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The Filipino World View and the Filipino Writer

LEONCIO P. DERIADA

The Silliman University inaugurated its Center for Women's Studies in the early 1980s, I was the only male involved in the Opening Program. I was asked to speak on women in Philippine literature. The organizers, who were, of course, all women, must have expected me to drop names like Laura, Maria Clara, Doña Victorina, or Candida and Paula Marasigan. But I chose to speak on women in Philippine folklore, starting from the very beginning. One day, Bathala decided to create human beings. A bamboo trunk split and out came Malakas and Maganda together: the man strong and the woman beautiful. The two came together, different but complementing each other. In short, from the beginning, the Filipino man and woman have been equal in dignity. No one is subordinate to the other. I shocked a good number of pious Caucasian women in the audience, wives of some reverend men on the campus, when I concluded by declaring that Philippine genesis is superior to the biblical genesis. After all, only people like the Jews would consider a woman subordinate to a man, and so Eve had to come from Adam's rib.

Not Maganda. Maganda could not come from a man's rib. For Maganda, the Beautiful, is the product of the Filipino world view which, in many ways, is superior to the world view of other races. It is this world view, this particular way of looking at the cosmos and themselves, that defines a race or tribe.

How Filipino is a Filipino writer, especially one who writes in English? How Filipino is a writer, especially one who is a product of a writers workshop?

The typical Filipino writer comes from the literature teacher. The typical literature teacher is the product of the Philippine educational system which, in many

ways, is wrong. Being a teacher of literature myself—a teacher for 40 years—I believe that the quality of our writers is a product of the quality of our literature teaching. Of course, the quality of our literature teaching is the product of the quality of our educational system which, in many ways, as I have earlier observed, is wrong. Imagine young Filipinos starting with English nursery rhymes in grade school and continuing this by taking up a subject called value formation instead of literature throughout high school. Philippine literature is taught only in college.

An educational system that allows the use of a history book that says that the Philippines is in the Far East starts our education all wrong. The truth is the Philippines is in the Near East, that is if we look at the world and ourselves as Filipinos. We agree that the Philippines is in the Far East because we think we are standing on a point in Europe or America and we look at the Philippines from the world view of a Westerner, not a Filipino.

The use of English as the language of instruction in our schools is the biggest error of all. I can say this now after teaching English the last 40 years: the sooner we junk English and instead use the local language as the language of instruction, the better it is for our people. The domination of a country whose language is imposed on another country is almost total simply because it practically erases the world view of the dominated country. Language is the expression of a tribe's world view: of the tribe's psychological processes, of the tribe's idea of relationship, of the tribe's overall culture and knowledge and wisdom. That human beings have been created in the image of God is the central point of the Jewish world view shared by the Christians who are products of the Jewish religion. Shockingly, the Greek world view is completely opposite: the gods have been created in the image of human beings. Also shocking is the vision shared by the Aztecs and the Japanese: that they are sons of the sun.

Now, what is the Filipino world view? It is as various as the variousness of the Filipino tribes. But this variousness is somehow unified by the belief in the supernatural, by the harmonious relationship between human beings and the environment, by the equality of the sexes, by the respect accorded to the old and the women, by the high regard for authority, by the belief in the search for the ultimate peace.

I do not wish to discuss purely anthropological generalizations of what makes the Filipino word view. Instead, let me echo Gemino H. Abad's very useful illustration: the English words brother and sister as compared to the Tagalog *kapatid*. The first thing one would notice about the English words is that they are sexist—one term for the male and one term for the female. The Tagalog *kapatid* is for

both male and female, which is not sexist at all—echoing the equality of the sexes presented by the Malakas-Maganda myth. One thing more goes for *kapatid*. The root word *patid* means the other end or *putol*. A *kapatid* therefore is a *kaputol*. A concept of close family ties embodied in *kapatid*: that siblings are like a chain of sausages, each sausage distinctly different but all of them are connected as one long entity. Curiously, the equivalent of *kapatid* in Hiligayon is *utod* and in Kinaray-a *bugto*—which have exactly the same concept as *kapatid*. Now, what happens to the world view of a Filipino who does not know *kapatid* or *utod* or *bugto* but knows only brother and sister?

Using English—or any foreign language—as the language of instruction—is a mighty waste of learning time. Probably, Filipino teachers are the only teachers who have an item on the lesson plan called Unlocking of Difficulties. This is nothing more than vocabulary study, in English. From grade school to graduate school, the teacher has to explain English words to Filipino students, in all subjects—from cooking to physical education to mathematics to history to literature to philosophy.

I keep on repeating this incident in my own education to stress the madness in our education system. I was a Grade 5 pupil in 1949 at Calinan Elementary School, Davao City. Our lesson one morning in elementary science was basic astronomy. The teacher wrote this sentence on the board, “The sun is a huge star.” Could you imagine how much time the teacher wasted to explain huge by giving its meaning and pronunciation and sentences using the word correctly? Meanwhile, while the teacher was tackling the unlocking of an English vocabulary problem, what was happening to our science education? *Nagbakasyon muna*. And this aberration is multiplied a million and one times in all classrooms in the Philippines from grade school to graduate school. As early as this incident in Grade 5 half a century ago, I wished the language in the classroom has been the local language. The lingua franca in Calinan, Davao City was Cebuano. Suppose the teacher simply said, “Ang adlaw usa ka dako nga bituon.” There was nothing to unlock at all since everybody understood every word. Our science education would have been faster and deeper.

At this point, I do not wish to be misunderstood. I do not mean that Filipino writers in English are less Filipino than those who write in the native language. The case of Jose Rizal writing in Spanish, or of Polish Joseph Conrad writing in English, has become trite, even impertinent, as examples of nationalists writing in a foreign language. Probably, the sanest justification for the older writers’ writing in English is that they are simply products of our country’s erratic history. They have

no choice but to write in English.

The young writers of today are better off. You have a choice. Of course, you choose to write in the language you know best. For writing is the art of manipulating words. You cannot manipulate a language unless you have mastered it. But have you truly mastered the English language if you choose to write in it? My standard advice to young writers is: write in your own home language and you solve more than one-half of the problem like the problem of grammar, syntax, semantics and nuance.

I boldly predict that in the future, English as the language of creative writing in the Philippines will go the way Spanish went. Meanwhile, old and young writers must make use of it if they have competence in it. One way of making writing more interesting and challenging is to branch out. It is good for one to be bilingual or multi-lingual. We southerners are very good at this. Many writers south of Manila write in three or more languages.

I am glad that some older writers joined my company in branching out into writing in the native languages. Marjorie M. Evasco and Merlie M. Alunan have found their Cebuano voice even if neither is from Cebu. No, we do not wish to abandon English but merely further our writing horizons even, or especially, in our inevitable old age.

I am waiting for the day that Anthony L. Tan would write in Tausug or Chabacano or Chinese; for Jaime An Lim to write in Cagayan de Oro Cebuano; Christine F. Godinez-Ortega to write in Dumaguete Cebuano; for Rosario Cruz Lucero to write in Hiligaynon or in a Cordillera lingua franca.

How Filipino is a Filipino writer? I think your answer would depend on your definition of what a Filipino is.

Let me illustrate this Filipinoness by giving you an analogy. I often tell the young men in my class: if you want to know where that girl beside you is from, pinch her. Her utterance of pain will give away her origin. If she says, "Aray!", she is a Tagala. If she says, "Aruy!", she is a Cebuana. If she says, "Araguy!", she is a Ilongga. If she says, "Adudoy!", she is a Waray. Now, if this girl says, "Ouch!", pinch her some more. She has not felt the pain as she has time to pretend she is an American. For the fact is, when one is caught unaware, the utterance of pain is always native, not foreign. So, pinch the girl beside you harder until she cries out, "Aray!" or "Aruy!" or "Araguy!" or "Adudoy!" This time, she is telling the truth.