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**Paz Verdades M. Santos, Hagkus**

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## BOOK REVIEWS

most historical accounts (e. g., Horacio de la Costa's *Jesuits in the Philippines 1581-1768*) regarding why Qudarat ordered the killing of the priest, Juan del Carpio, during a raid in Ogmoc or Ormoc. (De la Costa merely provides a summary.) Riled by the taunts of a captive priest who heaped insults not only on Qudarat's royal person but on Islam, which the priest called "satanic," Qudarat was prompted to order the beheading of the priest with his own *kampilan*. Then, there is Banua's character. De la Costa describes Banua as "a boor." If art imitates reality, this could explain Banua's attitude towards *kristianos* (Christians) in the novel by calling them pejoratively and repeatedly as *kapirs* (unbelievers). But, if, on the other hand, art improves nature, we also see Banua redeem himself from his alleged "boorish self" to become a dignified character in fiction.

This novel helps to restore to their proper place in history those who were never conquered. Cui-Pelares, among our few historical novelists, has shown us the richness of our past, a past we can proudly teach our young, a past our creative writers and film and television producers should think about. Unless we have writers like Cui-Pelares to glorify our own heroes, we will soon find our country the dumping ground of foreign movie and television heroes glorified in plots that signify nothing.

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Paz Verdades M. Santos. **Hagkus: Twentieth-Century Bikol Women Writers.** Foreword by Teresita E. Erestrain. Manila: De La Salle University Press, Inc., 2003. 296 pages.

Research on the writings from outside the metropolitan center and by the disenfranchised is necessary in the proper assessment of the literature of any country. In the case of the Philippines, an archipelago of multiple ethnicities and subjectivities which had been largely ignored in legitimate literary studies until the 1970s, the need is especially urgent. It

is in this context that *Hagkus* by Paz Verdades Santos should be reviewed. It is a response to the multiple marginalization of the Bikol woman writer, in Santos's words, "an attempt at a literary 'herstory' of twentieth-century Bikol women writing as part of the movement in research on 'writing from the periphery'" (p. xi). It is a welcome project, bringing to the fore writings unappreciated by the literary establishment.

As an anthology, the book has much to contribute. The scope is comprehensive, covering over three generations of writers and almost one hundred years of writing in the different genres. The precious primary materials were taken from issues of the *Bikolnon*, *Bikolana*, and *Bicolandia*, as well as "publications of religious, academic, government, nongovernment, people's, and even underground organizations" (p. xii). Santos provides valuable biographical and bibliographical data on the writers, derived from the few existing sources and her own interviews and correspondence with the writers or their surviving kin. What is most refreshing about the anthology is that it unapologetically reproduces the texts written in Bikol without English translations.

The book, however, is not without its problems. Chiefly, it does not go deep in its analysis of the marginal status of its subject. When Teresita Erestain writes in the foreword of the lack of published anthologies of Bikol women writers, she could be speaking for Bikol literature in general. That is not to deny the truth of Erestain and Verdades's basic presupposition, but to ask them to spell out the specificities of *this* instance of marginalization. Santos is not definite about what constitutes the oppression, ascribing it, it seems, to a vague and essentialist patriarchy.

To her credit, however, she mentions some directions that a more thorough investigation of the matter can take: what sort of patriarchy is that in a region which claims the Virgin of Peñafrancia as its patron and yet disallows women to ride in the Virgin's pagoda during the fluvial procession? Why is it that the Virgin does not figure in the writings of Bikol women? How can one account for an oppression of women which also allows the establishment of a normal college for girls, the first in the Philippines, and which makes male writers use female pseudonyms? One simply cannot transpose Western models of feminist analyses (where, for example, women writers used male pseudonyms) to Bikol. One wishes that Santos delved deeper into these contradictions.

The same elision occurs in Santos's discussion of regionalism. She uses Delfin Tolentino Jr.'s definition, published in a four-page article in

*Diliman Review* in 1993, of regional literature. But what is the role of regionalism in national identity building or in canon formation? Does it presuppose divisiveness or multiculturalism in an archipelagic culture? Santos simply sees it as opposition to Manila, but does not pursue the dynamics of this relationship in the writings in her anthology, apart from noting that the Bikol woman fought against their being stereotyped by the metropolitan center as *bailarina* (a dancer in a bar). The issue is admittedly thorny, and scholarship on the matter is still in its infancy. It is hoped that Santos takes this matter up in greater detail in her next work.

The problem then boils down to an inadequate construction of a theoretical framework within which to examine more substantially the literature she collected. Santos herself acknowledges that the Philippines is a case of multiple subaltern identities and, therefore, the use of varied theoretical tools, with surgical precision, is a must. Regional writing in the Philippines is rough and wild territory, requiring guts and gusto of one to even enter. Enter it is what Santos bravely has done. It is hoped that her future forays in the region eventually result in a clearing whose soil is Bikol and woman.

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