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Magical Realism and Colonial Shadows: Cultural Resistance in Joaquin's *The Legend of the Dying Wanton*

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Abstract

This paper examines Nick Joaquin's short story *The Legend of the Dying Wanton* through the lens of cultural identity, historical recovery, and magical realism. Often misunderstood for its invocation of Spanish Catholic imagery, Joaquin's narrative instead offers a subtle form of postcolonial resistance by reviving a repressed legend from early seventeenth-century Manila. Building on contemporary interpretations of Stuart Hall's notion of cultural identity and Homi Bhabha's concept of the third space, this paper contends that Joaquin's incorporation of miraculous elements, Gothic motifs, and symbolic relics serves a deeper purpose. Rather than romanticizing the past, these features operate as instruments for recovering cultural memory. Through the characters of Currito Lopez and Doña Ana de Vera, Joaquin portrays the layered complexities of colonial identity, voicelessness, and the burden of unresolved history. The miraculous survival of a dying soldier and the mud-stained robes of the Virgin Mary become mnemonic devices that challenge dominant nationalist and colonial narratives alike. Furthermore, Joaquin's deliberate silences and focus on spectral presences reflect the historiographic gaps of the colonial archive. By reanimating forgotten myths through magical realism, Joaquin not only retrieves suppressed narratives but redefines Filipino identity as something shaped by entanglement, trauma, and continuous reinterpretation. This paper positions Joaquin's work as a literary intervention into the politics of memory, offering new ways to understand the intersections of faith, history, and postcolonial resistance.

Keywords: *Nick Joaquin, Filipino identity, magical realism, postcolonial literature, cultural memory, colonial hybridity*

Introduction

Nick Joaquin remains one of the most complex voices in Filipino literature, especially on matters of cultural memory and nationhood. His literary style, deeply historical, layered with religious imagery, and often bordering on the magical, has provoked admiration and controversy in equal measure. The Legend of the Dying Wanton, a short story first published in Prose and Poems (1952) and later included in Tropical Gothic (1972), is one such piece where these complexities are fully dramatized. The narrative revolves around the miraculous transformation and redemption of Currito Lopez, a sinful Spanish soldier who harbors a secret devotion to the Virgin Mary. What makes this story compelling is not only its folkloric texture and Gothic imagery but also its powerful commentary on the entangled layers of colonial, religious, and cultural identity in the Philippines.

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This paper seeks to re-examine Joaquin's story through the lens of cultural resistance, especially how magical realism functions as a medium of retrieving repressed colonial narratives. Joaquin's invocation of an obscure miracle from the early seventeenth century allows him to engage in an act of cultural remembering, an act that deliberately runs counter to both nationalist erasure and American neo-colonial narratives of modernity. His storytelling method, often described as "tropical gothic," becomes a way to reanimate forgotten layers of the Filipino past, which includes the uncomfortable reality of Spanish influence. Far from being an apology for colonialism, Joaquin's story opens up a nuanced dialogue about the formation of Filipino identity and the importance of acknowledging how history, faith, and myth are woven into the cultural psyche.

Joaquin's work is often misunderstood because of his refusal to conform to nativist ideologies that idealize a pre-Hispanic golden age. Instead, he insists on tracing the birth of Filipino cultural consciousness to the arrival of the Spaniards and the Catholic faith. This approach has drawn criticism for romanticizing colonization, but as Arong (2016) suggests, Joaquin's persistent engagement with the Spanish past should be seen as a form of cultural resistance against American imperialism and intellectual Westernization. It is precisely in works like The Legend of the Dying Wanton where this resistance takes on a subtle, symbolic form. The miracle in the story, loosely based on real ecclesiastical records, becomes a metaphor not just for spiritual redemption but for cultural awakening, a process that Joaquin believes is rooted not in denial but in remembrance.

In examining this story, the paper will draw on Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity, particularly his ideas on identity as a process of "becoming" rather than a static essence. This view resonates with Joaquin's vision of Filipinoness as an evolving construct, formed in interaction with historical forces and cultural tools. Through this lens, The Legend of the Dying Wanton may be read as an attempt to confront the colonial shadows without being subsumed by them. It reclaims magical realism as a technique not just for aesthetic play, but for cultural excavation—a way of illuminating how myths, miracles, and historical fragments can offer alternative visions of national selfhood.

Theoretical Framework

To fully grasp the depth of Nick Joaquin's 'The Legend of the Dying Wanton,' one must explore it through the lenses of cultural identity, postcolonial memory, and the complexities of hybridity. These concepts offer insight into how Joaquin reconstructs forgotten colonial narratives and imbues them with symbolic and spiritual significance. The story is not simply a religious tale—it is a literary intervention into the politics of memory, identity, and cultural survival. This theoretical framework draws on key ideas from cultural studies, postcolonial theory, and magical realism to better understand Joaquin's artistic strategy.

Identity plays a pivotal role in Joaquin's narratives. Within postcolonial frameworks, it is no longer seen as something static or inherited, but rather as a dynamic and evolving construct shaped by historical disruptions and the interweaving of diverse cultures.

Cultural identity, as redefined by contemporary scholars, is now widely understood as a dynamic construct, historically shaped and contextually embedded. Hall's foundational claim that identity is formed "through difference and representation" and is "a matter of becoming as well as of being" (p. 225) still holds relevance. According to Hall (1990), identity in postcolonial settings is shaped not by a fixed historical foundation, but by

experiences of disruption, displacement, and cultural blending. This resonates strongly with Joaquin's vision of the Filipino self, which he presents not as a return to a pre-colonial golden age but as a hybrid construct born from the collision between native traditions and Spanish Catholicism. Joaquin does not mourn the loss of a pure Filipino identity; rather, he explores how that identity was shaped through colonial experiences and how cultural memory survives in fragmented but enduring forms.

In The Legend of the Dying Wanton, this process of becoming is dramatized through Currito Lopez, a Spanish soldier whose life straddles sin and sanctity, death and redemption, colonizer and convert. Currito becomes more than a man, he becomes a metaphor for the dual consciousness Joaquin believes resides in every Filipino. This duality recalls what Linda Hutcheon (1989) described as the "postcolonial doubled identity and history" (p. 154), where identity is not singular or linear but fractured and split, looking both to the colonizer and to the colonized self. Joaquin's tale exemplifies this fractured identity, one that has not been erased by the colonial encounter but has been reconfigured by it.

Recent literary scholarship continues to emphasize how postcolonial narratives turn to folklore and religious motifs not simply to recover the past, but to critique dominant historical narratives. As Glatch (2022) notes, the use of magical realism by postcolonial writers is often an act of resistance, and "many magical realism authors used the genre with subtle political intent, criticizing or subverting the political unrest". Joaquin's use of the miraculous, the Virgin's muddy robes, and the shared visions between Currito and Doña Ana, are not there to romanticize faith, but to recover a cultural archive that has been rendered obsolete by modernist, American-oriented narratives of history.

Through magical realism, Joaquin accesses what Sarkowsky (2008) describe as a "contact zone" between myth and modernity. This zone, particularly in postcolonial fiction, allows the supernatural to intervene in historical memory. In the story, the relics of the Madonna are not merely religious symbols, they function as mnemonic devices, echoing "cultural palimpsests", layered memories that exist beneath the surface of dominant history. By weaving the miraculous into a documented historical setting (Manila, 1613), Joaquin resists both erasure and dogmatism. He uses the tools of the storyteller, legend, vision, prayer, not to fabricate truth but to gesture toward the multiplicity of truth in Filipino consciousness.

This hybrid perspective is further supported by the concept of the "third space," a term popularized by Homi K. Bhabha and later reexamined by contemporary scholars. While the term "hybrid" has roots in fields like linguistics and botany, within literary and cultural theory it signifies the experience of existing between cultural boundaries—embodying multiplicity, fusion, and syncretism (Payne & Barbera, 2010, p. 339). Bhabha's "third space" serves as a metaphor for cultural interaction, a site where hybrid identities are not simply formed in resistance to colonial authority, but through a dialogic process with it. Joaquin's narrative unfolds within such a space: colonial Manila, a city shaped by Spanish influence, Catholic traditions, and indigenous adaptations.

Characters like Doña Ana, Currito, and even the marginalized native figures inhabit this in-between realm, where meanings are fluid and constantly redefined. As Bhabha (as cited in Easthope, 1998) emphasizes, this space is not harmonious, it is marked by friction, ambiguity, and contradiction. Tension is a defining feature of postcolonial identity. In The Location of Culture (1994), Homi K. Bhabha describes how identity emerges in the spaces where cultural differences intersect and shift. These in-between zones, what he calls

"interstices", are where shared understandings of nationhood, community, and cultural meaning are constantly negotiated. Rather than reinforcing fixed categories, these spaces allow for hybrid identities that embrace difference without enforcing a strict hierarchy (p. 2). In this light, Joaquin's narrative does not attempt to harmonize opposing forces. Instead, it deliberately shows them as they are. The interplay between colonial and indigenous influences, between religious conviction and doubt, and between myth and historical reality, all reflect the layered and often contradictory nature of Filipino cultural memory.

In sum, the theoretical concepts of cultural hybridity, postcolonial memory, and magical realism frame The Legend of the Dying Wanton not just as a Gothic tale, but as a text deeply embedded in the cultural politics of identity. Joaquin's narrative strategy serves as a subtle form of resistance, against the forgetting of colonial history, against the simplification of national identity, and against the dominance of modernist narratives that exclude the miraculous and the folkloric.

Cultural Resistance and Historical Recovery in The Legend of the Dying Wanton

Nick Joaquin's short story stands as a quiet yet potent example of literary resistance. At first glance, the narrative seems like a simple retelling of a pious miracle. However, beneath its lyrical surface lies a critical engagement with the politics of memory and the role of colonial archives in shaping Filipino identity. Through the use of historical fiction, forgotten ecclesiastical legend, and the subversive presence of magical realism, Joaquin reconstructs a repressed Spanish-era narrative, not to glorify colonialism, but to reclaim cultural memory from both erasure and distortion.

The story is framed around the miraculous survival of Currito Lopez, a sinful Spanish soldier in the early 1600s, who, after being mortally wounded in a battle in Ternate, remains alive for thirteen days to confess his sins. The miracle, witnessed and affirmed by Doña Ana de Vera, a noble and devout woman, is tied to her vision of the Virgin Mary and the Holy Childexplores. This miraculous occurrence, far from being a simple religious fable, dramatizes Joaquin's unique philosophy: history is never clean or linear; it is muddied, contradictory, and encoded in symbols and visions. As highlighted in Table 1, the story includes miracles, hallucinations, repressed Spanish narratives, and the sense of living in a "two-fold world"—each contributing to its Gothic and postcolonial complexity.

-	Miracles, odds, and magic realism,
-	Hallucination, dream, the exotic,
-	Repressed narratives of the Spanish past
-	Living in a two-fold world.

Tab. 1: Gothic Elements in *The Legend of the Dying Wanton*

What makes Joaquin's method culturally subversive is his decision to build the narrative on a hidden and repressed ecclesiastical legend. This legend, referenced briefly in Hornedo's historical research (1978), originates from 17th-century Spanish Catholic tradition in Manila, an era often overlooked in nationalist discourse that prefers to center

the Revolution of 1896 or American occupation. Joaquin resurrects this marginal legend not as an endorsement of colonial spirituality, but as a literary strategy to shift attention to the Spanish period as the matrix of identity formation, rather than a historical detour to be dismissed.

This narrative retrieval is embedded in the very architecture of the story. Joaquin creates two overlapping worlds: one rooted in faith, visions, and spiritual encounters, and the other grounded in historical time and space, Manila in 1613. This literary dualism reflects the Gothic notion of a "two-fold world" identified in multiple stories by Joaquin. The magical encounter does not escape history, it invades it. When Doña Ana sees the muddy robes and scraped boots of the Child Jesus, the dream becomes material. The divine leaves its mark on physical reality. This moment is not merely magical; it is mnemonic. As Shaw (2023) explain, postcolonial narratives frequently draw on supernatural motifs not to hide history, but to reveal truths that official historical accounts have neglected or erased. Joaquin's depiction of the Virgin and the Child walking through the mud alongside Currito becomes a symbol of cultural immanence, divine presence embedded within the Filipino landscape and history. Instead of offering transcendence, the miracle is deeply rooted in earthly detail: the mud, the boots, the trauma of a dying man. Such realism underscores the hybridity of Joaquin's worldview, aligning with contemporary readings of magical realism as a political tool. Benito, Manzanas, and Simal (2009) stress that in postcolonial fiction, magical realism functions as an intervention into the historical record, allowing writers to access cultural memories occluded by colonial or nationalist epistemologies.

One of the more haunting elements in the story is its treatment of native characters. They are present but nameless, often occupying the periphery of the narrative. This has been rightly criticized by some for marginalizing the Filipino subject. However, Joaquin's selective silence may not be erasure but rather a reflection of the colonial archive itself, where natives were often anonymized or removed from official stories. Joaquin's decision to reframe a Spanish soldier's miracle through the eyes of a pious mestiza woman can thus be read as a critique of the archive rather than complicity with it. In this way, the story works within a framework of haunted history. The past, haunts the present in several of Joaquin's key works. The miracle that anchors this story does not resolve the tension between colonizer and colonized, it renders it legible. Currito's prolonged suffering, his failure to name his native victims, and the silence surrounding his sin offer no redemption in the nationalist sense. Instead, Joaquin presents a deeply ambiguous recovery of memory: a miracle tinged with guilt, a vision muddied by sin, and a history preserved not in monuments but in the whispers of stories.

This form of resistance can be better understood through Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space." Bhabha (1994) argues that cultural meaning is produced in a space of contradiction and ambiguity, where established identities break down and new, hybrid forms begin to take shape (p. 37). Joaquin's depiction of Manila in 1613 embodies this liminal space—it is simultaneously sacred and brutal, shaped by both European and indigenous influences, and suspended between historical fact and mythic imagination. Rather than presenting clear-cut heroes, the narrative offers spectral figures who move through a world of uncertainty and contested truths.

Even Currito's survival becomes symbolic. It is not a triumph but a burden. His lingering body becomes a metaphor for unresolved guilt, delayed confession, and the long afterlife of colonial violence. Following Hall's notion of identity as an ongoing process of 'becoming,' Currito's miracle does not signify a return to an original state of purity, but rather reflects an unresolved journey of self-confrontation and transformation.

In the end, Joaquin uses the story not to rewrite the past, but to reinsert its complexities into public consciousness. In recovering a lost legend and casting it in the genre of tropical gothic, he not only destabilizes the myth of Spanish benevolence but also challenges the nationalist fantasy of pre-colonial purity. His act of resistance lies in his refusal to simplify. As Joaquin writes history into fiction, he also writes fiction into history, opening a space where memory, miracle, and mourning co-exist. As Arong (2016) notes, Joaquin's literature resists both colonial nostalgia and nationalist amnesia by re-inscribing the untidy textures of the past into contemporary discourse (p. 116).

Magical Realism and the Materialization of Myth in *The Legend of the Dying Wanton*

Nick Joaquin's literary style is often described as baroque, gothic, and even antiquated, but one of its most striking and enduring features is his nuanced use of magical realism. In The Legend of the Dying Wanton, magical realism is not merely a stylistic device, it is a narrative act of cultural recovery. The story becomes a space where myth and magic do not transcend reality but materialize within it. In Joaquin's world, miracles are not suspensions of reality, they are manifestations of the forgotten, the repressed, and the unresolved.

Joaquin's short story revives a little-known seventeenth-century miracle to illustrate how Filipino culture is inseparable from its Spanish-Catholic inheritance. His plot weaves together two archival threads that scholars have traced: a 1613 report of the soldier Don Francisco (Currito) Lopez's wondrous survival and a separate Santo Domingo convent tradition about mud-stained garments taken from the images of the Virgin and Child, preserved by devotees led by Doña Ana de Vera. Although the historical testimonies—heard in Manila's walled city in 1621—differ over details such as López's length of suffering and even the participants' names, Joaquin shows little interest in settling those contradictions. Instead, he dramatises them, recasting Francisco as "Currito," foregrounding Spanish characters (Currito, Doña Ana, Gonzalo Salgado) and staging their encounter with the sacred to animate what archival silence had repressed. In doing so, he demonstrates that legends, relics and conflicting chronicles can be recombined to keep a culturally formative past alive, not for strict historical accuracy but for imaginative re-engagement with Filipino identity.

In The Legend of the Dying Wanton, the central miracle, the survival of Currito Lopez for thirteen days after being mortally wounded, forms the magical axis of the narrative. His body, kept alive by the unseen presence of the Virgin and the Holy Child, becomes a symbol not just of personal redemption but of cultural endurance. Currito's slow death and eventual confession happen in a liminal space between sin and grace, between dream and waking life. Joaquin's realism is grounded in mud-stained robes and worn sandals, objects that bear testimony to a spiritual event, yet also to a cultural reality: the Catholic imagination is embedded in Filipino soil, marked by both violence and transcendence.

This dynamic is reinforced by the story's visual and sensory details. When Doña Ana finds the Virgin's robes stiff with mud and the boots of the Holy Child scraped and dirty, the miraculous is grounded in material signs. This moment is not allegorical; it is literal within the story's logic. It signals what Prickett and Timmermans (2022) call "palimpsestic memory", a layering of myth over historical trauma to preserve, rather than erase, the past (p. 29). The miracle leaves traces, physical, dirty, undeniable. It is through these traces that Joaquin asserts the legitimacy of myth as a form of memory. In the Filipino cultural context, where history has often been mediated or silenced by colonial powers, these miraculous signs become a counter-archive.

According to Table 1 of this study, The Legend of the Dying Wanton contains multiple gothic and magical realist features: "miracles, odds, and magical realism," "hallucination, dream, the exotic," and "living in a two-fold world." These elements are not decorative; they are integral to how the story constructs meaning. The reader is not asked to suspend disbelief but to believe in multiplicity. As Benito, Manzanas and Simal (2009) argue, magical realism creates a world where different systems of logic can coexist without collapsing into each other. Joaquin's narrative embodies this coexistence, creating a Manila where visions matter as much as documents, and mud is as sacred as ritual.

Moreover, the setting, Manila in 1613, functions as a crucible of hybrid belief systems. Christianity is still young in the islands, and indigenous traditions likely remain embedded in the popular consciousness, even if not explicitly depicted. By choosing this period, Joaquin emphasizes a historical moment of religious and cultural negotiation. The miraculous intervention of the Virgin and the Holy Child may be read not just as an act of grace but as a reimagining of colonial spirituality filtered through native soil. The mud on the robes signifies both the reality of physical suffering and the earthbound nature of Filipino religiosity. This approach also allows Joaquin to question dominant narratives of heroism and sin. Currito is not a heroic figure. He is "the wanton," a man associated with vice and likely with acts of cruelty during his service in the colonial army.

It is here that Joaquin diverges from both colonial piety and nationalist secularism. He does not reject religion, but neither does he idealize it. Instead, he recovers it as a repository of folk memory, of cultural fragments that can be repurposed in the postcolonial moment. In fact, Joaquin offers a different kind of resistance, one that does not negate the past but transforms it into a resource for identity formation.

Silence, and Identity in Joaquin's Colonial Characters

In The Legend of the Dying Wanton, Nick Joaquin does not present a world of binary oppositions between colonizer and colonized, saint and sinner, history and myth. Rather, he presents a liminal landscape where characters are caught in the complexities of colonial hybridity and historical amnesia. Identity in Joaquin's narrative is not something fixed or inherited, it is fractured, haunted, and negotiated in silence. Characters in the story do not represent colonial figures; they are morally ambiguous and culturally hybrid characters. By crafting these figures, Joaquin explores identity as a contested space, echoing Stuart Hall's claim that cultural identity is "always in process, never complete, and shaped by history and representation" (p. 222).

Currito, for instance, is not a noble figure. His initial portrayal aligns with the brutal and entitled image of the Spanish soldier in the colonial Philippines. Yet, as the story progresses, he becomes more than a stereotype. His suffering, prolonged for thirteen days, forces the reader to see him not only as a colonizer but also as a broken man—a figure awaiting both personal and spiritual redemption. His survival is framed as miraculous, yet Joaquin complicates that miracle. It does not exonerate Currito. Instead, it highlights his entrapment within a system of violence, guilt, and silence. He becomes a metaphor for the unresolved legacies of the Spanish past in the Filipino psyche.

While The Legend of the Dying Wanton presents richly drawn characters, it is also marked by intentional silences—particularly in its portrayal of native Filipinos. Notably, no Filipino characters are named, and the story unfolds entirely through the perspectives of Spanish or Spanish-affiliated figures. This narrative choice has sparked debate, with some critics

questioning whether Joaquin reinforces colonial viewpoints. However, a more nuanced interpretation sees this absence not as a dismissal, but as a deliberate reflection on the nature of colonial documentation. By replicating the structure of the colonial archive—where native voices are often omitted or marginalized—Joaquin draws attention to the historical gaps and exclusions that continue to shape cultural memory.

Likewise, Doña Ana's role as a visionary challenges traditional gender and colonial roles. She is not a nun or a saint, yet she bears witness to a divine event. Her voice becomes the story's moral compass, not because she commands authority, but because she listens to silence. She notices what others overlook: the mud on the robes, the wear on the boots. These small, material signs become vehicles of truth. This attention to detail aligns with what Sant (2023) describe as the feminist turn in magical realism, where women's bodies, senses, and experiences are centered as sites of knowledge. Doña Ana embodies this turn by being both subject and observer, living proof that history is not only written in documents but also in footprints and fabric.

On one hand, Joaquin's privileging of colonial characters can appear to center Spanish perspectives. On the other hand, he uses those perspectives to reveal a deeper truth about postcolonial identity—that it is often formed not through assertion but through negotiation, not through voice but through echo.

Conclusion

Nick Joaquin's short story opens a window into the obscured and often uncomfortable spaces of the Philippine colonial past—where myth blends with memory, and silence coexists with moments of the miraculous. The story resists idealizing either the oppressor or the oppressed, instead presenting a nuanced narrative in which the sacred and the historical intertwine. Through this intersection, Joaquin portrays cultural identity not as a fixed inheritance but as something shaped through tension, negotiation, and the act of remembering what history has tried to suppress. In reimagining a forgotten miracle from 1613, Joaquin does not glorify the Spanish past; he reclaims it as part of the Filipino cultural self, complex, hybrid, and still in the process of becoming.

Joaquin also uses magical realism not merely as a stylistic choice, but as a means of materializing myth and challenging dominant historical narratives. The miracle of Currito's prolonged survival, the mud on the Virgin's robes, and the quiet vision of Doña Ana all speak to a form of cultural resistance rooted not in confrontation but in remembrance. These supernatural elements are not escapist, they are mnemonic. They help us recover what has been lost or silenced in official records. They act as narrative relics, each one carrying fragments of memory, faith, and historical grief.

Equally important is Joaquin's depiction of identity as inherently fractured. His colonial characters, especially Currito and Doña Ana, are not unidimensional. They embody the contradictions of their time: sinners who seek salvation, witnesses who see but cannot explain, hybrids who neither fully belong to the empire nor escape its influence. By foregrounding these figures, Joaquin emphasizes that Filipino identity is not born from purity but from entanglement. It is formed in the space between conquest and miracle, between silence and vision, between the Holy Child's muddy boots and the soldier's dying confession.

The story's silence regarding the native voice has also been explored—not as an oversight but as a strategic reflection of colonial erasure. Joaquin does not fill in the gaps with easy

answers. Instead, he allows absence to speak. The voicelessness of the Filipino characters mirrors their exclusion from the colonial archive, and it is in this silence that the reader is asked to listen more deeply. Joaquin's resistance is subtle, even spectral. It does not raise a flag; it raises a question: what have we forgotten, and why?

Joaquin's work, especially in this story, insists that the Spanish colonial period, often dismissed or reduced in nationalist discourse, still haunts the Filipino psyche, not as a ghost to be exorcised but as a memory to be understood. For Joaquin, the miraculous functions chiefly as a storytelling device: it re-illuminates half-lost byways of history and invites readers to revisit places that time has rendered indistinct.

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