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Susan Evangelista



Feminist Readings of Philippine Fiction: Critique and Anthology.

By Sylvia Mendez Ventura. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1994.

In her new book Sylvia Mendez Ventura presents eight fascinating essays in feminist criticism alongside the 11 short stories her essays deal with, as well as introductory and summary chapters on feminist reading and writing. Ms. Ventura voices her own disappointment with the present state of feminist criticism in this country, citing the alarm with which Filipino feminists reacted to the concept of "Postfeminism" bandied about by foreign critics at a time when here, "Even in academe there are women who still say, 'Feminism? What's that?'" (p. 2) But while Ms. Ventura, and many more of us, may be eagerly awaiting more feminist writing, and more feminism in general, feminist *reading*, by far more the interesting of the reading-writing pair, is surely off to an auspicious start with this stimulating collection.

For the uninitiated, Ms. Ventura explains that one can do a feminist reading of *any* text, whether written by a male or female author, and no matter what the gender bias of the author is. Feminist readings, however, generally focus attention on the gender context of the text, the implied understanding of gender roles and issues:

... reading as a woman means reading texts within the patriarchal structure of society. It means being aware that literature offers definitions of gender which may seem "natural" but which are actually institutional. Men have always read as men and women have followed suit, in "sweet compliance," as Milton said of Eve; but feminists are now more sensitive to gender ramifications than they used to be, and certainly more sensitive than men whose views have been sustained by centuries of androcentric or male-centered readings. Feminism is concerned with the woman reader as the producer of her own meanings ... (pp. 4-5)

What does the woman reader do to enter into this "process of uncovering and shaping a feminist dimension hitherto undetected or unexpressed," (p. 8) to produce her own new meanings? (8) Ms. Ventura credits Catherine Belsey's *Critical Practice* and Pierre Macherey's *A Theory of Literary Produc-*

tion with providing the key to this new dimension. The key is in the silence of the work, that which is implied but not said because it is somehow prior to the saying. In a sense this is, to borrow Macherey's phraseology, the Freudian unconscious of the text itself—an unconscious that functions as does the human unconscious, providing a context or frame of reference that is usually simply beyond questioning. The practice of deconstruction is precisely the practice of pulling out this unconscious frame of reference and questioning it, examining it, and ultimately challenging it. Feminist criticism, then, focuses on the unconscious context of gender assumptions and understanding.

This process is likely to be, as Ms. Ventura suggests, both "subversive" and "fun." It is also a creative process, resulting in criticism which may be as original as the text itself, and which is likely to be as time- and culture-bound as well. One judges these works by how they help illuminate the text, whether they seem reasonable in view of the text, and whether they stimulate imaginative readings.

Feminist deconstruction is likely to be highly political, as it ferrets out and questions the deepest thought-patterns of the most pervasive of human institutions, the patriarchy. But this kind of criticism can be extremely illuminating, and even comforting, especially to women readers. The experience of one Ateneo graduate student comes to mind here: Ms. Gina Olivares was moved to attempt a feminist reading of a set of stories by Jose Y. Dalisay, Jr. because she was puzzled by her own initial reaction to the women characters in the stories. Their portrayal simply made her feel uncomfortable. It was only when she had dug out the patriarchal substructure of Dalisay's world view that she was able to understand the gender basis that caused her discomfort.

As one of the best-known characters of Philippine fiction in English, Kerima Polotan's virgin, Miss Mijares, may leave women readers uncomfortable as well. The question is not so much "Does she or doesn't she" allow herself to become sexually involved with the carpenter, but whether she can make such a choice, and whether as women readers we might be allowed to applaud a positive choice. Ms. Ventura critiques Miss Mijares' dream in which she takes a wrong jeep and finds herself lost in an area of the city which is new to her—the "new territory" of sexuality, and Ms. Ventura points out, the new experience of being, in some aspects, on top of the powerful/powerless binary opposition.

In her dream, Miss Mijares suddenly finds her way blocked "by something huge and bewildering." Is it the carpenter in Freudian guise? Sex itself? Ms. Ventura opts to interpret the obstacle as being neither the man nor the (potential) act, but simply the culture-bound upbringing of the character. And one might add, of the author as well, who chose to leave the story open-ended, and of the reader who feels at least slightly uncomfortable with her own urge to cheer Miss Mijares on. It is the feelings and attitudes towards sex ingrained in both men and women in this corner of the patriarchy that account for Fr. Miguel Bernad's facile statement of the "implied" ending of

the story, which Ms. Ventura quotes from an earlier formalist study: the carpenter simply "takes advantage of Miss Mijares during a rainstorm" (p. 41)

Ms. Ventura also quotes Polotan's famous statement that a woman should never trust happiness entirely, for "she is in the end shortchanged, for it is in her nature to be shortchanged:

. . . Against the day of betrayal she must be moderate in her happiness, taking only brief guarded sips, keeping the entire cup at arm's length—joy is not to be trusted. Though the nectar be sweet, it is bitter at the bottom, and no matter what honeyed words are spoken by the man who holds it out for us to drink, whether he be father, husband, son, brother, lover, friend, we must drink warily, closing only one eye in bliss, but keeping the other wide open, ready for when the blow comes. (p. 47)

The blow comes from the patriarchy, from the fact that "It's a man's world," and women who find joy in sexual relationships are more than liable to be cast aside. And it is this reality, not the economic problems of the working girl Isabel, which causes her to choose against love in "Cost Price." In Ms. Ventura's view, the author herself may not have been able to make this fact explicit at that point, but the reading is convincing, and here we see an enlightening explication of the tightness we feel in Polotan's work—a restraint which sometimes feels suffocating to women readers.

Again, earlier readings of Nick Joaquin's short story "Doña Jeronima" may leave women readers with a confused feeling that one ought to appreciate the "pro-woman" stance evident here and in other stories like "The Summer Solstice," but something still seems to be wrong. In "The Summer Solstice," two women, first Amada and then Lupeng, are possessed by female, fertility-based spirits during a bacchanalian feast of St. John. In both events, their husbands are totally marginalized, ineffectively attempting to beat some "sense" into their wives but failing even to be noticed, until the final scene in which Lupeng forces her husband Paeng to crawl to her and kiss her feet. In "Doña Jeronima," the Archbishop is brought to his knees, and finally to his death, by the powers of Jeronima, the spirit woman or *diwata*, who in the end lives in a cave with bats. This is also the woman from the Archbishop's past, after whom Ms. Ventura entitles her essay, "Nick Joaquin's Batwoman."

Ms. Ventura's readings of the two stories support each other brilliantly.¹ She suggests that in both stories, Joaquin is working within the context of the patriarchal interpretation of the dual nature of woman—woman as Madonna and whore, woman as Eve, God's gift to man and yet man's temptress. In man's eyes, then, woman is unstable and dangerous, for when the spirit is on her, she is uncontrollable and has no need for man. At that point she becomes man's "Other." She is of course Nature, inferior to man's "superior" mode of Culture. Within the framework of Christianity, she is flesh instead of mind, body opposed to soul; she is sin herself.

Ms. Ventura points out that for the Archbishop, Doña Jeronima is also the Ethnic Other, the Native in contrast to the Archbishop's Spanish blood: " 'Conquistadoring,' If I may coin a word, is an exclusively male vocation; its target is penetrable female territory" (p. 74). This observation brings together feminist and postcolonial discourse and suggests immediately that Jeronima is the Archbishop's "Madwoman in the Attic," his "native adventure" and the unrestrained passion of the Ethnic Other, exactly parallel to the way in which the mad West Indian woman Bertha Mason functioned for the adventurer Rochester in Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.²

Again, this is an enlightened reading of Joaquin, placed within the confines of the patriarchy, and it results in observations not possible in formalist readings which make no reference to the ideological context. Postcolonial discourse takes the same approach as feminist, deconstructing the deepest substructure of colonial thought, with its basis in racism and, yes, the patriarchy—and this is why the two forms of criticism go together very well.

In her final chapter, Ms. Ventura critiques two genuinely feminist stories, one written by South African Bessie Head, and the other by Canadian Margaret Atwood. She might have looked as well at the Nigerian Buchi Emecheta's novel *The Joys of Motherhood*. There is something inspiring about real feminist work—although one suspects that Bessie Head and Buchi Emecheta will always be more appealing to women readers in this country because their lives and concerns, even as feminists, are so much closer to our own.

But that is another story. Ms. Ventura does concede that if all women writers were explicit in their feminist concerns, the literary situation would be rather dull. At any rate, for the time being we are left with the much more interesting task of doing feminist readings of all texts written within the patriarchy. And here Ms. Ventura has taken a strong and very fine lead.

Notes

1. For her essay on "The Summer Solstice," see Kintanar's earlier feminist collection (1992).

2. Ventura cites Gilbert and Gubar (1979). For the postcolonial use of the same metaphor, see Bryden and Helen Tiffin (1993).

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