


The Politics of Literature: The Marginalization of the Mindanao Writer

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Last month, Edna Zapanta-Manlapaz of the Ateneo visited MSU-IIT in Iligan to give a one-day lecture-seminar entitled "Literature by Filipino Women: Retrieving Texts, Insuring a Legacy." The gist of her presentation was that the Filipino women writers have been marginalized in our patriarchal society.

When we say "marginalized," what does it mean? It means that the literary achievement of Filipino women writers, in general, has not been accorded due recognition. It means that in the Philippines male writers enjoy a privileged position, that they dominate the literary mainstream, that their work constitutes the bulk of the canon of Philippine literature; and that women writers are relegated to the insignificant periphery and margin, and their work is constantly in danger of being ignored, overlooked, undervalued, and even forgotten. The whole masculine buddy-buddy system of the Philippine literary establishment hinders the entry of women writers into the magic circle of power. Although barely articulated, our preconceived notions of women writers see them as weak, submissive, inferior, superficial, frivolous, flighty, incapable of dealing with the big harsh issues of life, interested only in small private domestic affairs or in fantasy and incurable romanticism. In short, lovable creature, but creatures not to be taken seriously.

Add to this our society's expectations of what women should do, be, know

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and aspire to (i.e., their proper place is the home, they should nurture the children, cook the meals, clean the house, make everything comfortable for hubby, etc.), and we have a deadly situation that works against women in general, but against women writers in particular, to the extent that they literally almost disappear from the literary scene.

A case in point: Dr. Gemino Abad has edited a ground-breaking anthology of Philippine poetry entitled *A Native Clearing* (1993) which surveys the most significant achievement of Filipino poets, from Edith L. Tiempo to Cirilo Bautista, from the 1950's to the present. From the hundreds of Filipino poets writing within the designated period, Abad chooses 49 poets, relying as he claims in his Introduction on poetic merit alone. Of the 49, do you know how many are women poets? Exactly 5: Edith L. Tiempo, Virginia R. Moreno, Gloria A. Garcitorea Goloy, Tita Lacambra Ayala, and Ophelia Alcantara Dimalanta. Where are the rest of our women poets? Surely the Muse has touched and inspired the pen of more than half a dozen women writers in the five decades covered! You would think there should have been more, given the random and unpredictable distribution of poetic talent by the Muse. You would think that as many women as men would be hit and fired into poetic freezy. But no, the reality is otherwise. Do you know where the rest of our women poets and potential women poets are? I'll tell you where they are: they are anonymously crowding the margins of our literary history, or interjected as mere afterthought or tucked as footnotes at the bottom of a page. This is what is meant by being marginalized. (The book is a good illustration because the editor is clearly far from sexist, which means that the marginalization of women writers is not just a simple matter of one individual's idiosyncratic taste or prejudices but resides in the very milieu, the complex economic and socio-political relations and realities of society.)

If the situation leaves much to be desired in *A Native Clearing*, the picture is even less rosy for women writers in the first volume *Man of Earth* (1989), also edited by Gemino Abad and Edna Zapanta-Manlapaz, of which *Clearing* is a sequel. That initial survey covers Filipino poetry from 1905 to the mid-50's. Of the more than 10,000 poems published within that time frame, 330 poems by 80 poets were chosen for inclusion in the book. You can guess without my telling you which gender dominated the field. The final sequel, however, on which Abad is currently working promises a more balanced presentation, thanks in no small measure to the advocacy efforts of people like Edna Zapanta-Manlapaz, Soledad Reyes, Marjorie Evasco, etc. and to the emergence of a large group of fine women poets. Things are changing for the better, definitely. Courses in Women Studies

are being offered in universities. Books by women and about women are coming out in record number. For example, books like *Kung Ibig Mo* edited by Marjorie Evasco and Benilda Santos, *Forbidden Fruit: Women Write the Erotic* edited by Tina Cuyugan, *Songs of Ourselves: Writings by Filipino Women in English* edited by Edna Zapanta-Manlapaz, and *Ang Silid na Mahiwaga: Kalipunan ng Kuwento't Tula ng mga Babaeng Manunulat* edited by Soledad S. Reyes. Even our language is being re-examined; and sexist or chauvinist references to women are being expunged in favor of more neutral terms. Say, chair or chairperson, instead of chairman. Ms. instead of Mrs. or Miss. Our legal system is also being strengthened with the passage of a number of legislations designed to protect women's rights. And all kinds of support agencies have been established to address problems and issues central to women.

The politics of literature, however, does not only concern women writers, for the process of marginalization affects other writer groups as well. During Manlapaz's lecture-seminar, I made the observation that other Filipino writers, because of their linguistic or regional affiliation, are also marginalized. What I'm referring to is the regional writers, say the Mindanao writers, who have for a very long time have also been standing on the sideline.

Mindanao in the South, the Land of Promise, has been until recently the subject of benign neglect by the central government whose seat is located in the North. This neglect is reflected in the underdeveloped physical infrastructures of the island which lag in development relative to those in Luzon and the Visayas. This, despite the fact that resource-rich Mindanao contributes up to 50% of the national gross national product. The imbalance in the distribution of government support for the three main geographical groupings of the country illustrates the classic pattern of metropolis-province power relation. The metropolis enjoys a privileged position simply because it is the seat of all the major government agencies as well as the three branches of the government. Malacañang is in Metro Manila, the Senate and the House of Representatives are in Metro Manila, the Supreme Court is in Metro Manila. As the National Capital Region, Metro Manila and the adjoining cities (Quezon, Pasay, etc.) constitute the hub of significant political and socio-economic initiatives in the country and from there the benefits of those activities trickle outward along the spokes to the surrounding provinces. And you know where the bulk of government largess goes. Certainly, not to the provinces. The center or the metropolis first, in all things. And then the provinces afterwards. Mindanao, the farthest from the center, gets the left-over. An exaggerated picture perhaps but hardly off the mark.

This unequal or dominant-subordinate relation between metropolis and province, between center and periphery, is mirrored in the literary scene. The case of Mindanao writers as a marginalized group is even worse than that of women writers. Going back to Abad's *Native Clearing*, how many of the 49 poets come from Mindanao? One or two. Jolico Cuadra was born in Zamboanga but he has spent most of his life in Manila. And his link to Mindanao is so tenuous that readers tend to associate him more with the Manila literary crowd than anything else. Tita Lacambra Ayala is probably the only one included in the book who might be considered a Mindanao writer (she has struck her roots deep in Davao for decades), although she was from elsewhere, in Sarrat, Ilocos Norte. Two out of 49 is clearly an instance of under-representation and marginalization. The writers from the Visayas fared better, but only a little better. Six of them are in the anthology, but the overwhelming majority -- 42 out of 49 - come from Luzon, or, more specifically from Manila and the surrounding areas. When we talk of Philippine poetry, we know whose poetry we're talking about.

Another instance: the Cultural Center of the Philippines published a few years back a multi-volume *Encyclopedia of Philippine Art*. The volume on Literature includes a listing supposedly of the major works in Philippine Literature, covering various literary forms. From novels to books of poetry to critical studies etc. Of the 272 individual works identified as major, only 7 are from Mindanao: one collection of short stories, Aida Rivera-Ford's *Now and at the Hour* (1957) and six folk epics: *Agyu*, *Darangen*, *Parang Sabil*, *Ag Tobig Nog Keboklagan*, *Ulahingan*, and *Guman of Dumalinao*. Who made the decision what to include or exclude? You can be sure the Mindanao writers were not consulted. Next time you get hold of the *Encyclopedia of Philippine Art*, look at the list of consultants and see how many you recognize as your next-door neighbors. At best, one or two as a token representation, you can be sure.

This is one way of assigning an inferior value to the achievement of Mindanao writers. In one book after another, the same pattern can be observed: there's an inverted pyramid representing Philippine Literature. The top four-fifth is made up of works by the dominant groups, the writers of the metropolis, and the bottom fifth is given to the literary underdogs, the writers from the provinces. That's how things were in the past; that's how things are today and will likely remain in the near future.

Unless, we do something about it. This regional training for literature teachers that we're having today is an echo of an earlier series of lectures given at La Salle University. CHED has mandated a revised course on Philippine Literature which

will reflect the literary achievement of the various regions of the country. In short, a national literature that is not Manila-centric but truly Philippine-centric. I was asked to talk on the literature of Region 12, both contemporary and folk, including specific authors and works; although for today take I'm taking a broader base, the whole of Mindanao. From the materials gathered will evolve, supposedly, a textbook to be used for the revised course. If this is the spirit of this regional training, then we can expect and we must demand a corrective adjustment in the representation of Mindanao writers and Mindanao literary works. Who are our contemporary Mindanaoan writers. A couple of years ago, Christine Godinez-Ortega and I put together a two-volume anthology of their work in *Mindanao Harvest 1 and 2*. By "Mindanao writer," what do we mean? We mean one who was born or is based in Mindanao. Here are some of the authors we included in the anthology.

JAIME AN LIM (Cagayan de Oro/Iligan) holds five graduate degrees, including an M.A. in Creative Writing from Silliman University and a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana. At I.U., he won the Academy of American Poets Prize, the Tutungi Prize, and the Ellis Literary Award. He has also won several Palanca awards in fiction, poetry, essay, and short story for children. He is the author of *Literature and Politics: The Colonial Experience in Nine Philippine Novels* (1993) and a co-editor of *Stoking the Fire* (1995).

CESAR RUIZ AQUINO (Tangub, Misamis Occ./Zamboanga/Dumaguete) is a prize-winning poet and fictionist. His story "In the Smitty of My Soul" was included in the *Philippine PEN Anthology of Short Stories* (1962), edited by Francisco Arcellana. He is a regular panelist at the Silliman Writers Workshop. He has published *Chronicles of Suspicion* (1990), a collection of his modernist stories, and *Word Without End* (1993), a book of his poetry.

CALBIA. ASAIN (Jolo, Sulu) finished A.B. in English and CSSP in Philippine Studies at the UP Diliman. A writing fellow in the 1985 UP Summer Writers Workshop, he has had his short stories published in *Focus Philippines and National Midweek*. He is a dean at the MSU-Sulu Development and Technical College.

TITA LACAMBRA-AYALA (Sarrat, Ilocos Norte/Davao), famous mother of an equally famous son Joey, is a prize-winning poet and fictionist. Some of her works are: *Sunflower Poem* (1960), *Ordinary Poems* (1969), *Poor Boy Poems* (1980), and *Pieces of String and Other Stories* (1984). She edits and publishes the Road Map Series/Art Anthology which has featured many Mindanao writers and artists. She was the 1994 National Fellow for Poetry, UP Creative Writing

Center.

ROLANDO O. BAJO (Candijay, Bohol/Davao City) finished his Bachelor's degree at Ateneo de Davao University where he teaches literature and drama courses. He is an actor and stage director. He was a writing fellow to the First Mindanao Creative Writers Workshop in Davao City.

LILIA LOPEZ-CHUA (Davao City/California) is described by poet Tita Lacambra-Ayala as one of the best poets in Mindanao when Lilia's poems were published in Tita's *Road Map Series*. Lilia has won prizes for her poetry. She is right now somewhere in California, U.S.A.

LEONCIO P. DERIADA (Davao City/Iloilo City) earned his MFA and Ph.D. from Silliman University. He is a multi-awarded writer in English, Filipino, Hiligaynon, and Kinaray-a. He has published several works of fiction and plays for New Day Publishers. Today, he teaches at the UP Visayas and directs local and regional creative writing workshops in Panay island. He is the Literature Coordinator for Western Visayas of the National Commission for Culture and Arts-National Committee for Literary Arts and Cultural Center of the Philippines.

ELSON T. ELIZAGA (Cagayan de Oro City) finished his Bachelor's degree in Silliman University. He has won a Palanca award for his poetry and has published his works in national publications. At present he is connected with the Department of Trade and Industry in Cagayan de Oro City.

ANTONIO ENRIQUEZ (Zamboanga/Cagayan de Oro), a Palanca award-winning fictionist, is the author of *Spots on Their Wings and Other Stories* (1972), *Surveyors of the Liguasan Marsh* (1981), *The Night I Cry and Other Stories* (1989), and *The Living and the Dead* (1994). He holds an M.A. in Creative Writing from Silliman University.

MIG ALVAREZ ENRIQUEZ (Zamboanga/Manila), just as distinguished as his cousin Tony, is a prize-winning short story writer, novelist, playwright, and stage actor/director. His well-known works include: *The Devil Flower* (1959), *House of Images* (1980), *Three Philippine Epic Plays* (1983), *The White Horse of Alih* (1985), and *Three Philippine Ethnic-Hero Plays* (1991). He has studied at the State University of Iowa under a Fulbright grant, where he obtained a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, minor in Theater. He has also enjoyed fellowships at the Yaddo Foundation in Saratoga Springs, New York; Edward MacDowell colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire; and Huntington Hartford Foundation at the Pacific Palisades, California. He has been to Spain, France, Italy, and England under various study and observation grants.

STEVEN PRINCE PATRICK C. FERNANDEZ (Manila/Iligan City) is the

Founding Artistic Director of the Integrated Performing Arts Guild (IPAG) based in the MSU-Iligan Institute of Technology where he teaches humanities and drama courses. He is a performing artist, playwright, scholar, amateur, musician, composer, and comic artist. He is Mindanao representative in the Dramatic Arts Committee of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts as well as the founding chair of the Iligan Arts Council.

AIDA RIVERA-FORD (Jolo, Sulu/Davao) is the founder and president of the Learning Center of the Arts, the first fine arts college in Mindanao. An A.B. English graduate of Silliman University, she co-edited the first issue of the *Sands and Coral*, and prestigious literary journal of the university, where she practically started her literary career. She is best known for her widely anthologized prize-winning stories, "Love in the Cornhusks" and "The Chieftest Mourner." These stories are included in her collection, *Now and at the Hour* (1958) which won the 1954 Jules and Avery Hopwood Award for fiction, at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan. Her other awards include: the Datu Bago Award for Cultural Achievement from the City of Davao, Parangal for Writers (Post-War Years) from the Philippine Government, and most recently the National Fellowship in Fiction from the UP Creative Writing Center.

RALPH SEMINO GALAN (Iligan City) is a junior AB English major of the MSU-Iligan Institute of Technology. He has attended regional, national, and international writers workshops and his poems in English and Filipino have been published in the *Philippines Free Press*, *Philippine Panorama*, *Home Life Magazine*, and *Graphic*, to mention a few. In 1993, he won first prize in the first Philippine Panorama Poetry Contest (Non-Professional category).

IBRAHIMA. JUBAIRA (Zamboanga/Manila) has worked for the Philippine Government for over 45 years. A prolific fictionist, poet, and journalist, he has published his works not only in the country but also in Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Korea, Pakistan, and the U.S. He is the author of *A Canto of Summer* (1974) and *Mirror of Ancient Heritage* (1978), collections of lyrical short stories dealing with the lives of Moslem Filipinos.

FRANCIS C. MACANSANTOS (Zamboanga City/Delaware) holds an MA in Creative Writing from Silliman University. He taught for some time at the Mindanao State University in Marawi City before he moved to Baguio City with wife Precy Supnit and daughter Monica. Butch, as he is fondly called by family and close friends, won a Palanca first prize for poetry in English. Today he is in Delaware where he and wife Precy are finishing their postgraduate studies.

VICTOR MANGUBAT (Davao City) is Ruben de Vera, the painter whose favorite subject is the Philippine eagle. He finished his fine Arts degree from the University of Santo Tomas and his A.B. from Ateneo de Davao University. He has published his poetry in the *CCP Ani* and the *Road Map Series*.

GENEROSO B. OPULENCIA (Negros Occidental/Koronadal, South Cotabato), while still young, moved with his grandparents to Koronadal, South Cotabato where he finished high school at the Notre Dame, Boys Department. He majored in Japanese and Russian literature at San Francisco State College for his A.B. degree. He has been a writing fellow at the Silliman National Writers Workshop and the Mindanao Creative Writing Workshop. He teaches at Notre Dame University in General Santos City.

CHRISTINE F. GODINEZ-ORTEGA (Dumaguete City/Iligan City) holds an MA in Creative Writing from Silliman University. She has published poetry, essay, and fiction in national publications. Aside from being a correspondent of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, she teaches literature and creative writing at the College of Arts and Social Sciences, MSU-IIT and is Special Assistant to the MSU-IIT Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research and Extension. She is also the Literature Coordinator for Mindanao of the National Commission for Culture and Arts-National Committee for Literary Arts and the Cultural Center of the Philippines.

EDUARDO P. ORTEGA (Tanjay, Negros Oriental/Iligan City) is a Biology professor of the College of Sciences and Mathematics of the MSU-Iligan Institute of Technology. He has published his essays, poetry, and short stories in national publications and the *Asian Pacific Cultural Quarterly* (ASPAC). He is also a researcher and has read his papers based on his research on seaweeds in international conferences. He is married to Christine, who is also a poet.

DON PAGUSARA (Tangub, Misamis Occidental/Davao City) finished his MA major in comparative literature at the University of the Philippines in Diliman, Quezon City. He has published poetry, plays, and songs in national publications. He received a writing grant for Cebuano poetry from the Cultural Center of the Philippines in 1981.

AURELIO A. PEÑA (Zamboanga/Davao) is the correspondent covering Southern Philippines for *Asiaweek*. A writing fellow at the Mindanao Creative Writing Workshop, the Silliman Summer Writers Workshop, and the Iligan National Writers Workshop, he has had his stories and articles published in magazines here and abroad.

MARYAM ELNORA O. MONTECLARO ROCA (Cotabato City/New

York) published her first collection of poetry, *Sanstorm in Jeddah* (1988) in *Road Map Series* in Davao City. She has written two plays: "Lumayon" and "Lemlunay," the latter performed at a PETA-sponsored theater festival in Manila in 1984. In 1990, she won third prize in the Gawad CCP Para sa Panitikan.

ANTHONY L. TAN (Siasi, Jolo/Iligan) has a Ph.D. in English, major in British Literature, from Silliman University. His stories, poetry and essays have appeared in numerous publications in the country and abroad. He has won first prizes for his poetry from the Palanca and *Homelife*. His first book of poetry is *The Badjao Cemetery and Other Poems* (1985). He is professor of English at MSU-Iligan Institute of Technology.

JOSEFINA CARBALLO-TEJADA (Iloilo/Davao) writes fiction and drama and works for *Nestle*' Philippines. She has been a writing fellow at the Mindanao Creative Writing Workshop in Davao, the Silliman National Writers Workshop in Dumaguete, and the National Writers Workshop in Iligan.

As literature teachers of Mindanao, you and I must take personal responsibility for our own literature, that it be given the proper appreciation, that it be read more widely, that it be a source of enrichment, enlightenment, joy, and pride to each one of us Mindanaoan. When we take pride in our cultural achievement, we cannot remain long in the shadows of the margin; we will eventually move to the center and shine. The affirmation of our self-worth will set us free.