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Imagining the Nation, by Martinez-Sicat

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Dalisay sharpens his postcolonial gaze further in the short novel "Voyager," a masterly homage to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and *The Secret Sharer*. There is even a sly reference to Conrad himself toward the latter part of "Voyager." The novel brings us back to the nineteenth century. Farolan, the governor-general's hatchet man; Meliton Gimenez, the young *revolucionario*; and Nervez, the *I* persona, are the characters that triangulate this brew of suspense and romance.

But easily the finest of the lot is the title story, "Penmanship," one of the most moving I have read in memory. Its poignancy reminds you of James Joyce's "Eveline," or Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights*.

Like the author, the old bachelor has a passion for old fountain pens.

"It wasn't him but the pen, gliding across the foolscap, filling in the vastness of the page with words that may have not meant all that much but which looked beautiful because of the personality and the infinite variety of their shape."

Then a young, blind woman—cool and self-possessed—begins to work in his office, seemingly ready to take over when he retires.

Weeks later, she asks him to pen a most painful letter to her former boyfriend, who abandons her. It is a proud letter, and the man dutifully writes her words down, although his heart was beginning to break.

And when he goes home that night, something has already changed inside him. No longer is he the emotionally barren man who loved only T.S. Eliot's deathless poetry. "The Parker Vacumatic glinted in the room light, poised to strike. It was ringed with bands of gold, and promised a wealth of words. The merest pressure on its nib could deepen an emotion."

So very like this story, and this beautiful book of stories.

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Imagining the Nation in Four Philippine Novels. By Maria Teresa Martinez-Sicat. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1994. 152 pages.

Literature is one way of knowing a people's self-concept and worldview. Martinez-Sicat uses this idea to explore the concept of "nation" which Filipinos had in the revolution against Spain and the war against the United States as reflected in four Philippine novels. The novels are Maximo Kalaw's *The Filipino Rebel: A Romance of American Occupation in the Philippines*, F. Sionil Jose's *Po-on*, Linda Ty-Casper's *The Three-Cornered Sun*, and Alfred A. Yuson's *The Great Philippine Jungle Energy Cafe*. This revised doctoral dissertation's

strength is its scholarly study of how these four novels actually perpetuate the bourgeois elite's concept of the nation.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part outlines the role of literary deconstruction, the history of the Philippine concept of nationhood, and the evolution of the Philippine novel in English. These provide the context for Martinez-Sicat's study of the four novels.

The second part is Martinez-Sicat's analysis of each of the four novels. She shows how Kalaw's *The Filipino Rebel*, about an elite general's campaign for Philippine independence after the Spanish-American war, understands the nation to be a country independent politically, culturally, and economically. The novel focuses on foreign obstacles to independence and takes existing social structures for granted. The patron-client relationship is extolled and there is no indication of oppression by the local elite. The peasants are portrayed as *pobres y ignorantes*, "at best loyal, at worst chaotic."

A peasant's life and death during the Philippine-American war is the subject of F. Sionil Jose's *Po-on*, but Martinez-Sicat sees the same elite domination still at work. Mabini and del Pilar lead the revolution, the desire for equality burning in their minds. In contrast, the peasants desire economic liberation. The peasants want revolution, but their religious faith makes them abhor violence. The Catholic Church wields tremendous power because only it can justify war and violence. While *Po-on* still imagines the nation as an independent country envisioned by the elite, the novel also shows how a concept of nationhood develops among the peasants. Martinez-Sicat shows how the protagonist in the story evolved from a peasant concerned only with his immediate family to one concerned for the community of families as a result of a common experience of oppression.

Martinez-Sicat sees more elite domination in Linda Ty-Casper's *The Three-Cornered Sun*, which is about an *ilustrado* family's odyssey through the Revolution against Spain. Without recognizing the contribution of the masses, the novel, like the two preceding it, claims that the *ilustrados* initiated the Revolution. Martinez-Sicat categorically states the masses initiated the Revolution and also manned the frontlines. Thus, *The Three-Cornered Sun* presents a revolution for the purposes of equality, but does not seek to alter the inequality between the peasants and the elite.

Alfred A. Yuson's *The Great Philippine Jungle Energy Café*, about a legendary hero's struggle against Spain, makes use of many allusions not familiar to the masses. Even the cafe is an elite creation. Martinez-Sicat argues that the novel does not build nationhood because there are times when it borders on absurdity. For example, the hero is shown as ready to die for a one-night stand.

In the third and final part of the book, Martinez-Sicat summarizes her analysis of the novels. Her main contention is that Philippine novels in English about the Revolution have imposed the elite concept of the nation

What the book really shows is the fact that the Philippines is still far from attaining genuine popular democracy and national independence despite important and irreversible changes in the urban-rural configuration and the decline of U.S. economic influence with the removal of the military bases. There still lies the great task of combating the global hegemony of neoliberal metaphysics manifest in postcolonial theorizing and other postmodern readings.

The author asks: "What is to be done?" San Juan posits that it is the task of the writers and intellectuals to seize the moment, together with the working masses, and forge the cultural-ideological weapon necessary for a genuine liberation.

Roberto Archie R. Carampatan, S.J.

The Beginning and Other Asian Folktales. Edited by Valorie Slaughter Bejarano, et al. CA: PAWWA, 1995.

The Beginning and Other Asian Folktales is a collection of eighteen Asian folktales edited by four Filipino-American women writers. The folktales came from China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Laos (Hmong), Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines.

In the Introduction, the editors trace the sources of these stories: their "own memories, from friends and family, both young and old, and in some instances from published works." Not a few of the stories were heard from an acquaintance who also heard it from another source. Inevitably, the writing of these stories, which used to be passed on orally from one generation to the other, is not completely free from the writer's biases. Their objective is "to entertain as well as to transmit the values and wisdom of the [Asian] culture, and instill a sense of right and wrong."

Even if the book is intended for children, adult readers can also draw insights from the stories. An illustration for each story also sharpens the imagination of the reader as he goes through the story. Even the size of the type makes the collection friendly to the child. However, full-color illustrations would have made the texts more vivid.

Books like these—which build bridges across cultures separated by geography and colonialism—should be encouraged.

Roberto Archie R. Carampatan, S.J.