

# Psychopathology of "Sisa"

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Luciano P.R. Santiago, B.S., M.D.  
*Department of Psychiatry, College of Medicine*

## Historical Background

Medical Psychology in Europe at the time Dr. José Rizal, the Philippines' national hero, was exposed to it was primarily divided between the French and the German schools. Hypolyte Marie Bernheim (1837-1919) at Nancy, together with Jean Martin Charcot (1825-1839) at the Salpêtrière, led the French school through their study of the neuroses and human behavior in general, based on psychopathology rather than personal opinions. Rizal was still completing his post-graduate course in Ophthalmology in Paris in 1886 precisely when Bernheim published his first book on "*Suggestion and Suggestive Therapeutics*" which taught that human behavior, both normal and abnormal, could be explained on the basis of suggestion and autosuggestion, although these might not always be apparent.<sup>1,2</sup> Sooner or later, Bernheim's theories must have attracted Rizal's seemingly boundless perspicacity, so that during his second sojourn in Europe he bought a later edition (1891) of the same book which then formed part of the medical library he brought back with him to the Philippines.<sup>3</sup> Later in 1895, during the last year of his exile in Dapitan, he wrote his only known medical article entitled *La Curacion de los Hechizados* in which he tried to explain the psychopathology of native witchcraft ("gaway") as due to "suggestion or autosuggestion" and thus proposed "de-suggestion" for its treatment. This monograph was unprecedented in Philippine medical literature and revealed the extent of Bernheim's influence on Rizal's thoughts.<sup>4</sup>

The German school, on the other hand, concentrated more on classifying the psychoses, starting particularly with Kahlbaum and culminating in the celebrated nosology of Kraepelin. Karl Ludwig Kahlbaum (1829-1899) was able to make out of the formless mass of

## SUMMARY

Dr. José Rizal's presentation of the case of Sisa, the lunatic in his first novel "Noli Me Tangere" was more scientific than literary. From the historical viewpoint, she underwent the typical, albeit now defunct, stages of catatonia; while in the modern context, she exhibited the symptoms of schizophrenia, under which the original symptoms of catatonia had been subsequently categorized. But the main import of Sisa's case is that through her, Rizal tried to bring up the significance of sociological and cultural factors in the etiology of mental disorders—which are yet gradually gaining ground in contemporary psychiatry because they have been neglected in favor of personal psychodynamics.

psychiatric data he had then at hand, a clinical entity which he termed "catatonia" in 1874. He enumerated five consecutive stages for this condition, which might not be all present and which constituted its "symptom complex", viz.: (1) melancholia, (2) mania, (3) stupor, (4) confusion, and finally, (5) dementia. Curability could be achieved in any stage except the last which was irretrievable. Ewald Hecker (1843-1909) in turn described "hebephrenia", a psychosis of adolescence characterized by rapid deterioration. Many other classifications were subsequently attempted but instead of attaining the coveted system, they tended more to build up a Babel of terminologies and hence, were mostly of passing significance. However, the system of Emil Kraepelin (1855-1926) was the exception mainly because he did not hesitate to take up the observations of previous workers precisely those of Kahlbaum on "catatonia" and of Hecker on "hebephrenia", and integrate them with his own observations on paranoid patients to form a larger category of mental disorders which has since withstood the test of time. His first book, the *Kompendium*, was published in Leipzig in 1883, a year after he left Heidelberg. (But it was not until 1896 that the nonmental Kraepelinian system came to its full being with the fifth edition of his book).

Although Kraepelin found the system, it is said that he lost the individual in the process because he was more animated by the institutional rather than the personal nor even the social factors.<sup>1</sup>

This was, therefore, the state of German psychiatry to which Rizal moved in at Heidelberg in 1886, not only to broaden his training in ophthalmic surgery but at the same time to reckon the sum and substance of his first magnum opus, *Noli Me Tangere*.<sup>2,6</sup> To expose one of the tragedies of Spanish colonialism in the Philippines in terms of the lunacy of Sisa, he took pains in presenting her case as scientifically as possible, making use of this contemporary knowledge in psychiatry, but without sacrificing the lucidity of his Castilian prose.

#### The Case of Sisa

Sisa (a familiar name for Narcisa) was about 30 years old, married, a dressmaker, residing at a distant barrio of the fabled town of San Diego. The incidents leading to her illness started on All Saints' Day (November 1) or one day before she broke down. She was expecting her two sons, Basilio 10, and Crispin, 7, to come home that night from their work as churchbell ringers which had separated them for a week. She had thus prepared for them a "supper fit for friars", but her improvident husband unexpectedly showed up and reduced the meal to only three fishes. She was almost exasperated with the anxiety of waiting for the two when Basilio finally arrived with a bleeding head wound without Crispin. She gradually learned from him that he had sustained the wound after fleeing from the sentries who were imposing the curfew for the night and that Crispin was retained by the chief *sacristan* for a charge of stealing, without mentioning the beating the latter had given the former which he shuddered to recount anyway. Sisa barely slept that night, anxiously waiting for the next morning, when she finally went to the convent house to inquire about Crispin's case. The Iriar's servant informed her that the latter had just been reported to the *Guardia Civil* after escaping from the convent and that their house was now being searched by them. She hurried

back home and found two soldiers already leaving their house with only her chicken caught in their arms. Having found neither her sons nor the allegedly stolen money, the two soldiers forced her instead to return with them to the barracks in the hope that her sons would have to give themselves up for her sake, sooner or later.<sup>7,8</sup>

"When she found herself flanked by them, she felt she would die of shame. True, there was nobody on the road, but the sun itself, the wind itself—true modesty imagines eyes everywhere. She covered her face with a shawl, and walking almost blindfolded she bewailed her humiliation in silence.

"She knew she was wretchedly poor, forsaken by all, even by her own husband, but until now she had treasured her good reputation and looked with pity on the women, scandalously dressed, who were known to the town as camp followers. Now it seemed to her that she had fallen even lower than they in human society...

"She was horror-struck when she approached the town. She looked around her, distraught; the flat unending ricefields, the shallow ditches, the puny trees—what she would have given for an abyss to swallow her, or a rock on which to dash herself! . . .

"People were staring, they were whispering, they were following her with their eyes; she knew this, she felt it, although her eyes were on the ground.

"Behind her she heard a woman shout shamelessly: 'Where did you nab her? Did you get the money back?'

"... It was plain from the way she dressed that she was a camp follower.

"Sisa felt as if she had been slapped. That woman had stripped her naked before the crowd. She raised her eyes for a moment in order to swallow her humiliation to the dregs: she saw the people around her as if from a distance, an infinite distance, yet felt the coldness of their eyes and heard their whispers. The wretched woman walked without feeling the ground under her feet. 'Here, this way!' a constable shouted.

"She turned quickly on her heels like a

mechanical toy about to run down. Blindly, incapable of thought, she only wanted to get away and hide herself. She saw a door; there was a sentry before it but when she tried to enter, a voice more imperious still stopped her. *Stumbling, she sought the voice, felt a shove at her back, shut her eyes, tottered forward, and her strength suddenly gone, collapsed on the ground, on her knees, and then on her haunches, shaken by a tearless soundless weeping.*

"She was in the barracks of the Constabulary; around her were soldiers and their women, pigs, and chickens . . .

" . . . Nobody really cared to find out what was to be done with Sisa. *She spent two hours in the barracks yard, half in a stupor, huddled in a corner, her head hidden in her hands, her hair in wild disorder.*

"The lieutenant was notified at noon and he immediately dismissed the friar's charges . . .

"So it was that Sisa was thrown out of the barracks; they had to throw her out because she did not want to move. *When she found herself in the middle of the street, she mechanically headed home, walking quickly, her head uncovered, her hair undone, her eyes fixed on the distant horizon . . .*

"At last Sisa reached her hut, silently entered it, went from corner to corner, and left again, walking here and there. *She ran over to old Tasio's house and knocked at the door, but there was no one there. Distressed she returned to her house. 'Basilio, Crispin!' she called out, pausing for an answer.*

"But the only answers in that solitude were the echoes of her cries, the sweet whisper of the nearby stream, and the music of the bamboo leaves. *Call again, climb here, hasten there to gorge and river—her eyes darted to and fro, now sinister, then sparkling, still later darken like a stormy sky—the light of reason, it seemed, flickered and was about to die . . .*

"*She walked aimlessly about, uttering strange cries, howls to frighten whoever might have heard her, inhuman sounds . . .*

"So did night overtake her. *When perhaps heaven granted that in her sleep an unseen*

*angel's wing brushed against her pale face and cleared her memory of its accumulated sorrows; perhaps such sorrows were beyond the strength of that weak humanity, and Providence prescribed with motherly affection the sweet remedy of oblivion.*

"Be that as it may, Sisa rose on the following day and wandered with a smile to sing and talk to every living thing."

### The Personal History of Sisa

There was no direct mention of Sisa's own family origins. But Rizal dwelt lengthily on her personal background. In his original chapter on "Sisa", he mentioned, by way of an introduction, the plight of a poor widow in providing nourishment for her baby—which could well be a narration of Sisa's own infancy:

"In a crude hammock, the infant is hushed and breathes soundlessly but from time to time, he swallows his tongue and tickles his palate for in his dream he still cries for more than what his widowed mother and elder brothers can give him."

This same widow, the vigil of All Soul's Day, was vacillating on whether to spend a hard-earned peso in buying indulgences for the soul of her dead husband or a new dress for her adolescent daughter.

But what this impecunious mother could not provide materially, she must have more than made up for with native affection, the evidence for which could be found in the lyrics of "The Song of Maria Clara" which was actually an ode to Filipino motherhood, in general, during their time:<sup>2</sup>

"Sweet are the hours in one's own country  
Where all is friendly underneath the sun . . .

"It is sweet there for the babe to waken  
In his mother's bosom without guile  
To seek her kisses and embrace her  
While their eyes meet in a smile . . ."

The pre-morbid personality that Sisa developed was typically the melancholic or compliant in that she tended to be solemn and submissive, dreary and self-depreciatory, endure in silence and weep easily although not in the presence of others if she could help it.

Although basically sensitive, she would try hard to overlook even real slights. This is supported by the following strayed quotations from the different original chapters on Sisa:

"Sisa is so humble that she even trusts her own son's judgment more than her own."

When her husband unexpectedly gourmandized the supper she had especially prepared for their two sons, "Sisa did not complain although she felt as if she were the one being consumed. Having eaten his fill, he remembered to ask for his sons. Sisa was so happily surprised that she could forego her own meal that night. Besides, what remained was not enough for her sons."

"What can I say but yes?" Sisa reassuringly embraced her son, although she was silently shedding tears over the future dreams of the boy for it did not include his father."

Parenthetically, it is also interesting to note that there was one passing remark about Sisa that beautifully symbolized a schizoid personality. After nursing Basilio's head wound, "Sisa closed the shutters of their hut and covered the few coals with ashes just enough to dim the light inside. As one smoulders the ember of his life with indifference so that his deeper sentiments will not be numbed by constant interaction with his fellowmen."

With regard to Sisa's occupation, here was a description of how she burned candles at both ends:

"She had not left her hut for several days, working on a dress she had been told to finish as soon as possible. She needed the money so much she had missed mass that morning; she would have lost at least two hours going to and coming back from town. Poverty makes one sin!

"She had finished the dress but she had not been paid with more than a promise."

The marital history was narrated in detail:

"On the edge of the road there was a leafy bamboo grove; in its shade she had taken her ease in other days, while her sweetheart made pleasant conversation; afterward he would help her carry her basket of fruit and vege-

tables. Those days had vanished like a dream. Her sweetheart had become her husband; her husband a government employee, it had been the beginning of her misfortunes.

"... She had married a selfish and cynical man, a cockfight addict who had deserted her for a life of aimless wandering, and now she lived only for her sons.

"The rare meetings between husband and wife were always painful for, having gambled away her jewels, and finding that she no longer had the money left for his whims and vices, he fell into the habit of beating her.

"She had a weak character, with more heart than brains and could only weep for her loves. Her husband was to her a god, just as her sons were angels in her eyes. He knew how much she loved and feared him, and, in the manner of all false gods, only became more cruel and capricious.

"When Sisa had consulted him about putting Basilio in the service of the parish house, he had asked noncommittally, his face darker than even, and his hands scarcely pausing in their caresses of his fighting cock, whether the boy would make much money.

"She had not dared press for an answer; in any case, she was hard up, she wanted her boys to learn how to read and write in school and she had gone ahead. Her husband had nothing to say about either."

The following physical description of Sisa could well serve as a partial mental status examination:

"She was still young, one's eyes must have been pretty and charming. Her eyes, which like her character her sons had inherited, were beautiful, deep, and long-lashed; her nose was well-proportioned; her pale lips attractively drawn.

"Her complexion was what the Tagalogs call 'Kayumangging Kaligatan', that is to say a clear golden brown. In spite of her youth, sorrow, or perhaps hunger, had made her pale lips sunken; and, if her abundant hair, once her greatest glory, was still well groomed, with a simple chignon unadorned with pins

and combs, it was not out of coquetry but habit."

#### Sisa from the Historical Viewpoint

If one scrutinizes Rizal's expert narration of the circumstances of Sisa's breakdown, one finds the consecutive stages originally enumerated by Kahlbaum to describe the symptoms of *catatonia*. Since not all of these five stages were expected to be identified in a patient, Rizal skipped the "manic stage" as if to imply that this was improper for Sisa even if she was about to lose her mind. All the other stages were present: melancholia, stupor, confusion, and finally, dementia (as quoted above in italics). Melancholia was set forth in terms of being "shaken by a tearless and soundless weeping"; while stupor, in terms of two hours in "semi-idiocy" or "half in a stupor" (*un estado de semi-imbecilidad*). The stage of restless confusion was described the longest from the moment she was thrown out of the barracks to the streets until she arrived home before sunset. And the ultimate state of madness was subtly handled in poetic prose in which Rizal was an expert hand.

But Rizal went ahead of his time in presenting the case of Sisa in the sense that he delved deeper than what the German psychiatrists of his time were pre-occupied with. Rather than stopping at a diagnosis, he advanced an explanation for it. Of course, he only had to pursue the general theme of his novel and thus easily lay the blame on the social evils of colonialism. But before he accused these social forces, he first considered Sisa as an individual. To him, she possessed an unblemished personality which should have spared her of any future madness—but the social cancer of his time was precisely so malignant that even canonized saints were wasted away by it. In retrospect, the melancholic or compliant personality of Sisa was the ideal personality of Filipino womanhood. This could explain why the native *kundiman* which they inspired was also composed in melancholic tones. This was the personality of all of Rizal's heroines: from the impregnable Maria Clara and her entourage of cousins and maiden aunt in *Noli Me Tangere* to the tragic Juli who went to Church unaccompanied in *El Fi-*

*libusterismo*. Those who did not fall under this category were the *señoras doñas* of Spanish castaways who were so dignified that they made fun of themselves, and the *queridas* of the barracks who were so lewd that they glorified only the lowest forms of womanhood of their time. These women, so to speak, played and wallowed in the storm through which Sisa walked with her chin held high until she had to bow down when it progressed to cataclysmic proportions.

Even Sisa's family was a victim of social circumstances. The implied mother could not fully minister her native affection to the baby because she had to put up with the material demands of religion. Her husband's villainy could be traced to social inopportunities. And her two sons were its latest scapegoats.

Rizal, therefore, in diagnosing Sisa's case as *catatonia*, also formulated a sociological theory of mental disorder in which the precipitating environmental factors outweighed the personal predisposition in etiologic significance. Of the social decadence of his time, he thus made out a case for this historical school of thought.

#### Sisa in the Modern Context

Because Rizal was more scientific than literary in his presentation of Sisa's case, it is not at all inconsequential to discuss it in the modern context. Her symptoms can be gathered from the chapter about the night of the vigil of the town fiesta, when the yet uncloistered Maria Clara was being escorted by the gallant Ibarra at the townsquare, chaperoned by the ubiquitous but unobtrusive *tia* Isabel, and her cousins. She had just encountered a leper, and out of convent-bred compassion, had given him her golden locket. "Unexpectedly, a beggarly woman caught the arm of the leper to the latter's panic and the horror of the passersby. The lanternlights revealed the disheveled hair and famished features of the maddened Sisa.

"Separate them! Separate them! She will get the disease!" was everybody's excited cry, but nobody's real plea.

"Sisa admonished the leper: 'Pray with me, pray with me! Today is the day of the dead.

Those lights are the lives of men. Pray with me for my sons!

"Do you see the light in the tower? That is my son Basilio going down through the rope. Do you see the other light in the convent? That is my son Crispin, but I am not going to see them for the friar is sick and he had gold coins and the gold coins were lost. Pray with me, pray with me for the soul of the friar! I brought him fresh vegetables; my garden was full of flowers, and I had two sons! I had a garden with flowers, and I had two sons!"

"Finally, losing her grip at the leper, she fled away singing: 'I had a garden with flowers, I had sons, garden, and flowers!'"

Sisa expressed ambivalent feelings towards the friar whose lost gold was imputed to her sons. Her affect was inappropriate: she sang in her grief and earlier "wandered with a smile to sing and talk to every living thing." Her ideas ran into one another without logical association although this was understandable in the light of the circumstances and emotions that dominated her at the time. She was autistic in that she had replaced reality with illusions and visual hallucinations.

In brief, Sisa exhibited all the fundamental symptoms of schizophrenia as laid down for modern psychiatry by Bleuler who had after all retained under this bigger category the original symptoms of catatonia *sans* its stages (as did Kraepelin before him).<sup>5,5,10</sup> However, the psychodynamic formulations for schizophrenia, which are the prime concern of modern psychiatrists, do not fit Sisa's case. Her pre-morbid personality was neither "schizoid" nor "stormy" but rather "melancholic" or "compliant." The implied early years of her life was not dominated by an inconsistent mother who could minister to the baby's physical needs without corresponding love and warmth. Her implied mother was just the opposite: she was full of maternal affection which could more than make up for the unsatisfied nutritional needs of the baby due to a forbidding poverty. And the baby seemed to reciprocate by being pacified even in hunger. Although this situation seems too good to be true in modern times, this is both apparent and real in the

past century when mothers were generally innocent and sincere and unaffected by extra-domestic concerns.

Notwithstanding the contention that the basic mechanisms of a particular mental disorder should not change with geography or history,<sup>5</sup> the present patterns for schizophrenia which are mainly lifted out from contemporary western experience, do not seem to apply to Sisa's case because she lived at a different time, in a different place and situation. Not even recent cases of schizophrenia all fit this schema. There are psychiatrists who even report similar cases with the best family background although these are taken with one grain of salt each. In order words, the modern psychodynamic concept of schizophrenia is still unsettled so that for diagnostic purposes, the fundamental symptomatology is considered over and above the patient's background.

Thus, it seems that the main consequence of discussing Sisa's case in the modern context is that it brings to our awareness, the neglect in contemporary psychiatry of sociological and cultural factors in mental disorders—the significance of which Rizal had tried to bring up—in favor of the still unsettled albeit very crucial personal dynamics. Although there have been many important studies undertaken along the sociological level<sup>1</sup> these have not gained valuable ground in modern psychiatry. However, it is the consensus of predictions that sociological and cultural factors will finally gain its proper place in the future,<sup>2</sup> when, in a manner of speaking, Rizal's portentous claims to psychiatry will also be vindicated.

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