

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

A Lion in the House

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Philippine Studies vol. 30, no. 3 (1982) 434–437

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Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

torical facts, but Alcantara's sociology opens up a new perspective, one that easily accommodates the pleasant memories of Joshua Aagsalud and Abelina Madrid Shaw.

But at the same time Alcantara's sense of history is very vivid and it comes across strongly in both the interviews and the commentary on them. The book is historically broad, going back to the very earliest immigrants, and actually spanning two cultures and two countries. The poverty and suffering of the Filipino peasants is always there and always real, first as a motivating force for those who left, and then, perhaps even more strongly, as a reason for staying: every immigrant had an old mother, or brothers and sisters, or a wife and children in the Philippines to support. (Maxine Hong Kingston quotes the Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino women workers in California's tomato fields as saying, "I cannot die: I am supporting fifty.") Ilocos is especially real in the book, from the early days when many Hawaiians were thought to have simply disappeared into a void to more modern times when a group of plantation workers flew home as Balikbayans to make a joint donation to an Ilocano barrio from which they had all come.

Sakada is touching in part too. Alcantara writes of the dilemma of the unmarried old men whom family life has passed by, and the younger immigrants who find themselves alienated when they try to return to the Philippines, and families who have been separated for many years, and a community reunion party for the welcoming of a new immigrant — a wife who had not seen her husband for thirty years.

It is also a book rich in suggestions for current relevance, as the Philippines is once again exporting laborers by the thousands, and for much the same reasons as before.

Susan Evangelista

A LION IN THE HOUSE. By Lina Espina-Moore. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1980. 142 pages. ₱14.

Rarely does a significant novel appear on the Philippine writing scene. Even more rare is the emergence of a writer of genuine talent. *A Lion in the House* is short (only 142 pages) and it is flawed in many aspects, but in the novel Lina Espina-Moore has produced a potentially powerful work, and in the process has given indications of her own considerable talents as a writer. Mrs. Moore is a sophisticated writer with a sharp eye and an even sharper tongue. She paints a picture of Manila Society, particularly the lower-middle-class-become-elite part of it, with a devastating precision. Her main theme is the hypocrisy of that society ("To be sure hypocrisy holds this society together," [p. 88]) and her main subject is the *querida* system.

She hated the terms *querida*, girl friend, kept-woman, back street, number two, and, oh, the most vulgar of them all (the vernacular can be very vulgar), *kulasisi*. A Caged parakeet (p. 32).

There is enough internal evidence in the novel to document Mrs. Moore's indebtedness to Mauriac's *Woman of the Pharisees* and *Generation of Vipers* with their own themes of hypocrisy, and the effect of possessive "momism" on the lives of the members of the family.

Mrs. Moore chronicles a Filipino family under seige and leaves it to the reader to determine just *who* is the Lion in the House. In this chronicle of the de Leon Family (de Leon — lion?), is it Alberto, the father and master of the house, who is the lion? He built up the family business inherited from his father, chose a "lion dressed in evening clothes complete with top hat and cane, looking somewhat like Fred Astaire about to do the Continental" (p. 1) as the symbol of the company, and now leads an accepted double life with his mistress Diana Corey? He moves through the novel as master of both household, the king of the jungle that is upper class Manila society. Or is Josie the lion? She is an ex-Tondo school teacher, now affluent matron, who rages through the novel rebelling against her husband's double life, refusing to accept the hypocrisy of the situation, and twisting the lives of her children out of any realistic hope of happiness. Or is Jake the lion? He is the young son, caught all unknowingly in the struggle between husband and wife, driven finally to psychological catastrophe and sessions with a psychiatrist in New York, away from the family and turmoil of hypocritical Manila society. Or perhaps, the lion is Emma, the daughter of the family who finds an outlet for her rage in activism and rebellion against the establishment institutions of society — her family included. She, too, finds relative peace at school in New York, close to Jake, preserving some remnant of what the New York psychiatrist calls "the Filipino sense of family," (p. 131). Only one member of the family is not a lion, and that is the older son, Mike, who has married a girl who is the daughter of an employee of the U.N. and who was born and raised in New Jersey. Mike has moved away from the family house in San Miguel to a Fil Am Insurance house the young couple elected to build at the other end of the town. He now runs the family furniture business and has managed to ride the storms of family crises by maintaining an aloof, almost passive existence, tolerant and accepting of the hypocrisy that he realizes he cannot change. Or, finally, is the lion none of these characters at all, but simply the symbol of what is wrong with the family as a whole? Mrs. Moore has handled this theme with remarkable skill and it holds the structure of her novel together in very workmanlike fashion.

The three elements of that theme are the upper class Filipino family that she portrays so well, the *querida* system and Manila society — all of them characterized by the hypocrisy which is her main message. Josie is her best

character. Mrs. Moore has drawn her with both understanding and a compassionate honesty. Josie is the center of the novel (the woman of the Pharisees?) and the other characters (all lions in their own way) are balanced against her in a way that gives her a real depth of character. The querida system, with its inevitable impact on each of the characters and on the family, is ambiguously (and perhaps ironically?) condemned.

“Mrs. de Leon, ma’m, your husband is just like any other man. You see, we fool around, but it does not mean that we love our wives less. Much more so if there are children involved. What Mr. de Leon is doing is, is, well – Standard Operating Procedure” (p. 76).

In the subtlety of her writer’s skill it is difficult to see just whom or what Mrs. Moore is condemning.

It is clear that I admire this novel very much. Mrs. Moore has a sharp mind with a real gift of insight and a stiletto style. She has used a neat shifting focus and time frame – moving from character to character and from present back to past and back to the present again with remarkable skill.

She captures the dialogue, that language and the scenes of contemporary upper class Manila with amazing fidelity. (Note particularly her descriptions of Josie’s two parties.) Her final chapter with its letters from the servants echoes the ending of Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*. It is as if she were saying that all this shall pass – the upper class family, the hypocrisy, the pretense, the turmoil – but that the servants, the real people, Max and Sening – these shall abide.

The novel, however, is not unflawed. The startling conversion of Diana Corey, the querida, strains credibility. Her religious dramatics would suit Josie, but they do not suit the character of Diana. Mrs. Moore struggles to be clever at times and the result destroys her technique. The same is true of her language. Either Mrs. Moore or her editor has trouble with the English language and the novel is marred by many misprints and grammatical errors. The final criticism is that this is really just an outline of a novel that could have been. To do justice to her theme and to the vision she had in mind would have required a much longer novel. There is need of much more character painting to give her characters depth and realism. There should have been perhaps, a more leisurely approach to many of the scenes and the setting so that her characters would have moved in a more detailed background. I would have welcomed more depth in the parish priest, Fr. Garcia, to underline the theme of religious hypocrisy, and in Pete Gomez who moves in and out of the novel as a very effective Greek Chorus. To make the ending more effective would have required more emphasis on the family servants. What the author has given us shows that she has the skills to write a more satisfying novel, but I suspect that she was too anxious to finish the story. Mrs. Moore has the talent; unfortunately she has not used it to the fullest.

This is an exceptional novel. It is deeply Filipino, at least in that area of Filipino life, which Mrs. Moore has chosen to focus on. It is a limited *tranche de vie* (is not every novelist's view a narrow one?) but a very good one. We can only hope that Mrs. Moore will soon choose a bigger stage on which to display her considerable talents.

Joseph A. Galdon, S.J.