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Paz Verdades M. Santos



In *Science and Literature*, Matthew Arnold warns against a fictional educator who is likely to say "he who in his training has substituted literature and history for natural science has chosen the less useful alternative" (Cadden and Browstown 1964, 23). One Bikol woman writer who is also a biology professor has sacrificed neither field of study for the other as "less useful." In fact, she has packaged many of her science lessons in the literary genre of drama. This playwright is Clarissa Guadalupe a.k.a. Emelina Gagalac Regis, 1992 Palanca awardee for "Dalawang Mukha ng Kagubatan," one of two plays in *Dalawang Dula ni Clarissa sa Ecolohiya* (1993) [Two Ecological Plays by Clarissa].

Regis, associate professor for more than two decades at the Ateneo de Naga, has a B.S. in Botany and an M.S. in Biology from U.P. and is presently completing her Ph.D. in Biology at the same university. It may come as a surprise that this playwright has had no other background or training in literature except for the usual courses in high school and college. But as a science professor, founder of ecological groups, and much sought-after speaker on environmentalism, she has long been a dedicated ecologist. She wrote "Karagatan" [The Seas] in 1988 and "Dalawang Mukha ng Kagubatan" [Two Faces of the Forest] in 1990, as contest pieces for the student group she moderated and for her outreach environmental campaigns. Since she could not find an environmental play, she decided to write one, adapting the concept of an *Ynang Bayan* [Mother Country] in the zarzuela *Kahapon, Ngayon at Bukas* [Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow] into an *Inang Kalikasan* [Mother Nature]. Regis did not give literary contests a thought when she wrote her plays. But a former student who had won a national award for poetry read "Karagatan" and convinced her to submit her work. She submitted "Dalawang Mukha," which

was more polished because it had been presented several times. It also has a less provocative ending than "Karagatan," which ends with a mass action. A few months later, Regis was planning Environmental Week activities when a telegram arrived, informing her that she had won one of the two first prizes for the Palanca for one-act play in Filipino. Since then, she has written two more environmental and one historical play.

Literary critic Soledad S. Reyes (1987, 72) states that

the hitherto neglected regional literature will have to be considered more seriously before the label *Philippine Literature* can assume a more valid meaning as a concept that encompasses not only literature in the Tagalog-speaking regions and/or Philippine Literature in English, but the works produced outside the cities.

Secondly, Patajo-Legasto (1993, 51) calls for a "reterritorialization" of Philippine literary studies "to capture spaces for marginalized literatures."

This reading of Regis's plays is a response to Reyes's criticism and Patajo-Legasto's call for the study of marginalized literatures toward a more encompassing body of literary criticism. The plays are written by a member of the marginalized sex (female) in the periphery (the countryside) of a marginalized country (the Philippines). They also center on a much maligned section (the *kaingero* and fisherfolk) of an already marginalized sector of society (the rural poor).¹ Further, these plays are excellent literary works, as attested to by a Palanca award, but they most likely will not make it to the Philippine literary canon. They are therefore appropriate for a post-colonial critique in the decolonizing Philippine society.

Dalawang Dula sa Ecolohiya

"Karagatan" is about a big problem in San Miguel Bay, Camarines Sur. Elpidio owns big trawls which use dynamite and *muro-ami* to rake the fish from the sea.² He sells these at superprofit to Mr. Yen. The small fishing community, among them the family of Karding and Desta, are therefore left with hardly any fish. Karding's son Juanito, a college student, reports Elpidio to the government. Meanwhile, when the fishermen brave the deeper waters at night in search of fish, Karding is killed in a storm. The worst is not over, for Elpidio's

goons kill Juanito's brother when they learn about Juanito's action. The fisherfolk rise up against the trawler's men, and their action moves all the fishing communities in the land to protest their plight. This in turn pushes the government to pass a law to protect the small fisherfolk.

"Dalawang Mukha ng Kagubatan" has a similar plot, except that the setting is the forest, and the conflict is unresolved. Berto and Julian are conscripted by Engineer Ramos to cut logs, which Ramos in turn sells to Mr. Yen. Julian dies when the branches of a tree they are cutting fall on him. The insensitive Engineer demands more wood, while Berto's son Jun, who is graduating from college, warns his father about the ecological disasters that logging brings. His Lolo Doro, a farmer, takes his part, but Berto and Ana see no other way to earn a living. At the end of the play, Jun is killed when a tree falls on him during a strong typhoon.

Literature from the Margins

Patajo-Legasto (1993, 6) defines post-colonial writings as

those that articulate the oppositional/ interventionary as well as re-defined consciousness of peoples whose identities have been fragmented, whose cultures have been deracinated by the physical and epistemic violence of imperialist incursions and colonialist systems of knowledge.

She further outlines the two characteristics of post-colonial discourse. First, it criticizes Western hegemony, the assumptions of which have penetrated into mass consciousness to legitimize colonialism and "to marginalize the cultural productions /knowledges of colonials and former colonials." Second, it articulates "alternative practices" which include the forgotten or "minority" texts as well as currently produced texts which confront the effects of, among others, "the uneven development of interlocking economic, political and cultural, including aesthetic, modes of production" (7).

Mabilangan (1993, 66) also refers to post-colonial literature when she states that "emergent literature" has been dismissed because of their didacticism which according to the dominant canon "detracts from the 'beauty' of the written text." For example, formalists may find that the plays of Regis lack "textual virtuosity" because of their "simple" characters and plots. But as Mabilangan further states,

Emergent literature demands a new set of rules for it has broken the old set. Therefore, for us to understand emergent literature, we need to learn how to read again. (66)

Environmentalism as Two-Faced Discourse

In an article entitled "In the service of two gods: deconstructing environmentalism as a two-faced discourse," Contreras (1992, 13) states:

Discourse on environmental protection is a political terrain that has to be fought not only in terms of people against the forces of ecological destruction, but also in terms of battles between classes, genders, and races of people.

Contreras further claims that environmentalism can be and has been used as an instrument by those in power for its own ends—whether it be its development agenda, or an imperialist, white racist, male-dominated colonizing world. At the same time, he points out that environmentalism can be used by the oppressed classes to challenge the dominant ideology. Thus, the two faces of environmentalism—"the hegemony maintaining face, and the counter-hegemony building face" (15). To become a radical counterdiscourse, Contreras says that environmentalists should

challenge the current social arrangements—the modes of production, consumption, and constitution which provide cause and reason for ecological disasters...by providing an avenue for the oppressed to constitute their own languages and practices which could later pave a way for their withdrawal from the consensual relations of domination in which they have been invested (15).

Further, Contreras says that environmentalism should be imbued with a counterideology and struggle against the structures of oppression. He points out the new counterideologies as deep ecology, socialist ecology, indigenous ecology, and eco-feminism, all of which indict present structures.

While Contreras's theory is not exactly one on literature, his constant references to "discourse," defined as "ways in which meanings are constructed," (Pantoja-Hidalgo and Patajo-Legasto 1993, 42) tie the environmentalist concerns of Regis's plays with issues tackled in

recent literary theorizing. Literature is one form of discourse; environmentalism is another. These two forms of discourse wed in the text of Regis. Contreras's references to class, gender, and race, and to "deconstruction" also show the common concerns of environmental and literary discourse in a post-colonial context.

Regis's Environmentalism

Regis's texts contend with the forces which bring ecological destruction—the greed of Ramos, Elpidio (spelled out in the surname Maramot) and Mr. Yen, the propensity for materialism and conspicuous consumption, as well as the needs of the forest and fisherfolk. But in confronting the causes of environmental degradation, do the plays take up cudgels regarding issues of "gender, class and race" necessary for environmentalism's "counterhegemony building face?"

In the first of these issues, Regis's texts evidently carry no feminist sensibility. Though there are women characters, they play supporting roles in both plays. The human protagonists are young males, Juanito in "Karagatan" and Jun in "Dalawang Mukha." It may be pointed out that in "Dalawang Mukha," nature is troped as a woman and death as a man, but these are traditional conventions rather than any conscious uplifting of the status of woman. Ana, the only female human in this play, is not a very likeable character compared with the wise grandfather or her idealistic son. She is painted as the conspicuous consumer who pushes her husband to cut more trees so that they can have a feast for Jun's graduation. When her son tells her they can't afford a feast, Ana assures him, "*Kaya ka naming ipaghanda. Maraming kahoy sa bundok*" [We can afford it. The mountains are full of trees] (Regis 1993, 57) revealing the stereotype of the "*Bilmoko*" woman who thinks only of short-term luxuries.³ In "Karagatan," Desta is the *mater dolorosa* who serves her menfolk and grieves over the corpses of husband and son. When other female characters speak, it is in the form of traditional "woman's talk," a form of non-speech and background static of background noises and gossip which do nothing to articulate women's concerns. In fact, the neighboring women in "Karagatan" are gossips who, while providing background information on Elpidio, are judgmental of other women:

Maybahay 2: May naanakan pa nga raw iyan sa Maynila, isang kahera sa bangko. At saka Mare, kabit daw niya si kuwan.

Maybahay 1: Talaga Mare? Kaya pala madalas ang pustura ni babae ano? At iyong asawa ay laging nasa madyungan. (18-19)

[Housewife 1: He also knocked up some woman in Manila, a bank teller. And he has this mistress,...

Housewife 2: Really? No wonder she's always so dressed up. And the wife does nothing but play mahjong.]

Patriarchal conjugal relations are not questioned in both plays. The husband goes off to work and the mother stays home to keep house, hiding the reality that women participate in productive activities in these rural households. Finally, the priority given to the son instead of the daughter in terms of education is not questioned, only the poverty that prevents the daughter from going to school.

This concern with poverty leads to the second issue of class struggle, and Regis's position on this is clearer. Neither Berto's nor Karding's family has ever had access to development or even social equity, which is why Minda, Andoy, and Berto harvest the sea of its coral and the forest of its trees. The text questions the present social arrangements, as in Ana's explanation to Jun about why they cut trees for a living:

Noong bata ka pa, nasa kapatagan kami ng tatay mo. Hirap na hirap kami. Wala namang pirmihang trabaho ang Itay mo. Ako naman ay nakikitanim lang ng gulay sa isang may-ari ng lupa. Kaya lang, talagang kulang. Minsan, naisip ko, habang buhay na lamang ba kaming magtitiis? (69-70)

[When you were small, your father and I were down in the lowlands. We were miserable. Your father didn't have a steady job. As for me, I planted vegetables on someone else's land. But it just wasn't enough. I sometimes thought, would we have to endure this all our lives?]

The land problem, one of the root causes of poverty in the Philippines, is revealed as also being one cause of environmental degradation in this country. Few hacenderos own hundreds of hectares of land and many are squatters in their own country, forcing some of them to practice *kaingin*.

A kind of class consciousness may be seen too in the comments of Lolo Doro about the insensitivity of Engineer Ramos,

Iyon kasing negosyanteng mestiso na si Indyinir Ramos, opisyal pa naman ng ating bayan, walang malasakit sa kapwa. Akalain mong mas mahalaga pa ang kikitain niya kaysa buhay ng kanyang kapwa. (63)

[That halfbreed businessman Engineer Ramos is a government official, yet he doesn't care about the welfare of others. He cares more about profit than people's lives.]

This not-too-veiled criticism of bureaucrats (is the use of the Top Bureaucrat's name coincidental?) and bureaucrat capitalism is more straightforward in "Karagatan" when Karding comments on the helplessness of the police and the government officials and Kikoy says

Pero, alam nating lahat dito na hawak ni Elpidio ang ibang mga tauhan ng kawanihan. Kaya't anuman ang ating maging reklamo ay ipagwawalang bahala lamang. (37)

[But all of us here know that Elpidio controls the other people in the department. So whatever we say, they will just ignore our complaints.]

Class consciousness is also evident when Karding reflects, "*Kung minsan naiisip ko tuloy, ang mundo ba ay para sa mga mayayaman lamang?*" (6) [Sometimes I wonder, should the world belong only to the rich?]

As to questions of race and colonization, Regis chooses to critique the new imperialists and the "new collaborators," rather than the overstaying American neo-colonialists or their "little brown American" cohorts. Japan is satirized in Mr. Yen, while the modern-day Makapilis are exposed through Doro's mockery of Engineer Ramos's greed and insensitivity, and through Juanito's accusation of Elpidio:

May trabaho man kaming makuha, ang mga isdang huli ng trol ninyo ay ipinagbibili ninyo sa mga estrangherong Hapon at Koreano. Mas gusto pa ninyong mapunta sa ibang bibig ang pagkain na kailangan ng ating kababayan. (12)

[Even if we do find work, the fish your trawls catch are sold to the Japanese and Koreans. You would rather see the food that our people need go into the mouths of others.]

To summarize, Regis attacks the unequal social arrangements, the political economy which fosters these, and neo-colonialism of the Japanese kind, but does not question the traditional roles of women in a feudal and patriarchal society.

Tagabayan at Tagabukid

Aside from the ecological and social issues in the text, there is a marked emphasis on the rural-urban dichotomy of traditional Philippine literature. With this binary comes an attack on materialism, conspicuous consumption, and alienation from nature, evils identified with modernization and urbanization. In "Karagatan," Julian comments on the ills that having too much money brings, "Ano pa nga ba ang kahihinatnan ng maraming pera? Sobra-sobra na kasi para lang sa pangangailangan nila" (19). [Where will all this wealth come to in the end? They just have too much for their needs]. This is echoed by verses from the *Damdamin*:

Hindi mauubos ang ating kayamanan kung pagkain, damit at tahanan ang sadyang pagtutuonan. Ngunit ngayon, ang pangangailangan kadalasa'y paghahangad lamang. (19-20)

[If we just focused on our needs—food, clothes and shelter, we wouldn't run out of money. But now, all too often, needs are just desires.]

Julian's neighbor also worries about how muro-ami kills even the small fish, leaving little for the future. In "Dalawang Mukha," Doro warns his grandson who eagerly catches frogs for his supper of *adobo* to beware of overindulgence,

Ingatan mo lang Jun na huwag tamaan ang malapit nang mangitlog at kapag maubos sila, wala ka nang mahuhuli sa mga darating na araw....Tirhan mo naman ang iba pang bukas. (64)

[Jun, take care not to hit those about to lay eggs for when they are all gone, there will be no more to catch in the days to come....Provide for other tomorrows.]

This cry, "Tirhan mo naman ang iba pang bukas," echoed by Inang Kalikasan, is the central theme of Regis's texts. It reveals the environmentalist's concern for the future, and echoes the slogan of all third world literatures so graphically portrayed in Lu Hsun's *Diary of a Madman*: "Save the Children!"

A Green-Red Counterideology

By confronting the issues of class and colonization, Regis's plays show the counterhegemony face of environmentalism necessary in

countering at least some oppressive structures. But what among the new environmental counterideologies enumerated by Contreras does the text adopt?

It is obviously not ecofeminism which combines the principles of ecology and feminism. Ecofeminists believe that since women's genetic vocation is to create, nurture, and protect life, as attested to by human reproduction, the world needs a feminine energy which brings peace, love, and tolerance and is a source of creativity and compassion (Carolinian 1994). In Regis's plays, there is no critique of patriarchal structures, as pointed out earlier, much less any call for woman power.

Neither is it "deep ecology," a form of ecocentrism identified with New Age mysticism which views the earth (Gaia) as a complex resilient system, but capable of being destroyed by humanity. It preaches the 'bioethic' which gives priority to non-human nature or at least places it on a par with humanity and calls for the primacy of "nature's intrinsic rights and worth," regardless of use or otherwise to humans (Pepper 1993, 37, 114-15). Though Regis's plays feature New Age creatures such as the Damdamin and talking trees, they are more of a theatrical convention than any deep abiding faith in a sisterhood or brotherhood between humans and trees. In calling for the preservation of the forests and the seas, Regis does not necessarily prioritize non-human nature but shows that its degradation will eventually result in the destruction of humanity.

Regis's ecology is marked by anthropocentrism which is a characteristic of eco-socialism, an ideology which weds green and red, or ecology with socialism. Defined by Pepper (1993, 233) as a humanist and anthropocentric ecology, it rejects the "bioethic," "nature mystification and any anti-humanism this may spawn"; however, it regards the non-material interaction between humans and nature as important for human spirituality. It perceives greed and pollution as a result of the prevailing socio-economic system, rather than of an innate defect in humanity. It shows that humanity's alienation from nature can be resolved by common ownership of the means of production, but the planning and control of nature should be for the common good. Eco-socialism preaches that a more socially just and earth-friendly society will result, not through involvement in the management of capitalism, armed revolution, and a dictatorship of the proletariat, nor a "revolution in mass consciousness via education and exemplary lifestyle" (232-34). It will not come until most people want it enough to be prepared to create and maintain it.

There is indeed eco-socialism in Regis's plays. The anthropocentric aspect of eco-socialism is discernible in the words of the Damdamin, who criticizes humanity's abuse of nature, but in the same breath states "Narito kaming kumakandili sa inyo" (Regis 1993, 33) [We are here to protect and care for you]. Inang Kalikasan too blames humanity for ecological disasters, "Tao, ang may gawa ng lahat" [Humanity is responsible for everything] but asserts her hope in that same humanity, "May mga tao ring nakakaunawa, Kamátayan" [Death, there are still humans who understand] and "Tao, tulungan mo ako!" (77) [Humanity, help me]. "Karagatan" also features another characteristic of eco-socialism, people empowerment, through the fisherfolk's collective action against the trawls of the big capitalists.

But the plays reveal only an alliance with eco-socialism, not a full-blown commitment to it. The playwright stresses education and an exemplary simple lifestyle for a more equitable and greener society. Eco-socialists recognize these as important, but not the key factors for change.

Education

Education, in fact is the other important motif in the two plays, reminiscent of African post-colonial writer Chinua Achebe. Both protagonists are college students. The parents struggle and even risk their lives just to keep their sons in school. Karding asserts, "Maraming maaring gawin, hindi lang natin alam, hindi inaabot ng pag-iisip wika nga, dahil sa kakulangan ng kaalaman" (8) [There is so much that can be done, we just don't know what and how, our minds cannot grasp the idea because of our lack of knowledge] and Doro says, "ang nagagawa nga naman ng pag-aaral" (64) [what a lot education can do]. Further, Regis uses her texts to provide those without access to education with some knowledge necessary for development, and thus perpetuates traditional Filipino belief in education as an improvement over traditional knowledge (e.g. Doro's), as the way out of poverty, as a means to learn about the environment. In this way, she contradicts Sr. Mary Bellarmine Bernas's contention that education as an agent of social change is a national illusion (Bernas 1989). Fortunately, the type of education the text offers is not the Western colonial one of urban and foreign as ideal, or of going abroad as the way to knowledge and prosperity. Both plays insist on the educated

young person's return to the barrio to serve. In "Karagatan," Kikoy thinks educated young people should seek opportunities elsewhere, because all they can expect if they stayed in the barrio is more poverty. But Karding, who is proud that Juanito has chosen to major in education so that he can serve their community, answers:

Mali ka, Kikoy. Kung ang lahat ng nag-aaral ay nag-iisip na makaalis sa kanilang lugar dahil sa kahirapan, wala na ngang pag-asa pang umunlad ang kanilang baryo. Ayon kay Juanito, maraming maaring gawin, hindi lang natin alam. (8)

[You're wrong Kikoy. If everyone who has received an education thinks of leaving home because of poverty, there can be never be any hope that their barrio will prosper. According to Juanito, there are many things to be done, we just don't know what these are]

The text also preaches a type of education which draws from the people's wisdom and experiences, but the sermon is distilled into an artistic form for them to learn from and appreciate.

Regis's plays do not reflect a Marxist Weltanschauung, but a post-colonial one. The solution that the texts offer to the problems of ecology and social inequity tends toward the red-green of eco-socialism, (or *green-red* because the green aspect is more highlighted) rather than toward the red-red socialism of Marx. In fact, eco-socialism rejects not only capitalism but also Marxist socialism which views nature as an object to be exploited and which believes that technology can solve all problems (Croall and Rankin 1981). Eco-socialism seems to be actually a revision of Marxism along the lines of Gramsci. Regis's employment of the stage to foster ecological consciousness among the populace reflects Gramsci's and other neo-Marxists' view that the struggle must be waged not only in the socio-economic infrastructure but also in the cultural-ideological superstructure or "mass consciousness"—the consciousness of groups and whole societies—which has been manipulated by a capitalist system through education, propaganda, and the media (Pepper 1993). There are no vestiges either of Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zedong Thought, the erstwhile Filipino variant of Marxism, in Regis's texts. While there is plenty of sympathy for the poor, there is no call for a vanguard party to "surround the cities from the countryside" to establish a dictatorship of the proletariat. In fact, the plays preach reformist rather than revolutionary means through mass actions and government legislation. Though

some revolutionary violence is suggested by the word *pag-aalsa* (uprising), this violence is ultimately stemmed by government action to help the fisherfolk, rather than ended with the poor grabbing the reins of power. The texts therefore hew close to the "revisionism" of eco-socialism and Rejectionists' populism so distasteful to those who Reaffirm the radical politics of traditional Filipino Marxists.

Sustainable Development

If there is any "ideology" inherent in the plays of Regis, it is that which underlies the concept of sustainable development, defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland 1987). A Filipino acculturation of this concept has been formulated, a four-way test conceptualized by Green Forum-Philippines by which the message of Regis's plays may be measured in "operational" terms.

1. Who is the Filipino?
Development must respect cultural identity.
2. For whom is development?
Development must achieve social equity in the access of natural resources.
3. What is the relationship between nature and society? between economics and ecology?
Development must be environment-friendly; economics must be ecologically-sound.
4. Who should manage development?
Development must empower local communities. (Santos 1994, 180).

Regis defines the "Filipino" as the rural Filipino, the *kaingero*, *mangingisda* (fisherfolk), *magsasaka* (farmers), the *sadit na tao* (the small folk) of the country's disappearing forests and shrinking open seas who people her plays. Regis shows that development should be for them, not only for big business and foreign vested interests. She thus preaches social equity in the access to natural resources. But she also warns the poor, whom she centers on, against ecologically unsound practices in their use. Thus, even if the *sadit na tao* are the collective protagonist and the reality of their impoverished world is exhibited, they are not idealized. In fact, they are criticized by ascendant

and descendant in "Dalawang Mukha," symbolizing the wisdom of the older generation and the anxiety of the new that no resources will be left to them. Finally, Regis shows the futility of top-down development; in fact, the text reveals that government officials either condone or even conspire with big business and foreign interests that perpetuate poverty and ecological destruction. "Karagatan" shows that people have to help themselves. Kikoy says, "Kung sabagay, lalong walang mangyayari kung hindi tayo kikilos" (Regis 1993, 38) [Well it's true, nothing will ever happen if we don't move] and sometimes that action has to be radical, for Damdamin 1 says, "Kung minsan kailangang humarap sa habagat. Sa pagbubo ng dugo lamang napipilitang humanap ng lunas" (42). [Sometimes we have to face the monsoon. We are forced to search for a solution only when blood is spilled.]

Regis's texts thus obviously subvert Western hegemony, particularly by criticizing the materialism and conspicuous consumerism set up as the ideal lifestyle by Western (and Westernized) purveyors of mass consciousness. While the plays show the rural poor as beset by the poverty wrought by unequal socio-economic structures, they go beyond structure to superstructure; they show how the desire for luxury and short-term gratification brought by imperialist (Mr. Yen) and urban (Ramos, Elpidio) incursions can be disastrous to humanity and the eco-system. They also show that urban lifestyles are not necessarily "natural" or "superior," and how simple living as a traditional practice has been "othered" by Western hegemony so that it is now considered an exotic "alternative lifestyle," an eccentricity, even a virtual impossibility. Regis's plays frontally attack the consumerism that pervades even the minds of the rural poor, and critique the socio-economic system that supports such a worldview.

The texts may prefigure a better social order, in the sense that the audience is made to rethink its present priorities, values, and lifestyles. However, that better social order is still amorphous, and entrusted wistfully, to ecologically informed decisions and the people's political will.

Utile as Dulce

The *utile*, of Regis's plays is clear. What then could be its *dulce* which critics insist is needed to elevate a didactic text to the level of "art"?

One appeal of Regis's plays is the lyrical language of her chorus, the Damdamin in "Karagatan," and nature, death, and the trees in "Dalawang Mukha," entities that hover and annotate the goings-on among humanity. The chorus serves as an effective poetic counterpoint to the colloquial prose of the humans.

Secondly, the title of Regis's plays is also its dulce, its environmentalist message, which while accusatory and bleak contains a testament of faith: "Hindi," *Inang Kalikasan fends off Kamatayan*. "May mga tao ring makakaunawa Kamatayan" (77) [No, Death. There are humans who can still understand.] Humanity created the problem; humanity can solve it.

Rural folk have been more receptive and responsive than Regis's city audiences. This is perhaps because her plays deal with their lives, their anxieties and aspirations. It is they who have a great and pressing need now for what nature can give them and who find it difficult to think of some abstract future of holes in the sky...until the sky falls on them. It is they on the outskirts of Bikol National Park, in the foothills of Mt. Isarog and Caramoan, or along the shores of San Miguel bay, who contend directly with the problems of these dramas. Yet one does not have to be a poor logger or fisher to identify with their hankering for a better life for themselves and their children. One does not find it difficult to understand their confusion. Their need is now, her characters seem to say, the trees, the fish, the white coral, are there so they can clothe and feed their families. They know of no other better way. As Ana pleads, "Ang tanging alam ko lamang ay kailangan natin ang pera upang tayo ay mabuhay ring katulad ng ibang tao" (71) [All I know is that we need money so we can survive just like other people]. As for the city audience, many nod and say yes, we should stop denuding our forest and polluting our seas, and in the same breath throw a candy wrapper into an already clogged drain or vote for their patron in the coming elections, never mind if he owns big ravaging trawls or a sawmill in the middle of the forest.

The plays' greatest appeal, therefore, is the fact that they were not written for the elite patrons of the cool dim caverns of the CCP or the Shangri-la Plaza, but for the plazas, churches, and streets of the vast rural areas in her own Ambos Camarines, and recently, in the still green enclave of Palawan. This is the real theater of the people, allowing citizens who have been given almost nothing by the government in terms of income, education and cultural fare, to see their lives in more meaningful terms than everyday existence permits.

If only for this service of providing form to the *sadit na tao's* existence, Regis deserves an award greater than the prestigious Palanca she has already won.

Reading Regis's book means multiplying the voices that speak out in her plays—the voices of the waves, of the sand, of the children. Then, we too can, like the Damdamin says:

Ako ang tinig ng mga supling. Nasa aking gunita ang daloy ng buhay, bawat galaw at salin ng lahi. (44)

[I am the voice of the children. The flow of life, each movement, each change in generation is in my memory.]

Notes

1. *Kaingeros* practice *kaingin*, the slashing and burning of trees and bushes in forests to create clearings for planting cash crops.
2. *Muro-ami* is a Japanese term for a fishing procedure employing children who carry big stones attached to a rope to dive into the sea, crush the coral, and drive the fish into the net spread out by fishermen waiting at the surface. *Muro-ami* destroys the coral reef, kills even the small fish, and endangers the lives of the children who wear no diving equipment except goggles and who may be themselves trapped in the net.
3. *Bilmoko* is a coined term in a Filipino commercial as shortened form of *bili mo ako* meaning "buy me (something)," referring to greed for material goods. A counterpart from American pop culture would be Madonna's song "Material Girl."

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