

philippine studies

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

Society in Fiction

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Philippine Studies vol. 48, no. 2 (2000): 235–264

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Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

Society in Fiction

Niels Mulder

In previous issues of *Philippine Studies*, I have often dwelt on the subject of Filipino self-imagination. In 1990, "Philippine Textbooks and the National Self-Image" (38:84–102) offered a discussion of the weird self-denigration perpetuated in school texts. Newer, post-EDSA teaching materials on "The Image of Philippine History and Society" (42:475–508) were slightly more positive, but largely failed to give meaning to the present through connecting it to its becoming. The current society appeared as a kind of accident of history, an appendix to a surveyable colonial past. The resultant picture of life through independence up to now became extremely jammed and confused, more comparable to press releases than to informed social analysis. Later on, "Filipino Images of the Nation" (45:50–74), culled from martial-law and recent textbooks and newspaper columns, wondered at the persistent negativism—self-flagellation—that keeps currency even in the press today. Yet, instilling pride in country and nation is an explicit principle said to guide instruction at the primary and secondary levels of education. Somehow, however, there seems to be no coherent "Ideology of Philippine National Community" (46 [1998]:); as a result, the state, run by legal legerdemain and rapacious politics, substitutes for the nation.

Next to the impressions created by school and press, other images have wide circulation, too. The government, NGOs and nationalistic intellectuals produce idealistic images of the future Philippine society, ranging from "Philippines 2000," through justice and peace, to vibrant national community. These models sharply contrast with the representations in tabloids and movies in which the world seems to be run by sex and violence. Televised talk shows add substance to social-critical images, while the experience of everyday life gives local color and flavor to individual imaginings. In order to access the latter two, the

works of creative authors writing on the subject of present-day existence can be most relevant. Such people have more freedom to explore and react to their environment, and will only seldom reflect "objective"—whatever that is—reality. Often they have a message, and hope to open their readers' eyes to one condition or another. Normally they want to dig deeper than the obvious, and may be ruthlessly frank in their appraisal of social life.

The fiction I am interested in consists of novels that are set in the present, that address existence in the here and now. I need novels, because they allow for a broad canvas and the development of complex social relationships—things that are as a rule not possible within the confines of short stories. The latter may corroborate certain images, and are sometimes helpful to sketch atmosphere and mood. While this may sound straightforward enough, it is not that easy to find sociologically relevant novels dealing with current conditions. Apart from the very modest book production, Philippine authors seem to have a predilection to situate their stories in the past, such as the time of the Revolution, the First Quarter Storm, or Martial Law. The late eighties, basically the post-Marcos crisis, have received attention, too. Yet, apart from the numerous writings of F. Sionil Jose, few novels take issue with general conditions and, up to this date, I have not found anything that squarely focuses on life, and its sundry problems, in the 1990s.

In the following, seven novels and two collections of short stories will be reviewed, not as an exercise in literary criticism, but to scrutinize their contents for socially revealing images. At the end of the first two excerpts, these images are still summarized. Later on, they are so clear that commenting on them, other than in a general conclusion, would be an insult to the endurance of readers. Be this as it may, let us now first review the titles I thought relevant because of their social information.

***Bulaklak ng Maynila* (Flower of Manila)**

A view from the ivory tower of the Diliman Republic

There is no shortage of works dealing with the lives of the poor. Landicho's book (1995) is just one of the latest exponents of this genre. Among his precursors, we find well-known authors, such as Adrian Cristobal Cruz (*Ang Tundo Man May Langit Din*, late 1950s); Edgardo

Reyes (*Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag*, 1960s); Ricardo Lee (*Si Tatang at mga Himala ng Ating Panahon*, 1970s); Jun Cruz Reyes (*Utos ng Hari at Iba Pang Kuwento*, 1970s). While some of these authors treat their subject more convincingly, it is Landicho's merit to bring us up to date, in the sense that he may reflect the touch of optimism that was largely absent from the earlier trend of social realism. True, Cruz's novel is colored by good hopes, too—and opened a window on life in the slums. Then, however, in the 1960s and 1970s, perceptions changed. Life in the underbelly—Landicho's "iron entrails"—became harder, as it were. E. Reyes's novel is about extreme exploitation, degradation and perversion. Lee does not even situate many of his episodes in the confines of slum life: many of his stories are about street children, preyed upon by, and preying on, child molesters. JC Reyes, too, situates his underdogs in the hard realities of city life at a time that these were aggravated by the rule of martial law.

The author of *Bulaklak ng Maynila* is a professor of creative writing and literature at the University of the Philippines, where he also accomplished his Ph.D. degree in *Pilipinolohiya*. His novel is set in one of the poorer quarters of down-town Manila, that is the Magdaraagat Slum of Tondo. There, and on the sidewalks of Quiapo, most of the action takes place. The focus of the book is with individuals and their motivations, even though certain personages may readily be understood to stand for certain social conditions.

The story centers on Ada, the flower of Manila. When we first meet her, she exits from the slum to greet her parents on her way to school. These, that is Roque and Azun, have just installed their sidewalk merchandise. They are quarreling. It seems to be Roque's habit to come home drunk every night—and with no money left to pay their debt to Timo who grows fat on financing the street vendors. In the eyes of the latter, Timo is a good man: he helps them survive. So does the police; by selling their protection, they cooperate with the vendors in making a living. Sometimes, the police even pose as vendors when they "sell" jasmin garlands to the jeepney drivers. It is an elegant way to collect their *tong*.

Elegant are the ways of Timo, too. When he makes his round, Azun has to beg his lenience. Timo advises that she drop by his house on her way home. When his suggestion is seemingly ignored, he stresses, "I shall be waiting for you." Later, in the evening, somebody knocks at Azun's door. Ada is already asleep. Timo forces himself on Azun. "I love you." "Don't worry about your debt." Azun protests. Her de-

fenses are weak, however. Soon, she has been incited. Happiness flows through her veins. She gives herself freely to Timo. Then another rap at the door is heard. This time it is the turn of the drunken husband to force himself on her. She fantasizes about Timo.

When Ada tends her mother's sidewalk stand, she is harassed by a group of teenagers who pose as buyers. It finally leads to a fight in which Ed, a cigarette vendor, takes her side. When the group feels threatened by other vendors and spectators, they make off. By that time Azun has arrived to teach Ada a lesson:

"The customer is always right."

"But they offended me."

"Such is life on the sidewalk. We are poor. We have to live of it. Let's appreciate that. Together with the suffering it brings."

"Why must we always be made to feel inferior?"

"Hold it!"

Later on, Ed drops by to console Ada. He touches her. "I love you." Late into the night, she feels a smarting pain. Her mother will explain that she is a woman now.

At school, Cris waits for Ada. He has a crush on her. As a mute, he considers himself a coming artist. He lives with an aunt, and has some spending money. He also wants to get to know the family of the poor girl. Azun, too, has two men in her life. Somehow, Roque, more drunk than ever, heard the gossip about Timo's clandestine adventure. It becomes a noisy and threatening scene. Armed with a kitchen knife, Roque challenges Timo. When finally taken home, he avows:

I am a bad husband, yet, what do I get in return? So, when I pass the sidewalk, all of them are glancing at me. That one? Haha ... I also love you. Such is life. But I tell you, it won't be long like this. Imagine, those children, those proteges of mine whom I employ as beggars, they have a nice income, and from my share of it . . . we'll rise. So is it. The poor depend on the poor. That's what I always say. Be patient, but then, what happens? It's ridiculous. It's very irritating.

Explaining herself to Ada, Azun maintains that people often do, and have to do, things that they do not like themselves. Often people are mere victims of circumstances. "I always tried to be a good wife to your father." Before she knew him, she—coming to the city from the Visayas—had been lured into prostitution. Her marriage brought her

to the more self-respecting life of a sidewalk vendor. Be that as it may, the relatively affluent and influential Timo—on whom much of the neighborhood depends—is serious about his desire to possess Azun. The point is that Roque stands in his way.

At several places, the author inserts “observations” about “the residue of society,” the beggars of Quiapo. These observations revolve around Angelita, a blind girl who lives with an old beggar woman. The strong point of Angelita is her voice. She can sing beautifully. This not only attracts money, it also attracted publicity. People interested in beggars reported about the two as the “madonna and child” among the poorest, and for a while this contributed to their livelihood. Those, however, who made the scoop and wrote the story are the true winners. When you are really at the bottom of the pile, there is little to hope for but alms. Even so, they live complete lives. They are born, live and die on the side-walks. They have their modest hopes. They even sing.

After school, Cris is waiting for Ada. Although she is expected to go home, Cris succeeds in taking her for a ride. At a certain moment, they are in a park. There, far from the noise and stench of town, they start petting and necking. Cris maintains he loves her. He has money, too. In a cab, he takes her to his auntie’s well-furnished place. The aunt is not very interested in meeting Ada. She is at the point of disappearing into her daily night life. Her estimate of Ada is, “She still has milk at her mouth.” “Mind you, Cris, she is green indeed.” Even so, before Ada is in a taxi again and on her way home, she had got to know what it is to make love delightfully exciting, then leading to inexplicable loneliness.

A change in the district’s administration, or new owners, can make a difference in the rules, and the rumor of such events causes a stir among those who occupy the sidewalks. The newly powerful always seem to start on clearing the streets, demolishing shanties, and thus to regularize and ‘beautify’ the environment. Soon such measures boil down to pay-offs to the police—but there are limits to what can be creamed off from the poor. After all, the sidewalk is their livelihood, the shanty is their home. Yet, they always need to be alert to sudden cleaning up campaigns when the police raid their stalls and goods. This goes for the beggars, too. They can be rounded up just like that, and thrown into jail.

The vendors’ only resort is Timo. They are fully aware that he lives of them, but they need him even more than he needs them, and thus

they must grant him the liberties he takes, such as with Azun. Now, with the change of guard in the district, they need him very much, because Timo is the life line connecting them to local and urban politics. Besides, the politicians concerned are very conscious of the voting power of the slum dwellers. In this way, everybody depends on everybody else. The police have the law to maintain, the others have the bribes to relax it. The politicians have the power to regulate, yet need the votes to stay in power. Laws and regulations aplenty—these are there to serve individual purposes, not the common welfare, and the underdogs are often hit hardest. It often seems as if their humanity is denied. They have no choice but to go with the flow of fate.

Roque remains keenly aware that he has been duped. He remains suspicious, peevish, and very piqued whenever Timo is mentioned. Besides, his situation did not improve when the police rounded up the beggars and watch-your-car boys upon whom he depends. He needs money. One night, he sneaks out of the house. The next day he is among those accused of breaking into the house of and killing a Chinese. In spite of the police being almost immediately at the scene of the crime, Roque escaped, but at night, when he dropped by to see Azun, he is arrested. At that time, too, the police seemed to know his whereabouts.

It boils down to a plot hatched by Timo. Two of his proteges talked Roque into joining them in the burglary. The police had been forewarned. Because he stabbed the owner of the house, Roque may expect a life sentence. At the same time, Azun is deeply indebted to Timo, and harassed by his runners. Even the house where she and Ada live is claimed back. In spite of her knowing that it was Timo who got her husband behind bars, she has been left with no choice but to move in at Timo's. Then the man forces himself on her again. But he is an experienced lover. He does it nicely. He is not drunk like Roque. She likes it. Does it matter? No, we are merely driftwood, pushed on by the stream of life. We have no choice. Seemingly, life goes nowhere.

Does this mean that people have no honor in life? That there is no dignity? The author wants us to think there is. Although Azun mentions said words, it is Ada who has been destined to give them shape. While Azun floats inexorably into Timo's net, Ada decides to go to it on her own, to seek her own keep. The first person she turns to is Ed. He lives in a poor hovel, and is burdened by the task to see to a Christian burial of his aunt. On her way back, she meets with a butterfly of the night who dances in a club. Since Ada is beautiful, she is invited

to join the show. It is a success. With the money so earned, she helps Ed defray the cost of the burial. Then she is picked up by Timo's assistants, and brought "home" to where Azun has taken the place of lady of the house. Sneers Timo:

Honor . . . dignity! You hardly know what you're talking about. A while ago, I saw your daughter, dancing almost naked in front of people. And now you want to talk about honor? You are just talking wind.

Well, if honor, dignity, loyalty, and suchlike, are unaffordable luxuries to Azun, these remain Ada's preoccupations. Living at Timo's is like living in a golden cage. Yet, Azun has taken to it. She identifies with her new affluence and power. She begins to look down on former friends and associates. And thus, when it is clear that Ada still sees her cigarette-vending friend Ed, she is read a lecture by Azun, "We are on our way up. Everything changes. Such is the law of life. I want you to have a future." To win Ada over, Timo promises to make her Queen Helena of the Santacruzian festival. This elates and confuses her. Anyway, this brings Cris back into the picture. He will be the Queen's consort and, as an upcoming actor, Timo pays him well for the job. At the lavish reception following the procession, Timo becomes increasingly drunk and boastful. When the party is over, Ada still meets Ed. Then her mother comes down to persuade her to come in and sleep. In the sitting room, Timo has fallen asleep. When he wakes up, he rapes Ada. The author still finds it necessary to write, "She could not feel the least of pleasure at Timo's indulgence." The next day, she runs away. With little money to buy food, she is easily persuaded by a Chinese shopkeeper to enter his keep, and do the washing. At night, he tries to rape her. "He is like an animal in heat. He regularly forces himself on me. I hope I'll be pregnant. Then I'll be his missus." The older servant's words do not console her. She makes off into the night. Back to the sidewalk to sleep. Back to the club. To dancing.

In this way, she meets Ed again. She settles down with him. In their poverty, she is happy. Even when confronted by Timo, she sticks to her new life. Instead of dancing, she now does the dishes at the club. Still, Timo looms large. One day, Ed is killed in an "accident." She continues to live in his hovel. She defends her honor and dignity, "even if it is in quicksand." This is illustrated by Cris. He didn't make it, and slides back into despair. Basically, this is also where Azun has arrived. Timo's infatuation with her has faded away. She, however, has no way

to go, "I buried my memories. I merely live today. If I allow for the past, I'll be destroyed. Clear your head. Banish your thoughts, throw them out like stinking garbage. We're mere victims." Yet Ada does not accept this type of reasoning.

In the last seventy pages, the author wants to construct a whole world again. Timo turns against Azun. He wants Ada. This leaves Azun totally dazed. She is consoled by Mang Tomas, the old sidewalk shoe repairman. He calls himself her father. He takes her to his hut. (Mang Tomas has four adult children, living in different parts of the country. His two sons are an accountant and a civil engineer, respectively). Slum demolition—the dwellers are too scattered to oppose—brings Ada into Mang Tomas's hut too. When Timo comes there to rape her, he is stabbed to death by Azun. This shocks her out of her daze. Her cause is being hailed by feminists. She's acquitted. Angelita, the blind beggar girl, wins a song contest. She is invited to sing at other occasions. Ada receives money from Ed's uncle. Cris turns to God. Azun and Ada visit Roque in jail. Angelita is promised an eye operation. Mother and daughter go back to their original house. In the end, all is well.

Image of Landicho

It is not that the book is not full of improbabilities, but if we just concentrate on the first 250 pages when all sorts of miracles do not yet happen, we find, in spite of some ideological messages to the contrary, lives in which the main motivation seems to be to follow their own fate, their own inclinations, and in which everybody seems to be taking advantage of everybody else. The poor live off the poor; the police live off the poor; the shrewd exploit the poor. Everybody uses the little power he has to his own advantage. The book is ostensibly about honor and dignity. Ada, Manila's flower, is the exemplar. "The novel is about the dehumanization in which Ada grows up, yet the path taken does not get bogged down in the quicksand of pessimism, but leads to the victory of the human spirit that holds on to dignity, love and hope." To do this, Ada the schoolgirl needs to be abused, first by a young adult "boy friend," then by her "uncle," then by a Chinese—but she will wash dishes instead of dance, suffer poverty and injustice, and inspire love and hope in others.

To do so, the author needs anti-heroes and villains. Timo, the vendors' patron, is familiar to many Filipino novels. He is the one wield-

ing power and influence. People depend on him. That he grows fat on their sweat does not matter. The one you depend on, is good. But he is only good as long as nobody is in his path. When contravened, he becomes dangerous. He is used to getting it his way. If he has set on Azun, he will get her. If Roque is an obstacle, it will be cleared. If he wants to show his might, he does so. His tentacles spread everywhere. He degrades Azun in every respect, disposing of her husband, taking her in, being served by her. The only thing Azun knows to do is to forget about honor, about the past, about herself, and to be comfortable in her new-found position. When Timo lays his violent hands on Ada, Azun is shocked back to "honor." Killing him gets her into the headlines. She becomes a feminist cause. Her acquittal is also an acquittal of her past. She loves Roque again—in spite of his permanent drunkenness, irresponsibility, and pimping of the poor.

Of course, Landicho is right. There is honor among the poor. They have their rays of hope, their dreams, their loves. After all, they are human too. We need these things in life. It is what keeps churches in business. Yet, in spite of his wonderful ending, the obstacles and odds on the way to the good life are almost insurmountable. Escaping is there for a few. For most, being poor and downtrodden is the life of everyday. The only way up is to sell yourself to the devil, to a patron—with destructive consequences. In practice, honor may lay deeply hidden in the self. It is not a common commodity where the law of the jungle—the author repeatedly assures us that the city is a jungle—prevails.

Shifting Sands

This novel of Irah Borinaga (1997) about love and idealism does not really address the life and working of Filipino society, yet needs to elaborate a little on the circumstances in which love and idealism can thrive. As far as love goes, these are of a personal nature, and have much to do with private experience. Idealism, though, is evoked by social challenges. These can be found in prevailing poverty, injustice, landlordism, the use and abuse of power, the callousness of patrons, and suchlike. All these, and the perceptions surrounding them, are often mentioned in public discourse, and it may be useful to see how they are presented as the backdrop of *Shifting Sands*.

Most of the story is set on Isla Blanca, a white-beached tropical paradise on which we find a small community of fishermen. The is-

land had been appropriated by the Spanish grandfather of the present owner, Mr. Villarama. He is the principal provincial tycoon, monopolizing all sorts of business. Politicians depend on his favor and the votes he can muster because of all the people dependent on him. This, in turn, enhances his opportunities. The pursuit of these is his life, more than anything else.

The people of Isla Blanca, like so many more throughout the province, recognize Mr. Villarama as their patron. Half their catch goes to him. He reciprocates by sending supplies to their parties, and a particularly joyful occasion is the yearly celebration of his birthday. Unofficially, he supports the volunteer doctor working on the island. He even had a costly waterpipe built at the latter's instigation. Yet, on a certain day—similar to umpteen other occasions—he shows his true colors. The island is to be developed into a world-class tourist resort. This, he argues, will be to the good of the population.

The residents do not agree. To them, the island is holy ground. Villarama silences the main protestor, not by killing him—as it has been feared—but by “buying” him. When the advance construction party arrives, fishermen's huts are cut down without mercy. In the melee, a youth is even hit by a bullet fired by a security guard. Villarama always gets his way. It is no use opposing.

The tycoon's influence runs so deep as to touch the underground. Naturally, he opposes his daughter's choice of her husband-to-be. He, like other idealists, is a product of UP—of a privileged background, but making the honest choice to side with the poor and to change the structure of Philippine society. He is an active member of the liberation forces. As such, his comrades do not take his marriage to Miss Villarama for granted. Neither does her father. Suspicions against the future groom—such as being a deep-penetration agent (DPA)—are kindled, thanks to Villarama's intercession with the armed forces and their real DPAs. Similar to what happened and happens a thousand times over the revolution eats its own children. Tanya's fiancé is butchered by his very fellows.

Mr. Villarama is the exemplar of power, pure and simple. Power gets its way, bulldozes it, is persuasive, bribing, smiling, and absolutely amoral and ruthless. As a result, respect for power seems to come “naturally.” Lovers and idealists oppose. To no avail. Power, at least as far as the male goes, is sex. The chain of women—conquered, bought, subdued—on Mr. Villarama's way seems endless. Yet, did it bring happiness? The author comes back at him (he is close to seventy

then) by having his wife run away, by leaving him with the shambles of "family life." Will he finish his days as a lonesome, unhappy man? I doubt it.

The only clear social picture we get from this novel is the one about power, how it originates—in land-grabbing, or in cultivating the "right" people, be they friend or foe—and how it maintains itself and expands in relation with politics and politicians. Loyalty and morality do not belong to its qualities. Ruthlessness does. This image of an outer world, possibly encompassing an inner one of love and idealism, is pervasive and surfaces in many writings, not only fictional, but in the press as well. It incites idealism, and powerless rage.

Migration Literature

Beginning in American times, Filipinos have been moving in numbers across the globe in search of greener pasture. Early on, many went to those parts of the States where their manpower could most readily be deployed: to Hawaii's plantations and Alaska's fish canneries. Some of them wrote about their expatriate existences, about being caught in between homesickness and dollars. Carlos Bulosan (*America is in the Heart*, 1946) and Bienvenido N. Santos (*You Lovely People*, 1955) are prime examples. Others focused on the loss of identity of returnees, their feelings of alienation when confronted with "home." This problematic surfaces in Juan C. Laya's work (*His Native Soil*, 1940) and in one of the novels by N.V.M. Gonzales (*The Bamboo Dancers*, 1959). Anyway, the flood of Filipinos on their way to the American dream is relentless. Many of them are highly educated. Many among them write. In the group of currently States-based Filipino writers, we find Linda Ty-Casper, Ninotchka Rosca, Paulino Lim, and Epifanio San Juan, Jr.

Sometimes, such authors write directly about the experience of life in the Philippines. Often they touch on the subject of exile, of being in strange lands, of the desire to be back, of the difficulty of being back. To many, after having broken away, homelessness and separation become a way of life. Ties with dear others become tarnished, unraveled, unreal. Distance becomes the theme, it hazards the subject.

Meanwhile the flood of people leaving the country has reached fabulous proportions. In a way, life at home has become surrounded by the global village, a wide stretch of "public" land that does not seem to clearly belong to anybody where Filipinos are being aban-

done and where they are on their own. Their anchoring point is the far-off homeland; their experience is one of exile. It seems as if everybody has relatives, friends and acquaintances in the position of being *émigré*, a temporary or a permanent Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW). This has thus become a shared point of view, a common way of seeing the world. No wonder, then, this has become part of the literary tradition, and a topic of scholarly research.

The America-inspired literature demonstrates considerable continuity. It is of Filipinos who may venture back from time to time, but who are really States-based. The later waves of migration aimed at temporary work, in the Middle East, in Hongkong, Singapore, Malaysia, Japan, or on foreign, often Norwegian merchantmen. Women constitute a very large segment of the migrants. They work as nurses in Canada, entertainers in Japan, mail-order brides in Australia and Germany, domestics in Hongkong and the Middle East, factory laborers in Taiwan—and many of them had to add the injury of being abused to the insult of their deprivation and loneliness. As it may be expected, this has given rise to regular reporting and discussions in the newspapers about the miserable conditions of work; about rapes and suicides; about the killing of cruel employers, and the subsequent trials and executions; about the powerlessness, or the unwillingness, of Philippine foreign representations to interfere for the sake of their nationals; about the insatiable greed of the agencies living of the export of labor. These themes resurface in the literature on women in exile, such as the stories in *Mga Hibla ng Pangarap* (Strands of Hope, 1994) about which it has been said:

Government calls them heroes for their contribution to keeping the country alive with their dollar remittances. And indeed they are. But they are so in ways that have nothing to do with our common conception of heroes as knights in shining armor out to rescue damsels in distress. They *are* the damsels in distress. No, not even damsels, though they are truly in distress, as this collection of often bitter, always moving, stories shows. The sign in a Hongkong elevator banning dogs and Filipino women from its premises is the least of their worries. They have quite enough to do just being *seen*. Are they really heroes, or martyrs to the cause? (Conrad de Quiros, back cover).

An important problem surfacing in many of the stories is the fact of being morally abandoned by the people they work for. Those staying behind find new lovers. Some husband-fathers rape their daughters.

Some live leisurely of the remittances. Others turn extremely jealous. Wives remaining behind get into comparable problems. Children have to do with half- or broken homes. Misunderstandings flourish. Secrets are kept. Bad news is revealed. Emotions are stirred. Love turns into treason. Trust becomes suspicion; People reach out for and miss each other. And so it is in Irah B. Borinaga's *Distant Echoes: A Modern-day Novela* (1993).

Her main character is Carmina Morales who left the Philippines for the States some ten years earlier. Then she also left her children, ranging from approximately ten to eighteen years old. Her marriage to Luis was not viable any longer, and for the sake of extending her stay in Chicago, she married a gay American. This enabled her to pay for the family house in Manila and the higher education of her children. The book opens when Carmina is on her way "home."

The narrative and the plots relate the distances that have grown between her and the children; the lies that need to be told to keep illusions in place; the secrets kept in order not to cause worries and anxieties. The children are living their own lives, and the mother feels guilty in regard to them. The children convey that she does not need to, that all is well, that they appreciate her economic efforts. These children are not of one kind, though. While they know each other, they also have their private ideas and experiences that are not supposed to be revealed to the others. But Carmina is on the receiving end all the time.

Naturally, there is much pleasure in being "reunited," and even in meeting with her "former" husband—and eventually, his new partner. Such evokes endearing memories and short-spun feelings of togetherness yet, in the end, people appear to have grown far apart, the pleasure of each other's company being short lived, or rather, superficial. Motherly advice and ideas do no longer connect with the adult lives of the children. These have their own experiences, reach their own conclusions, find—and must find—their own ways, often through trial and error, through tears and comfort. There is no longer a place for a motherly mother. Everybody's die has been cast; Carmina has become homeless. She returns to Chicago. Her actor-"husband" went to New York, and is in no hurry to join her. Meeting her friend Cielo—who married, or rather, picked up a much younger Filipino husband (with a family of his own in Manila)—they get soaked together. Cielo's relationship is breaking up; Carmina is just back from facing hers.

"I'm a fool. A real hundred-percent fool." Cielo shook her head bitterly.

"I am, too. We both are. But life must go on," Carmina declared.

"Right?"

"Yes, of course!"

The Yawning Gap

"You are going to fight the mayor? He has not been defeated yet in any of the cases he has brought before the court. Are you not aware, my son, that money talks and that power begets power?"

With these words in Gonzaga's novel (1991), the worldly wise father-tenant admonishes his son Mario, who has taken it upon himself to defend Gorio, one of the mayor's dependents who has been accused of stealing and slaughtering a carabao. During their interview in jail, Gorio explained his case to his defense council, the young and bright Mario Polistico. Seven years earlier, the mayor had convinced Gorio to develop a six-hectare plot of land, and to turn it into a coconut plantation. When the trees would yield, Gorio would be recompensed through obtaining full ownership of one half of that garden. When he came for his share, the mayor started to procrastinate, then accused him of stealing one of his carabaos.

It is abundantly clear that Gorio could never have done this, and that the mayor is looking for a way to be able to dismiss the just claim of his tenant. Yet, mayors are not used to losing cases in court. To complicate matters, Mario also happens to be engaged to Elisa, the mayor's daughter.

The case against Gorio is an obvious fabrication, blatantly illustrated by the very court proceedings when the case is adjudged. But when judge, prosecutor, and accuser team up, the verdict becomes a certainty no common sense can defeat. And thus Mario's NPA friend Tano has to stick to his vow: this type of justice will seal the mayor's fate. At the victory party at his house, the latter is indeed shot, and—of course—Mario's establishment enemies conspire to get him behind bars because of it. It is Tano who rescues Mario from jail; he is being given a teaching chore at the NPA camp.

Conversations between the two old school friends clarify the undesirable condition of Philippine society where a few—the rich, the corrupt, the powerful—command the lives of the poor who are

systematically oppressed, exploited, denied justice, or what have you. Political power appears to be the key to the good life. It naturally combines with selfishness. The two friends have no trouble in agreeing this much. How to fight and change the system is the bone of contention. Tano believes in armed confrontation. Mario espouses the sense of justice and the power of good example, schooling, development, and democracy. This course can only succeed if leaders shed all personal and selfish interests. In other words, what is needed most are changes in individual attitudes and values.

Mario's ideas, religion, sacrifice, true love, the honesty of President Aquino, justice, a few shining examples in the higher echelons of the civil service, and an awakened conscience of the nation are obviously what the author sets on. These are even made to penetrate Tano's mind. And thus, after some severe setbacks in the field of battle, he decides to surrender with his remaining men. They are ambushed by another NPA unit; more blood flows. Will the Philippines ever reach peace? Will justice ever prevail? Or is it opportunistic politicians and their money that will keep the country in their stranglehold? Are love and idealism really powerless?

Fiesta People

Although recently written, Josefina Protacio's story (1994) has been set in 1971, at the time of the Plaza Miranda bombing. Just the same, I found it extremely recognizable, reflective of Manila today as much as of the Manila then. Granted, no light rail yet, Rizal Avenue is still attractive in its big-city ways. Then as now, the traffic jam remains familiar—and it made me think of my up to then worst experience of gridlock, in 1969, in Manila. Then as now, high-rise buildings were going up. The churches of Quiapo and Baclaran were attracting those in need of blessing. People were enjoying, and preying upon, each other. However this may be, such details are, by themselves, insubstantial. The book's timelessness has little to do with its temporary setting that, anyway, does not play much of a role. Its relevance has everything to do with some perennial themes of Filipino life: with family, with politics, and with youthful disgust—call it idealism—of these two core institutions.

The story opens on a scene at the US embassy. It is Filipinos queuing, and scrambling to get ahead. Everybody, these days, seems to

wish to leave—off to Saudi, to Germany, Hongkong, off to greener pastures. Away from the “shitty, stinking system” (8) where power and money have their way and where the dastardly poor can merely demonstrate to no avail. Even so, Danny Singson is to stick around. Getting out is not the cure. He will show them his principles. Eight years in college—three courses, finally finishing in Arts—should get him a job. But as his father, a small-town physician in Mindanao, observes, “You don’t want to find work; you want work to find you. You’re looking more and more like *Juan Tamad*, waiting for the fruit to fall. But believe me, Danny, there is no fruit to wait for anymore. Everybody’s out there, plucking the tree clean” (10, 11).

Juan was lazy, but he was smart. Vice and virtue are but two sides of the same coin: this was the moral Filipinos had been raised on. If you can cut corners, why take the long route? If you can get an influential friend to lend your son a job, why make him join the line to the smug bureaucrat’s desk? (12)

Is Danny beyond those with influence? Not at all. His uncle is Senator Singson, his father’s younger brother. Yet, Danny wants to go it alone, pawning his belongings until becoming so poor, he has to beg for a coin to buy him a jeepney ride. He is a rebel without a cause. He wants to get his parents off his back. He disdains his friends who use their connections. He does not want to play the system. What he positively wants, however, remains unclear.

Danny is contrasted with his law-college friend Benjie, who had to drop out when his father was killed upon winning a lawsuit against a governor. This started Benjie in life. Selling the father’s estate—the bone of contention—to that very official, he got a ten-times better price than originally offered to his dad. “I could have asked for more—after all, I’ve got him by the balls—he didn’t quite expect my father to have a law student for a son.” With the money, he established himself in the antique business. By courting the daughter (thirty-five, and three kids from two fathers to boot) of an upstart tycoon, his business has been capitalized to capacity, “Danny, drop by if you care!”

Native business acumen—playing the system—is regularly contrasted with the sly and patient ways of the Chinese. Such as old Sia Peng who, besides crucial shops, “also co-owned with a Japanese a lumber concession ..., and the talk was, together these two aliens bribed local inspectors to pass good logs off as bad logs before shipping them to Kobe, cheating two governments with the transaction”

(34). Danny's dealings concern his confrontations with the pawnshop owners, who treat him condescendingly in spite of his being well dressed:

Later, he told Danny accusingly, "You must be rich." But the look on his face said, "So, why pawn things if you're this rich? And why travel to Japan? Rich people don't go to Japan, they go to America or Europe. New York, London, Paris, Rome." (32)

The Filipina wife of the pawn broker, though, "knew perhaps she had to tread on tiptoe when dealing with compatriots. The wrong tone or facial expression could very well bring about an awkward scene, a loss of face for every one. Too much *amor propio* being bandied around when her people could hardly afford it, was the expression Danny read on her face." (33)

The book is spiced with a thousand-and-one observations of Filipino life, especially in the big city, but also of relationships with relatives, with the powerful, and the powerless. The Chinese remain Chinese, in spite of Filipino citizenship. At school, pupils are made to memorize Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. Connections get you through Customs. Obligations need to be repaid or are, at least, expected to be so. Teachers pilfer school property. Using English "puts one a class above the *bakya* crowd." Blood ought to be thicker than water. Abortions are a rather common occurrence. It is only idiots who do not use their connections. Chinese eateries have very dirty restrooms. Water pressure is perennially problematic. Everybody, certainly the professionals, wants to leave the country. The police routinely torture suspects in order to make them sign confessions. The city is festive and fecund of violence; "car-watch" boys—you pay them, if not...

Really, this city isn't Chicago of the East for nothing. Shoot-outs, robbery, rapes, kidnapping. And small wonder when movies, comic books, and television these days glorify nothing but sex and violence . . .

Opinion columns, if not ranting about government corruption and red tape, are always pontificating on society's general malaise but as usual coming up with no cure. . . .

On top of the social volcano, they quote the President often. But what do you see? Society editors hobnobbing with the rich, gloating over the beautiful people they meet at cocktails . . . What double standard. So bogus. So—well, so Catholic. (54)

The city is double standard, too. Ermita's honky-tonk pleasures are paired with its decay. The rules authorities impose are ignored by public and police alike. The church is not really beyond a little mumbo-jumbo. Conversation, communication is drowned out by jeepney radios on full blast. Policemen pick their teeth over their post-lunch San Miguel. Small people are too proud to admit to their poverty. Danny's principles are never going to make a dent in the practical ways of others.

A sort of a divide seems to split society. There is the elite—self-seeking, going their own way—that stands apart from the others. They are Manila's Four Hundred. For them, the Cultural Center of the Philippines has been built. For them, foreign philharmonic orchestras are flown in. They keep the poor out, wall the slums off, and fence themselves in luxurious subdivisions where the grass is always green, whatever the season, whatever the drought. There, or at the fine hotels, they throw their parties, do their politicking, make their deals, and think up their tricks. There, they live their own lives, almost oblivious of the crowd. It is their privileged position that lets them run the System, a System built on immorality, on double standards, in which the moral obligation (*pakikisama*) of the one party inheres the corruption of the other. To change it, is an academic question. Practically, it is self-perpetuating. How could you change it "with our every-one-for-himself predilection, our Us versus Them mentality?" (82)

The episodes set among the politically influential seem to sport the theme of "as long as it is in our mutual interest." It is almost as if no action is taken, no word said, no joke told that does not refer to ulterior motives. Besides, all seem to be connected. Is it the thugs profiting? Then, what about the politicians behind those thugs, and the businessmen behind the politicians? And what about the entourages of the successful, the admirers, the sycophants, the society editors, the joiners, the free-loaders? "Where did Mother have guests like these from? Shallow, shallow people. I'm surrounded by fakes." (99)

Uncle Serge, is he a fake, too? He is a Senator. He has power. He has money. He knows the system. Yet, walled in within walls, the rich are not sleeping so well any longer. Their prewar confidence seems to have evaporated. Now they protect themselves with ramparts topped with bottle shards and surrounded by security guards. And thus shabby-looking Danny has considerable trouble reaching his uncle's house. Anyway, upon arriving, he proceeds to his uncle's room where

he finds a copy of *Macapagal: The Incorruptible*. In it, he finds the dedication, "Read this for laughs. How it was before everyone abandoned the sinking ship" (105). Incorruptible? "That's why he lost, chucked Uncle Serge" (107).

"Incorruptible, bah," Uncle Serge went on. "Enough to alienate everyone. When you're in power and you claim you didn't even get a house out of it, people begin to wonder if you are nuts. Well, if you are that stupid, is how people look at it. They don't vote you in again. If you can't take care of yourself, how can you take care of them? So, with a title like that, how could Macapagal hope to win? Now, a book like (Marcos's) *For Every Tear a Victory*, that's a winner. People want tears, dramatic plots. Did you see the film version?"

Anyway, Uncle Serge offers Danny a job in his political machine—yet Danny is reluctant. He wants to have the rules of the game—of the system—changed. And still he does not realize himself that he, in spite of himself, is part of the system through his being a member of a rich family. He may go temporarily hungry, but for the others the game is survival:

Sometimes giving in keeps the game going. Look, everybody out there says there's a social volcano about to erupt, and what does everybody do? Sing and dance to delay the coming of the apocalypse. One's got to join the singing and the dancing, or the streets will be covered with blood. (116–17)

On the other side of the Great Divide, Danny finds his poor relatives living in the Tondo slum. Sometimes, debts of gratitude are not paid to the full, and especially if it is the inferior who has the credit, superiors may be short of memory. The same goes for family ties. In spite of their good fortune, the brothers let sister Merced lead her life of misery at the side of her driver-husband. Once a year, or so, her sister-in-law sends them a package of old clothes. "I wish she would send me money instead. I can't use silk dresses around here, backless and all." Yeah, "When you are poor, people give you not what you need but what they no longer have use for. Then they call their act charity. You are a drowning man and, instead of a lifebelt, they throw in swimming trunks" (146). It, therefore, is of little help to be at the mercy of the richer relatives. Investments in the own children are hazardous, too:

"My Rita, for example," Aunt Merced griped on. "Ever since she got married, I barely get a letter from her, and she has stopped sending money... All that money spent on her to get through nursing school for nothing." (146-47)

Nonetheless, among the people of the slum, *utang-na-loob* is obliging, especially if favor is expected from the slightly less miserable. The sense of obligation is deep—but let's knock on wood that others do not land in such dire straits as to need to appeal to us. We can barely breathe. When Danny has left, he still hears his uncle complain:

"You fed him everything we have in the house, tomorrow's breakfast, and you didn't even get a fiver? Fine relatives you have."

"I dropped all sorts of hints, what do you know?" (149)

As the story evolves toward its plot, the lesson is that Danny is and remains unable to shape his own destiny. He depends on his relatives, on their "love that could kill," to survive, to get out of trouble, out of prison. Even the torture treatment he got at the police station was benign, "See, you have no broken bones. You must be a big shot outside, or you would not have been able to walk for weeks." No, the Philippines has no place for principles ("Can you eat them?"), and so, in public, it remains the rhetoric of politicians that gets pride of place:

"You reward someone for integrity, for honesty, for other basic Filipino values that, I (Uncle Serge) know, this administration no longer appreciates."

"You mean that there was no gentle persuasion by you or your family whatsoever?"

"Absolutely not," Senator Singson looked at his wife, "However strange that may seem to you." (198)

(To which the Senator's wife could add)

"Well, I thought that it was a hasty and nasty deduction. We are not a family of criminals. We are a God-loving, hardworking, and law-abiding family. Of course, we have enemies, *political* enemies who would jump at any opportunity to smear our name. Luckily, God has always been on the side of truth. Our side." (193)

Requiem for a Rebel Priest

The America-based author, Paulino Lim (1996), situates his story in the Aquino period. Since the focus of the book is on individual motivations impelled by time and circumstances, the image of society re-

mains vague. The book primarily evokes an atmosphere, and the author is quite successful at that. The disillusionment that set in soon after the euphoria of People Power has been palpably described. Indeed, Marcos was out, but his legacy lived—and lives—on. If the Left was initially welcomed back into the fold, the “fold’s” condition seemed to be that it accepts its dictates. Soon democratic space contracted. The talks with the NDF/NPA were a hoax. Before the temporary armistice came to an end, the army was attacking again. The end of January 1987 saw the massacre of peasants at Mendiola Bridge. Land reform consisted of unreformed words only. Land owners ran arrogantly high. The so-called Freedom Constitution was riddled with loopholes. Corruption thrived. Abuse of power had simply been “decentralized” and delegated to whomsoever could grasp a piece of the pie. The positions of government and NPA polarized like never before. Between February 1987 and sometime in 1989, the communists reached their maximum strength, and lorded it over vast tracks of the countryside. They also posed a real threat to cronies and officials in the city. The military was restive. Six coups against the widow-president created more anxiety among many than could be aroused by the NPA—weren’t the latter dubbed Nice People Around? In between the extremism from all sides, and the rapidly decaying infrastructure that presaged the near-terminal brownouts and water crisis of 1992–93, there is no cause for wonder that Aquino’s human rights’ record is worse than just appalling.

It is these things that set the background of the book, together with the hunger in Negros (1985–86), the civil war in Bicol (1987–88), the renegade nuns and priests joining the guerrilla, the excesses of the rich and the venality of anybody in power, the squalor of Manila, the shameful behavior of Pinoys in America, the break-down of law and order, the hesitant, then rightist-again position of the institutional church, the travesty, or hypocrisy, of faith, the polarization of society, ‘unjust social structures, corrupt bureaucracy, (and) capitalism,’ (41), the inroads of foreign (US) consumer culture, the nationalists’ opposing of English and colonial miseducation, the sham of democracy in a country where most people are poor, the extremes of social injustice, the exploitation of Filipino labor abroad, the sphere of half-lies and pompous English, the rapacious private schools, the low educational standards, the demonstrations against American bases, the fear of the military, the depressingly dirty surroundings in town, the endless civil war, corruption in every nook and cranny of society. Yet, all of these

things, recognizable as they are, have not been integrated to result in a structured image of society. They merely hint at the atmosphere of the Aquino years, years that were colored by hopelessness, pessimism, and self-denigration; years in which self-mockery and faithful fatalism functioned as the best remedy:

Here, we laugh at storms, earthquakes, corruption ... a way to keep our sanity. We also pray, that keeps our faith. (108)

If victims are left in its wake, the fatalistic Filipino mind sees this as the unraveling of God's will, as punishment and atonement for sins, like calamities of earthquake and tidal wave. (188)

Sin (A Novel)

Similar to the author's *Mass* and *Ermita*, this novel of Sionil Jose (1994) is critical of the country's elite, their extravagance, perversions, arrogance, conceit, and boundless greed. This time, the author singled out the Spanish mestizos:

Look at all the successful businesses and organizations in this country. They are all Spanish mestizo, or Chinese mestizo—not Indio. My father and my grandfather believed that the Indio is inferior, that his brain is not big enough for creativity or management. It is us, mestizos, with our mixed blood, who will bring this nation up from the dungheap. (167)

The lead character is CC, a man of unlimited means and an equally unlimited sex drive. In the ruthless pursuit of his aims, all possible honors have been bestowed upon him. He is Mr. Ambassador, sugar baron, nationalist entrepreneur, honorary Spanish citizen, bearer of "The Order of Lapu-lapu." He hob-nobs with The Leader, although is not so close to him as his father was to President Quezon, or as his grandfather to Aguinaldo. This intimacy with power was the key to wealth; wealth that brought more wealth, and influence, and power.

An effective means of ingratiating presidents, politicians and high officials is catering to their libidinous needs. His father knew how to please President Quezon, then provided the Japanese top brass with beautiful mestizas, and was finally recognized by MacArthur as an outstanding guerrilla leader, in spite of having sought a cabinet post in the Second Republic's puppet government. These days, CC recruits

female talent from around the globe and, after testing them, releases them as bait, as rewards, as incentives. Of course, he would not like to be called a procurer, much less a pimp but, as in all business, in all pursuit of power and gain, the end justifies the means.

What is the sin of the book's title? Is it in the most steady of CC's relationships, that is to his sister with whom he also sires a child? Or is it with the callous exercise of privilege to which lesser mortals have to submit? Or is it in the unbridled drive for power and wealth? Is it the machinations to subvert people's morality in order to make them follow his bidding? Perhaps the sinfulness is in arrogance, conceit, and being blind to the suffering of others. Maybe it is in the weaknesses and venality of others, who can be bought all the way, from ordinary journalists to the justices of the Supreme Court.

When new history writing casts a doubt on the origins of the family fortune, CC is emotional in refuting the claim that his grandfather misappropriated money that changed hands at Biak-na-Bato. Grandfather was an honorable revolutionary, and a democrat at that. Besides, "Whatever my grandfather did was for a larger cause and why should he be blamed if, in the process, he also profited?" (13) Anyway, he was farsighted enough to quickly learn the language of the Americans, the language of dominance, while "All those noisy Tagalistas, if they believe their nationalist cant, are doomed to be left by the roadside." (13)

The novel oozes with Spanish mestizos' disdain for nationalism, the Tagalog language, native blood, and is outrightly insulting regarding the putative qualities of the Filipino. They are an improvident, lazy lot—and imminently corruptible at that. It is the mestizos, whether Chinese or Spanish, who see and grasp the opportunities. War offers such chances. It teaches men how they can rise above the misfortunes of others.

The mestizo oligarchy is the most obvious reminder of the colonial past—and they mean business. The nationalist noises—they are mere irritants: "I often wonder if there were any Indio leaders in the Revolution at all" (38). As a group, they are protective of each other, and careful to marry among themselves in order not to sully their Spanish bloodline. They are the driving force behind Philippine politics and economy. Their loyalty is primarily to themselves. Their native soil is a field of opportunity that thus needs some maintaining and investment, but culturally they are obviously overseas. As a result, their "nationalist" activities consist of collecting rare Philippine books, antiques, and Chinese porcelain, of building up Makati and Quezon City,

of running shipping lines and investing in tourism. At best, such activities set off against a complete contempt for the native population:

If there is anything Indios cannot accept, it is the searing truth about them, their perfidious character, their ostentation and boastfulness. Who will believe their pronouncements, when everything is hot air, when no sooner have they proclaimed their virtue than they turn around and do the opposite? These Indios—they are stupid, and their country—thank God for exceptions like myself—is silly. (97)

Alibangbang

The problem with short stories is that they allow for impressions of an atmosphere but, because of their length, cannot aspire to sketch life's and society's complexities. If I yet review a few of them, it is because the authors and their introducers hold these particular stories to reflect the mood of Filipino life in the later 1980s. According to Efren R. Abueg's comments on Tolentino's work (1994) it is only the most recent writers who finally succeed in evoking the true shape and content of Filipino awareness. This consciousness was put soundly to sleep by the long period of colonialism and imperialism. Now it stirs again. It is too early to say, though, however much this coming to life will stimulate the material and spiritual conditions of the Filipino public. After all, to incite the spirit that has not moved for four-hundred years is no minor endeavor (v).

Tolentino and his generation are said to explore reality. They carefully dissect it, peeling off layer after layer of the mask behind which life in these times hides. They bring people and their motivations to life. Yet, often the environment in which their characters operate is freighted with violence, terror, intimidation, competition, and exploitation. Existence is a gloomy experience. It is cruel. People take advantage of each other. There is no way out. Debt simply accumulates. People express all this in their sadness, in their being without hope, in their loneliness, and in the religious frenzy of charismatic sects and the megalomania of the elect. 'The nice world is for a few only. The great majority lives in fear and darkness.

For the courageous types, it is possible to flee from the world—when you will kill, or kill yourself, or turn crazy, or let yourself float on the stream of fate without purpose or direction. Nobody in your

environment cares, neither do your fortunate fellows, nor God, that is why (vi):

On the day Mother's husband died, the birds were humming. The dust scattered. The sun shone. The sky was clear. And God, and all the Saints were on their thrones in heaven. (66)

According to Abueg, Tolentino hits the nail mercilessly on its head. His is a severe attack on the political and social atmosphere of the times that stimulates the reader's self-awareness and sensitivity to social and national conditions. He definitely has a point if it is true that hopelessness and surrender to circumstances are as widespread as he thinks; if the forces that affect people's lives are as ruthless as depicted in the lengthy title story, "Alibangbang." It is set in the period that President Aquino unsheathed the sword of war against the communist rebels. This was a time of extreme militarization, human rights' abuses, and rape of nature.

In order to gain expressive power, the author resorts to a phantasmagoria in which social forces often are represented through mythological creatures. The NPAs are the *aswang* (harmful spirits) the *kapre* (malicious giants) want to eradicate. As the "booted ones," the latter unleash a reign of terror at the simple-minded population. These are a poor lot indeed. They wallow in ignorance and poverty. They are dirty and grotesque. How did Mang Asyo get his wife, Impong Sion? Their fathers were buddies, given to the cockfight and liquor. On a day they are drunk together, they bet on who of the two can pee highest:

Impong Sion's father began; roaring with laughter, he gets his water up to Mang Asyo's father's throat. Mang Asyo's father merely smiled while he released his formidable cock—big like a gourd—reaching up to his breast. 'Ta-ti, tati, tati, tatita, shuw', whistled Mang Asyo's father, while beginning to piss at Impong Sion's father's muddy feet, and then up, toward his balls and his navel, toward his chest and throat, into his mouth—which still causes surprise up to this day—until his eyes could merely blink because of the pain induced by the acrid fluid. Impong Sion's father did not have the twenty pesos. (16)

As a result, Impong Sion is brought over to Mang Asyo's place; ever since, she is abused. She is made to draw the cart as if she were a carabao. She's whipped like a riding animal. Her body is one of the places in which Mang Asyo releases himself. She is supposed to care

and cook for him, to massage and console. When Mang Asyo finally perishes, she doubts whether she is able to go it alone.

Life among the suffering masses is heartless. Partly, they inflict this brutality upon themselves. Then they are victims of pretentious land-owners who reward their labor disdainfully. Impong Sion is given Ma'am's old panties and bras. Most disturbing of all are the Booted Ones who terrorize them, rob them blind, exploit their labor, rape their daughters and who, in the end, just kill them. These Booted Ones protect, in the name of saving and serving the land, the rule and realm of Gob who, in league with Gook, preys on the forest and natural resources. The land is being denuded. The trees are cut. The natives (tribals) are made slaves. The peasants are pillaged and despoiled. Even development is introduced. This entails experiments with up-grading bran and straw to serve as human food. And when Gob visits, he is moved to tears, and promises to take the suffering of the people to his heart.

It is not worthwhile to specify all the instances of dehumanization, frenzy, gullibility, degradation, terror, the vigilantes, civil surveillance, fanatical sects, and private armies. If there ever was, compassion has been lost. If there ever was, civilization has ceased to exist. Nature and cupidity, accidents and stupidity reign supreme. The author illustrates it through newspaper headlines: "Colonel Boots Ambushed" ; "Donya Paz Sinking Kills 3500" ; "Colonel Boots Honored by President;" "Typhoon Sisang Kills 320;" "Payapa Renamed Colonel Boots City;" "2500 Aswang Surrender;" "Natives to Be Relocated;" "Human Rights Activists Are Aswang Too;" "Landowners Accused of Economic Sabotage;" "Illegal Strikers Disbanded;" "The President Shares Coke and Buns with Dimasalang Families" ("I shall do everything within my power," says a teary-eyed President); "National Maritime Safety Week Declared. Sponsored by Donya Paz II."

Still I am not sure about Abueg's introductory comments when he writes that Tolentino's work succeeds in evoking the true shape and content of Filipino consciousness. What we are confronted with is a society gone berserk, from which civility has ebbed away, where civilization has been abandoned, where nobody cares about anything but himself. In the other stories, too, we meet with the merciless preying of family members on those who have some income; with drunkenness and murder, with religious megalomania and charismatic fanaticism, with loneliness and terror. Is that what is meant? Perhaps the author explains himself best through one of the mottos to his collection:

Constabulary Maj. Roberto "Bobby" Ortega cleaned up Baguio City of muggers, drug pushers and other criminals ... He would trail a holdupman—his favorite prey—observe while the criminal committed felony. Catching his quarry redhanded, Bobby would pounce his prey by shooting him on the spot. I once asked Bobby how many criminals he had killed this way. "One hundred fifty-five," came the quick reply. Then Bobby showed me an album of photos of criminals who became his victims ... I asked him how he felt after killing a criminal. "Like I had an orgasm," Bobby said. (ix)

Pitada

As a book, Tolentino's and Guieb's (1994) collections of short stories belong together. They have been published back-to-back in one volume. Their stories deal with the same period. Expectably, though, they report on it in a different manner. Tolentino's is more society-focused, painting the atmosphere of a social context eroded by unreason. Guieb concentrates more on individuals, their feelings and motivations. Of course, these are social products, as much as the author's imagination is—and Guieb, in his introduction, is the first to assert so.

The general introduction to Guieb's work has been written by Jun Cruz Reyes. According to this author, society is in a permanent crisis. Why? Because of change. Everything keeps changing—and since the process appears to be speeding up, the certainties of the past fade at an ever accelerating pace. This throws individuals back upon themselves or—as it occurs several times in the stories—into collectives that function as old-fashioned families, or communities, in their attempt to dominate the individual members.

As it happens in Guieb's narratives, persons need to free themselves from compelling relationships, at the same time that they need these bonds in order to achieve their emancipation. Live-in partners need to be complemented by extra-live-in lovers, because everybody is special, and nobody can serve all individual needs. Parents divorce. Children run away, join university, then The Movement. They need this activism to learn to see social conditions, then to act on these. But if they strive for self-realization, they need to divorce themselves from the movement, too. Even the bonds between brothers and sisters are questioned. These, too, are not a matter-of-course, and frequently it is even desirable to cut them. Sometimes it is necessary to cut the line to life itself.

It is clear that alienation and separation, unsatisfactoriness and vague hopes, meaninglessness and uncertain emancipation—after all, we remain tied to time and circumstances—are the staple of rumination. These individual experiences are seen as reflecting “the times,” “a period of doubt.” How to realize self-confidence in the stream of happenings, and yet, is there anything else an individual can rely upon? This seems to be Guieb’s message. It has been illustrated by individuals and personal relationships. As a result, however much it has been claimed that these are products of time and conditions, these conditions themselves have been taken for granted, and thus the social image remains vague. The collection does what may be expected of short stories. They paint an atmosphere. They illustrate the mood of a society where bonds are disintegrating, where relationships cannot be taken for granted any longer, where individuals have to fight their lone battles. In brief, the human condition is a vague Philippine setting.

Images of the Contemporary World

The image of the public world, of general society, the authors evoke is, to me, shocking. They seem to have compressed in single volumes what can be read in a newspaper in a year. Besides, these authors are absolutely open about the excesses characteristic, in their view, of life in the wider Philippine setting. We have noticed that even the school-books demonstrate a good deal of realism, and that existence in the country is seemingly surrounded by appalling, dehumanizing conditions.

The question is, whether they are exaggerating. Are their accounts experience-near? Are they recognizable, or mere products of morbid imagination? Sometimes the general reporting about Philippine society strikes one as pathological. Things must, apparently, be portrayed in a negative manner. Such befits the prevailing picture of politics, but is politics the same as life in the islands? Or is the social volcano about to explode?

There is no denying that there is a lot of violence all around and, with it, a lot of anxiety, but I also observe many people living peacefully and going about their affairs in a routine, in a normal fashion.

The thing that, perhaps, best transpires is the chronic state of anarchy in which life labors in the country. It is irregularity that is expected and with which many people seem to feel at home. Of course, it is not nice to be preyed upon by military and police. It is objection-

able when an open-air karaoke opens right in front of one's house. It is unfair to have to bribe a politician to land a job as a teacher. It stinks when all cars belch smoke. It is ridiculous when public projects are projected as political beneficence, thanks to Congressman Kuwan, but such is life. It is the flourishing of *jueteng* in a *jueteng*-free environment. It is the elderly, oh-so-friendly immigration official asking for a fee to superexpress process the fast-lane service. It is the taxi without meter, the vendor without change. It is, perhaps most of all, the absence of civil responsibility in a wider, anonymous society where everybody minds his own business, and his own only.

Life beyond the private sphere is perceived by most as unsafe and predatory. Has this always been so? In the school texts we noticed that the American period is pictured as the exception: then there was regularity. Now it is anarchy; things do not stick together any longer. Meanwhile, this decay also seems to affect interpersonal relationships which—as widespread myth, or consensus, has it—were reliable. The family was the fortress of Filipino life, from which one made forays into more general social space, in which one could maintain oneself through networks of relationships.

A very interesting point shared by most authors, although not all of them address this problem, is not only that they give a negative evaluation of relationships in the public, in the political and businesslike world, but that they question the validity of bonds in the inner circle. It seems that the fortress of the family has also been affected. Guieb and Tolentino were very explicit to this point. Sionil Jose's relationships are self-serving to the extreme. In *Fiesta People*, family is reduced to politics, and ingratiating bonds are business, pure and simple. Contrary to the author's wish, this is what transpires in Landicho's novel, too. All right, there are people of integrity, there are people capable of giving love, but the normal thing to do—the expectation—is to seek the personal advantage. The migrant literature is bitter about this.

There is more to say about the perception of society that colors the narratives we briefly reviewed. I was basically struck by the persistent negativism, by the conclusion that Philippine society is missing a moral basis, that it is, at best, a market where bargaining positions are informed by relative power and, of course, money. In such an amoral environment, irregularity is deeply enconced. It has become the norm, and because of it, people can live with it. That does not make their judgement, and even self-perceptions, friendly, though, as we also noted in the previous presentations of self-images.

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