Writing Ethnicity – In English

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I used to go hunting in my youth on that now besieged island of Basilan (called Taquima by my ancestors). There we shot at wild boar, deer, monkey; they were everywhere then. And so, now, after we've decided which hunting area we'd go to and the pre-dawn hour we'd meet at a friend's place and this is how our conversation and the end of our meeting would go.

"Sigui, 'pareng; we'll all meet here, here at Jun's place, tomorrow about two, buntag, morning, *ha, hindi* afternoon: rain or shine – *basta hindi u-ulan!*"

Obviously a contradiction in terms, but we can even say, in all humility, that without the local words and phrase we couldn't have got the same stylish and farcical effect.

Not too recently, like the legendary sphinx, there rose from the ashes, what many had not foreseen, and if foreseen were to look down upon it with envy and incredibility: writers writing not in English-English, or American-English, but their own English, born, nurtured, and hammered, in the smithy of their very soul. Thus, using English from far apart of each other as Africa to India, straddling on two different sides of the world's great oceans, the former in the Atlantic Ocean and the latter in the Indian Ocean, these writers, though writing in a unique, novel language, had shown to the incredulous world, by their ritualistic work,

The author read the above during the 5th Western Mindanao Writers Workshop in Zamboanga City in October, 2010. The author, Enriquez has received numerous awards for his short stories and novels including the SEA Write Award. His first novel was published in Australia and recently, some of his stories were translated to Korean. The UST Press has released his 7th novel, *The Activist.* Enriquez lives in Cagayan de Oro City with his wife Joy and four of his grandchildren.

how rich, provocative, and mystical is their culture and tradition. And more that that forever marked are their work with this momentous and significant seal: no one will mistake their tales, and the poems, and the stories, as anybody else's, but typically, as the case maybe, Indian or African writing, as one New York reviewer said, "in a highly individualistic style."

If only to satisfy our curiosity, let us look at samples from the work of these two great African writers:

African writer Chinua Achebe, in his novel *Things Fall Apart*, which has so far sold eight million copies in 50 different languages, writes:

"Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honor to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino. He was called the Cat because his back would never touch the earth. It was this man that Okonkwo threw in a fight which the old men agreed was one of the fiercest since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights."

And this from the distinguished Ben Okri, winner of the "Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Africa, winner of the "Paris Review Aga Khan Prize," in his "1991 Booker Prize" novel, *The Famished Road*:

"Our king was a wonderful personage who sometimes appeared in the form of a great cat. He had a red beard and eyes of greenish sapphire. He had been born uncountable times and was a legend in all worlds, known by a hundred different names. He always lived the most extraordinary of lives. One could pore over the great invisible books of lifetimes and recognized his genius through the recorded and unrecorded ages. Sometimes a man, sometimes a woman, he wrought incomparable achievements from every life. If there is anything common to all of his lives, the essence of his genius, it might well be the love of transformation and the transformation of love into higher realities."

But what has shocked the literary world are the Indian writers who have changed the English literature scene.

Asia Week, August 7, 1997 issue, said:

"Thanks to [Salman] Rushdie, Indian literature no longer needed to explain itself to a foreign readership, to provide glossaries for native words and explanations for the subcontinental oddities of life."

You've heard, if not read, Salman Rushdie, whose publication in 1981 of *Midnight's Children,* shook the literary world by its magic, fantasy, and myths, and got him the prestigious Booker Prize. And, of course, his equally, and perhaps more famous, but for a different reason, novel *Satanic Verses.* If Gabriel Garcia Marquez dazzled you in *A Hundred Years of Solitude* with his Latin American magic-realism, Rushdie bubbles with it in his own fiction: such dialogue as taken from his robust, baroque, historical novel *Shame* (published by Vintage 1995), and may I ask you to lend a lobed ear to the certainly unmistakably magic-reality of the language, which stamps this dialogue with Indian tonality and inflection:

"...in those days nobody believed the boy's stories about the far-flung infinities of the house. 'Only child,' Hashmat Bibi creaked, 'always always they live in their poor head.' And the three male servants laughed too: 'Listening to you, *baba*, we are thinking this house has grown so huge huge, there mustn't be room for anywhere else in the world.'

And in the same book, we hear Little Mir Harappa shouting from horseback, at his cousin's wife, Rani Begum, while his soldiers loot the house:

'{Expletives}...That pizzle [penis of an animal, like a bull] of a homosexual pig. As the villagers how his great father locked up his wife and spent every night in the brothel, how a whore disappeared when her fat stomach couldn't be explained by what she ate, and then the next thing Lady Harappa was holding the baby even though everyone knew she hadn't been screwed in a decade. Like father, like son, my honest opinion, sorry if you don't like it. Sisterfucking bastard spawn of corpse-eating vultures. Does he think he can insult me in public and get away with it? Who is the elder, me or that sucker of shit from the rectums of deceased donkeys?'

In October, 1996, at the U.P. Writer's Workshop in Davao City, held every year since the past 4 years or so, I asked NVM Gonzalez how we Filipino fictionists writing in English can achieve, even just a grain, a scrap, of our contemporaries' literary success, writing in English, like African and Indian writers, who, like us, had been under chains, at one long period or another, by some colonial white power. And in answer, he said, not in his same words, but in quite the same vein that I may quote him:

"What we need, Tony, is a voice that would liberate Filipino writing." And he went on to say something about the nuances of our culture and tradition, of native soul and homeland, and their stamp and resonance (this he would repeatedly use) in our writing.

Perhaps, among the Filipino writers, he is the most conscious of this: the native voice that has not escaped the African and Indian writers, and has indeed freed them from seeing only, as Nick Joaquin said what the English language saw. In his short story "Children of the Ash-Covered Loam," NVM Gonzalez writes:

He [a young boy Tarang] was walking down the path from the *kaingin* one afternoon when he saw *Tia* Orang [an old midwife] in the hut....

'And where would they be?' she asked the boy.

'Across the river.'

'Where exactly? I have come for the planting.'

'In the clearing of Mang Longinos, perhaps,' the boy said. 'We are not yet planting.'

'Now be good enough to give me a drink of water, *Anak*,' the old midwife said. 'Then I shall be on my way.'

She reached for the dipper of water that he brought her. She drank, and then, putting down the dipper, tweaked Tarang on the leg. 'If I do not see your mother, *Anak,* tell her that *Tia* Orang has come. Tell of my passing through, and of my helping in the planting when the time comes.'

Here, as elsewhere, but like in Rushdie's novel *Shame*, in that little scene with Little Mir Harappa, we hear clearly, vividly, the personas speaking in their own tongue, in their own inescapable, unique tonality and rhythm; although actually it's all said in English.

Through the years, NVM Gonzalez, long considered to be the dean of modern Philippine literature, has his devoted readers, here and internationally, and had most especially influenced a generation of authors. Though I had never met him personally until several years ago, in 1989, when to the State University I went to receive U.P.'s National Fellow for Literature grant, much, much too late to say he had also influenced my writing, but there we were: he on his mountain top in his "colonial island of Mindoro," while I on my white (tourism people say "pink") shores of Zamboanga City---also writing about the simple barrio folks, the farmers, fishermen, in other words, about the underclass, the common people, the hard-life beaten ones, as well as the mind-of-their-own, leave-us-alone villagers.

In my short story "Asocena," a contraction of the two words: "aso" (dog) and "cena" (meat), that is "dog's meat," I tried, though unconsciously doing it then, to tell the story of a boy whose favorite pet, a dog named Leal, a Chabacano word for "loyal," was killed by the barrio's uncouths and drunkards, to tell it as well and as best as I could--- without losing the heart and soul of the barrio and the simple, common life of the barrio folk.

Thus I wrote, for the feel of the pastoral setting:

The father and his son left the yard, smelling the fresh, warm dung, and then went down the hill the same way they had come. Then the father felt it. He felt it, somehow, without the boy saying anything....

'Don't you want the puppy *Tio* Pedro gave you?' he asked.

'Pa,' said the boy. 'Papa ----' and he stopped speaking.

The farmer felt it again, now feeling it and hearing it clearly in his son's voice, quiet and soft, not even rising above a whisper. '*Que pasa, hijo?*'

'Is he a brave puppy?'

'*Valiente?*'

'*Si,* so when he becomes big he'll bite '*Ñor* Tomas.'

Nick Joaquin, I remember, said years, years back, in Davao City, that in the 1930s the "city of Manila became invisible to our writers in English. Something in their upbringing," he went on, "in their schooling, had made them unable to see what had been so apparent to their

grandfathers. These young writers in English could see only what the American language saw."

And here is even a much harsher comment, of a Nobel prize winner from a small island colony of Trinidad, which may sound a sort of betrayal, as he writes in that language English, his second language. Naipul made this comment in his keynote address during the SEA Write Awards in Bangkok, a few months before he received his Noble Prize in Literature, in 2002. I remember, also, him saying, and I can only paraphrase it: 'Beware of the English language that you use in your writing. Language is the most dangerous tool that a dictator uses to enslave you. For the English language that you use, without the resonance of your native tongue, will surely enslave and colonize you."

Naipul shows how it is when the foreign language he uses doesn't colonize him nor make him see only what the foreign language sees.

Listen, particularly to the dialogue:

All the next day we waited for him to come out to the pavement, to congratulate him with our laughter, But we didn't see him.

Hat said, 'When I was little, my mother used to tell me, "Boy, you laughing all day. I bet you, you go cry tonight."

That night my sleep was again disturbed. By shouts and sirens.

I looked through the window and saw a red sky and red smoke.

Morgan's house was on fire.

.....

What really made the fire beautiful was Morgan's fireworks going off....

But Morgan made no more fireworks.

Hat said, 'When I was a little boy, my mother used to say, "If a man want something, and he want it really bad, he does get it, but when he get it he don't like it.'"

All this is possible if we remember certain nuances and instincts in our writing, which later become guidelines, through the experiences, that we may not lose our identity, or ethnicity, if you wish, writing in English.

So, what I do is to think in Chabacano, not English, the language I am writing. It is not an easy thing to do, as it is not easy, to give a lecture in your native tongue than in your second language, English. That is my experience and in many of us here, since we've always been taught to speak in English, particularly in public. In any way, thinking in Chabacano transports its style into the second language, that one uses in writing, and Chabacano comes in naturally, with its own fixture of loose syntax and little use of proposition. And since your character and setting is just within your neighborhood, you are unlikely to describe 'Juan' for instance with blonde hair, aquiline nose, and white skin. Nor will you have snow falling on a nipa hat, the river Yangtsi flooding your barrio.

And if you listen carefully, there is in every one of our languages a tone or rhythm: listen to it and if you keep and remember the rhythm – your English will not sound and ring like American or British or African-English.

Since it looks easy to do, a number of writers I noticed have been careless with it: the dialogue in our story. For it is the matrix, the heart of your opus, and stamps your work if the dialogue is done well – as authentic, sincerely written, and ethnic in history and culture.

Let us write then with a voice that will liberate Filipino writing from seeing only what the English language sees, that celebrates and resonates our identity, and our native homeland, as the African black writers and the Indians and the Hispanic Americans have, so it won't be long when we are read more and more by our Filipino readers; and no longer will foreigners, particularly the Anglo-Saxons and the Norte Americanos, look just as if through an aquarium glass at us in surprise and disbelief as we write in English.