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A Feminist Reading of the Poetry of Angela Manalang Gloria

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"You shall not forget, for I am past forgetting."

— "To A Lost One"¹

It is with such haunting imperiousness that Angela Manalang Gloria first stepped into the pages of *The Literary Apprentice* in 1928, and into the world of Filipino poetry in English. That line might well speak for that entire first generation of Filipino poets in English to which she belonged, a generation that has largely been forgotten by contemporary literary critics and historians, a generation whose works are viewed as extinct curiosities rather than as living texts which continue to speak to contemporary readers.

There has recently been renewed scholarly interest in this first generation of Filipino poets in English; scholars of the period stress what they feel to be this generation's undeniably important contribution to the development of Filipino poetry in English as a whole. Gemino Abad and Edna Manlapaz insist upon the need to "re-read past writ"—that is, to turn to the poetry of this early period and examine its entire literary output, free now from the biases, limitations and concerns with which these works were read in that time.² "Re-reading past writ," they assert, necessarily produces a "re-writing" of text and of literary history. To read the poetry of this earliest period "in another light" (to borrow Abad's phrase), i.e., in the light of contemporary

1. Angela Manalang Gloria, "To a Lost One," *The Literary Apprentice*, U.P. Writers Club, 1928, p. 104.

2. Gemino H. Abad and Edna Z. Manlapaz, "Re-reading Past Writ: Toward a History and Anthology of Filipino Poetry from English, 1905 to the Mid 50s" in *Philippine Studies* 34 (1986): 374-87.

concerns as well as critical norms, is to produce a new set of meanings inaccessible, or perhaps only partially accessible, to readers of earlier generations.

This article proposes such a rereading of the poetry of Angela Manalang Gloria (1907-), a major poet of that first generation of Filipinos writing poetry in English. Specifically, it proposes a rereading of her work from the perspective of feminist criticism.³

FEMINIST CRITICISM: CREATING "FEMALE SPACE"

The underlying assumption of feminist criticism is that women's writing differs from men's writing, that gender engenders a particular sensibility, a particular sensitivity, a certain perspective on life, love and other such verities. Women's "special experience," says Elaine Showalter in her seminal article "Toward a Feminist Poetics," "would therefore assume and determine distinctive forms in art"—distinctive forms that demand to be understood on their own terms.⁴ Feminist critics assert that literary history and criticism have always been defined in male terms, and thus become wholly inappropriate frameworks within which to examine women's texts. In other words, women writers experience a profound alienation from the sources of literary power, constrained to fit their art into the marginal spaces of the male authority's page.

The problem of women's lack of access to power is well illustrated in the model of women's culture conceptualized by anthropologists Shirley and Edwin Ardener and discussed by Elaine Showalter:

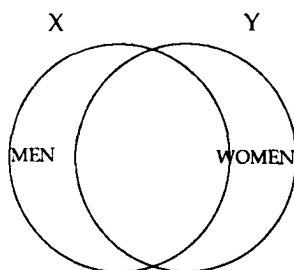
[The Ardeners] suggest that women constitute a *muted group*, the boundaries of whose culture and reality overlap, but are not wholly contained by, the *dominant (male) group* . . . By the term "muted," Ardener suggests problems both of language and of power. Both muted and dominant groups generate beliefs or ordering ideas of social reality at the unconscious level, but dominant groups control the forms or structures in which consciousness can be articulated. Thus muted groups must mediate their beliefs through the allowable forms of dominant structures.⁵

3. There are two distinct modes of feminist criticism: one that is concerned with the feminist as reader; the other, with woman as writer. This essay engages in both, but is principally occupied with viewing Manalang Gloria as a writer.

4. Elaine Showalter, "Towards a Feminist Poetics," in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p. 135.

5. Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," in *Writing and Sexual Difference*, ed. Elizabeth Abel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 29.

The Ardeners present the following diagram of intersecting circles to illustrate the relationship of the dominant and muted groups:



Ardeners speaks of the crescent of circle Y which is outside the dominant boundary as a "wild zone":

Experientially, the *wild zone* stands for the aspects of the female life-style which are outside of and unlike those of men; . . . there is a corresponding zone of male experience alien to women. But if we think of the wild zone metaphysically, or in terms of consciousness, it has no corresponding male space since all of male consciousness is within the circle of the dominant structure and thus accessible to or structured by language.⁶

Thus, Showalter goes on to say:

For some feminist critics, the wild zone, or "female space" must be the address of a genuinely woman-centered criticism, theory and art, whose shared project is to bring into being the symbolic weight of female consciousness, to make the invisible visible, to make the silent speak.⁷

ANGELA MANALANG GLORIA: A "MUTED VOICE"

Manalang Gloria is a woman writer with much to say of female experience within that wild zone but her voice has been "muted" by the dominant culture to which she was subject. What we propose to do in this article is to create a space of silence, as it were, so that we might hear that muted voice speak more loudly and more distinctly.

The poetry of Manalang Gloria presents itself as a specially suitable subject for feminist criticism because of two reasons:

Firstly, she wrote in what was a particularly interesting historical juncture for the Filipina woman of a certain class. The opening decades of the twentieth century marked the transition of the Filipina woman

6. Ibid., p. 30.

7. Ibid., p. 31.

from one feminine ideal to another, from the Hispanic ideal of woman confined to home and church to the American ideal of the liberated woman forging her own identity in traditionally male-dominated fields of endeavor. In line with the new colonial master's advocacy of equal rights for all, wide vistas in education and employment were suddenly opened to her. She suddenly found herself thrust into bewildering new roles, entering fields of expertise on equal footing with her male counterparts.⁸

The women poets of the period enthusiastically ventured into the academe, into literary clubs and classes, into various campus publications and national news-magazines. However, they appear to have been more cautious with regard to portraying this new, independent woman in their art, choosing (whether consciously or not, willingly or not) to mold their personas and characters after the Maria Clara figure of the turn of the century.⁹ Manalang Gloria, as we shall see, was more daring.

Secondly, Manalang Gloria's literary career presents itself as an excellent case study of a "muted voice": a voice from the muted female culture, raising itself to be heard in the halls of the dominant male culture, sometimes succeeding and sometimes not, quite often "muted"—i.e., banned, censored, edited, ignored, or praised for questionable reasons—by the authorities of the dominant culture.

Manalang Gloria produced only one slim volume of poems, simply entitled *Poems*, a collection of seventy-nine pieces, which was published in 1940 and re-issued as a "student edition" in 1950. Before this collection was published, however, her poems had been appearing in the twenties, thirties and forties in such publications as *The Literary Apprentice*, *The Philippine Magazine*, *The Philippines Herald Midweek Magazine*, *Graphic*, and *The Sunday Tribune*. She is rather well-anthologized, her poems appearing in textbook and nontextbook collections from the twenties to the early seventies. Abad and Manlapaz's *Index*

8. See Encarnacion Alzona, *The Filipino Woman: Her Social, Economic and Political Status, 1565-1937* (Manila: By the Author, 1934).

9. "Maria Clara" here refers less to the heroine of Rizal's novel than to the stereotype of the middle and upper class Filipina whose "melancholy transformation from paragon to parody" is traced by Carmen Guerrero Nakpil in a famous essay ("Maria Clara," *This Week Magazine*, *Manila Chronicle*, 30 December 1956; later included in the collection *Woman Enough and Other Essays*, Vibal Publishing House, 1962, pp. 29-35). This impression regarding the conservatism of women poets in their delineation of contemporary woman is based on a random sampling of the poems written by women poets included in *Index of Filipino Poetry in English, 1905-1950*, compiled by Edna Zapanta Manlapaz and Gemino H. Abad (National Bookstore, 1988).

to *Filipino Poetry in English, 1905-1950*, lists 128 poems by Angela Manalang Gloria.¹⁰

Upon examining the body of criticism on her poetry, it is apparent that her poetic reputation was virtually "made" by 1940; that is, critics and historians writing from the forties onwards tend to repeat what critics of the thirties said of her poetry. The publication of *Poems* in 1940 did not appear to alter substantially the popular impression that her earlier works—published in various magazines and newspapers—created.

What was this popular impression of her poetry that was to remain unchanged throughout the succeeding years? Perhaps it is best to quote what some of the major critics of the 1930s wrote of her work.

Arturo Rotor, trying to "introduce and classify" the various "species" of writers who made up the prestigious U.P. Literary Club, described the group represented by Angela Manalang Gloria as follows:

I am sorry to have no better word to call them with than that totally inadequate and much-abused 'romantic.' And yet, what else can one call the glamorous escape from life that is the poetry of Angela Manalang Gloria, of Trinidad Tarrosa, of Conrado Ramirez? They write of things which we know cannot be, and yet without which we cannot get along. A happiness that can never be ours envelopes us when we read them. They speak of the rose and we inhale deeply, they talk of tears and our eyes become misty, they tell of stars, and we look out of our window up to heaven. They are the skilled workers of the guild, they fashion their phrases very much as a jewel-cutter would a rare diamond, they string their words together as they would the crushed sampaguitas of which they write.¹¹

Villa was vicious, calling Manalang Gloria a "third-rater, a writer of merely pretty poetry, pleasant amateur verse . . . a poet one can only admire in one's immaturity." He described her poetry as having "no passion, no drive, only a feeble nostalgia . . . her verses never disturb."¹²

S.P. Lopez defended Manalang Gloria against Villa's vitriolic criticism:

It will be said of her poetry that they lack substance. But it is precisely for this seeming fault that her poems acquire quite a faery, insubstantial

10. Manlapaz and Abad, *Index to Filipino Poetry in English*, pp. 365-376.

11. Arturo Rotor, "Introduction and Classification" in *The Literary Apprentice* IX (1936): 36-41.

12. Jose Garcia Villa, "The Status of Philippine Poetry" in *Graphic*, 6 June 1935, pp. 10, 54.

quality, an elusive fascination which, after all, is the primordial claim of poetry on the heart of man."¹³

These were the kind of reviews Manalang Gloria's poems elicited in the thirties, reviews which—it must be remembered—were based largely on her college pieces which she herself today describes as "sophomoric gooey-gooey."¹⁴

The appearance of *Poems* in 1940 might have changed these impressions of her poetry as the mere effusions of a romantic adolescent, for it contained considerably more mature poems. However, the Commonwealth Literary Contests dealt a blow to this possibility. *Poems* 1940 was entered in the contests' poetry division, but lost to Zulueta da Costa's *Like the Molave*. It is interesting to note Manalang Gloria's own perceptions on the reasons for her losing:

Do you know why it did not win the (Commonwealth) prize? . . . Mr. Walter Robb, the American among the judges, told me: "I voted for you. The others did not because there were several poems in the book that they considered objectionable." One of them was called 'Querida.' But the most objectionable to them, he said, the main reason the others did not approve the book for the prize, was the poem 'Revolt from Hymen.' Robb further told me, "I tried to convince them that these were not against morals . . ." but, *wala*.¹⁵

A passage from the *Report of the Chairman of the Board of Judges for English* tends to confirm Manalang Gloria's suspicions:

Literature, it is universally admitted, deals primarily with values, and not merely aesthetic values, but with values in general—values in any field or aspect of life, where it is at all possible to distinguish between beauty and ugliness; pain and pleasure, justice and injustice, good and evil. Under the Rules governing these Contests, the Board felt it to be its duty to reject the doctrine of Art for Art's sake as the sole basis of judgment, as a principle wholly inadequate to the larger objectives of these Contests.¹⁶

13. Salvador P. Lopez, "Villa" in *The Literary Apprentice* IV (1936): 116–21.

14. Interview with Angela Manalang Gloria, Premier Hotel, Manila, 20 January 1985.

15. Edilberto N. Alegre and Doreen G. Fernandez, eds., *The Writer and His Milieu: An Oral History of First Generation Writers in English* (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1984), p. 45.

16. Report of the Board of Judges for English (for the 1940 Commonwealth Contest) in Manuel E. Arguilla, Carlos P. Romulo and Teodoro A. Agoncillo, eds., *Literature Under the Commonwealth* (Manila: Philippine Writers' League, 1940), p. 80.

Moreover, the Contests tended to favor works with "social significance," as the following passage from the Report indicates:

In addition to the aesthetic test, the Board . . . applied the test of social significance; and in all cases where two works were observed to possess technical excellence and the purely artistic qualities in equal degree, it decided in favor of that work which contained this significance and the vital element of contemporaneity.¹⁷

Poems, a collection of mostly very personal pieces, would have certainly failed the test of "social significance." *Poems* might have had the chance for better critical reception after the contests. But unfortunately, a year after its publication, the war broke out.

Aside from being a casualty of the moral and nationalistic dictums of the Commonwealth Literary Contests, Manalang Gloria was also a victim of what might be called the tyranny of the textbooks.

In 1933, her poems began to appear in *Philippine Prose and Poetry*, a textbook-anthology series intended for secondary schools. The series was a landmark in literary history, being the first textbook to make use of exclusively local contributions in literature. For over three decades (1927-64), *Philippine Prose and Poetry* shaped our 'national' literature in English to the extent that it shaped the young readers' sensibility.¹⁸ It was this textbook-anthology series that established her as a writer of romantic, lyrical verse; at the same time it had the unfortunate effect of limiting the public's acquaintance with her poetry to two pieces which she herself now dismisses as mere "products of a young girl's fancies."¹⁹

When *Poems* was being prepared for reissue as a student edition in 1950, it was rigidly censored. Manalang Gloria recounts:

. . . Mr. Celedonio Salvador, the Director of Education, told me they were going to use the book for the schools. He instructed me: 'You remove this . . . remove that.' Even some words were deleted and changed. There was that poem, 'Pier 7,' in which I had to substitute 'bores' for 'whores,' a word which they did not want there. . . . Then I wrote that poem about hatred, and that was censored by the Bureau of Education. They said it was a bad poem, because it was about hate, and so I shouldn't put it in the book. . . . There was also a poem, 'For Men Must War' which the censors took out. . . . There are seven or eight poems that were taken out: 'Soledad,' 'Heloise to Abelard,' and 'Querida'. . . .²⁰

17. Ibid.

18. Abad and Manlapaz, "Re-reading Past Writ," p. 383.

19. Alegre and Fernandez, *The Writer and His Milieu*, pp. 65-66.

20. Ibid., pp. 45, 53, 59, 60.

Textbooks, especially high school textbooks, make poor custodians of literary reputations, as the norms of teachability and propriety are weighted more heavily than artistic merit. A reputation built on selections popularized by textbooks, as was Manalang Gloria's, can therefore profit from a reconsideration and reevaluation as we propose in this essay.

MANALANG GLORIA'S SONGS OF SUBMISSION AND SUBVERSION

As stated earlier, the premise which undergirds feminist criticism is that women have a "special experience," a set of values and perceptions unique to their gender, a distinct set of "beliefs or ordering ideas of social reality"—as the Ardeners put it. The dilemma, however, is how to articulate this special experience, given women's profound alienation from the forms and structures of expression. It is the dilemma of a muted culture. Muted groups, the Ardeners state, "must mediate their beliefs *through the allowable forms of dominant structures*" if they wish to be heard at all.²¹

How did Angela Manalang Gloria, as a woman poet, as a member of the muted culture, articulate her special experience into art? What strategies did she, consciously or unconsciously, employ to communicate this "precious specialty" within the sphere of the dominant culture?

A writer faced with this dilemma has two choices: One is to "surrender," to submit to the values of the dominant culture, in order that one's voice may be heard at all. The other option is to subvert, to express values and beliefs contrary to or different from those to which this culture subscribes. There are varying degrees of subversion, different modes of struggle. There is the strategy of open revolt; there is also the strategy of the "underground," of more "covert" operations.

This study will present the poetry of Angela Manalang Gloria as at times submitting to, and at other times subverting the dominant culture's myth of woman as Maria Clara—of woman as totally dependent on man for identity.²²

21. Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," p. 30. Underscoring ours.

22. In this context, we are adopting "Maria Clara" as the Filipino counterpart of the Victorian "angel-woman" analyzed by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their now classic work, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the 19th Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979). The reference to "angel" is one of the two extreme images generated by male authors about women, the other being

Songs of Submission

Shall I compare you to a rainbowed shower
 Drawing to earth the very arc of dream,
 Or shall I say you are an orchid flower
 That fevers men beside a jungle stream?
 Shall I compare you to a windy morning
 Because you stir the sleeping blood and brain
 To rise and follow beauty till beauty, scorning
 Desire's fleet runners, vanishes again!
 No, you are more than spectrum, than the find
 Of orchid hunters, than ariel dawn on wings
 And I, who know you are the undefined
 Reality of all unreal things,
 Shall wisely set your breathlessness apart
 As the unanswered challenge to the dreamer's art.²³

At first blush, the poem seems nothing more than a Shakespearean sonnet in extravagant praise of a woman, its rhetorical excess condoned by poetic convention. But a close reading of the text from the vantage point of feminist criticism reveals a view of woman which, far from exalting her, reduces her to a non-thing.

The speaker, most probably male (immaterial in this case) forages in his mind for an appropriate metaphor to describe a certain "lovely woman." He rhapsodizes: she is a "rainbowed shower," "an orchid flower," later, a "windy morning"—all images that exude an ethereal quality about them. The "rainbowed shower drawing to earth the very arc of dream" suggests that the woman dwells in angelic realms, in the realm of "dream" and not of "earth." The image of the "windy morning" suggests a spirit, rather than a corporeal body. Moreover, the speaker talks of following beauty "till beauty vanishes again," implying that the woman is not a person differentiated from other persons—but is rather an Ideal. In the last few lines the speaker, unable to describe the woman's loveliness adequately, calls her the "undefined/ Reality of all unreal things." She is not only unreal, but doubly unreal, being an "undefined/ Reality of all unreal things." The speaker deals the final death blow to the woman's identity by calling her "the unanswered challenge to a dreamer's art." This metaphor suggests

"monster." As the ideal woman envisioned by male authors, the angel is presented as the apotheosis of beauty and virtue; but feminists, including Virginia Woolf, decry the image as pernicious.

23. Angela Manalang Gloria, "To a Lovely Woman," *The Philippines Herald MidWeek Magazine*, 23 October 1935, V, 11, 1.

that the "feminine space" is the world of dreams, that woman has no place in reality. Moreover, the fact that she is made to appear mute, "un-answering," seems to suggest that her identity is for the dreamer (presumably male) to determine.

This feminist reading of the poem surfaces a negative concept of woman, i.e., one that negates her existence as a person of flesh and blood, as a real being. Yet there is nothing in the poem to suggest that Manalang Gloria offers any resistance to this dehumanizing concept of woman.

A feminist reading of another poem by Manalang Gloria, "Virac" [1935]²⁴ demonstrates the extent to which the seduction is completed by woman's voluntary surrender of identity to man's.

I

Rain on the nipa roof in dull insistence
Frets all desire away;
The winds are dead, and there is no more meaning
And no more dream in day.

I cannot look beyond the window, nor listen
Beyond the falling rain;
My heart is heavy as the day; beloved,
You have failed to come again.

II

Now that the rain has ceased and thoughts grow vagrant
On roads that wander past the lonely house,
I shall go down the stairs and walk with morning
Across the beach. And where a palm tree bows

Before the surf and seashells gleam like magic,
I shall go barefoot, careless of sand and spray,
Remembering how once you sat there watching
My wind-washed ankles curved against the day. . . .

The speaker in this poem laments that her "beloved" has "failed to come again." His absence alters her entire perception of the day. It is "heavy"; rain makes "dull insistence" on the nipa roof and "frets all desire away." Moreover, his absence robs life of all its significance: ". . . there is no more meaning/and no more dream in day." Her

24. Angela Manalang Gloria, "Virac," *The Philippines Herald MidWeek Magazine*, 21 August 1935, V, 2, 1.

capacity to have "dreams," i.e., personal goals and visions, seems to be contingent on his being with her. His absence, she says, "frets all desire away"—including, presumably, the desire to dream and the desire to live. The fact that she "can not look beyond the window, nor listen beyond the falling rain" suggests that she considers her man to be her eyes, with which to look "beyond the window," and her ears, with which to "listen beyond the falling rain"—her eyes and ears to the world outside the four walls of her house. Without him, she is "blind" and "deaf," walled in by the rain.

"Virac II" finds the speaker walking along the beach after the rain, lost in reminiscence of her loved one. "Virac II" removes the speaker from the confinement of house and rain and brings her out into an expanse of sea and spray. And yet, before this wide panorama of nature—which could provide her with considerable distraction, she still insists on caging herself within her nostalgia. She says she will go barefoot, "careless of sand and spray," only "remembering how you once sat there watching/My wind-washed ankles curved against the day." Nature, in other words, speaks to her of nothing but him. The "palm tree [which] bows/Before the surf" and the "seashells [which] gleam like magic" hold no enchantment for her without him.

The detail of the lover gazing at her "wind-washed ankles" is significant, too—as it suggests an act of worship, of adoration, of kneeling at some goddess' feet.

Once again, this feminist reading of the poem surfaces a negative view of woman, i.e., woman bereft of identity by the absence of her lover.

"To a Lovely Woman" and "Virac" are examples of poems by Manalang Gloria which completely submit to the dominant culture's definition of woman.

SONGS OF SUBVERSION

Manalang Gloria's position was not consistently one of submission; on occasion, she attempts subversion, sometimes openly, sometimes covertly. One aspect of the male-constructed myth of angel-woman she directly challenges is its refusal to openly acknowledge that woman is not just spirit but flesh as well, that woman has sexual feelings. In "Mountain Pool," a poem quoted below in its entirety, Manalang Gloria has the speaker announce

You who would hereafter
Understand my name,
Learn that mountain water
Can ripple over flame.

For though I love so purely,
 I know supreme desire —
 My heart, a pool demurely
 Holding heaven's fire.²⁵

Woman knows the sweet thrill of romance, but also the dark surge of passion. Passion sleeps within every virgin-woman's bosom, waiting only for the man who can make it stir:

You woke in me a slumbering Delilah
 You woke in me, O Samson, when you came
 This kin of fire that centuries had hidden
 Within the ancient caverns of my name.²⁶

NOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND: TECHNIQUES OF COVERT SUBVERSION

But subversion being a dangerous undertaking, Manalang Gloria, like most other women writers who are denied full access to language, foregoes direct statement in favor of euphemism and circumlocution. These techniques of covert subversion are most clearly demonstrated in Manalang Gloria's erotic poetry, specifically, in three poems dealing with illicit sexual passion.

In "Querida" [1940], Manalang Gloria chooses for her subject matter an illicit sexual tryst between a married man and his mistress.²⁷ Here is the poem quoted in its entirety:

The door is closed, the curtains drawn within
 One room, a brilliant question mark of light. . . .
 Outside her gate an empty limousine
 Waits in the brimming emptiness of night.

That Manalang Gloria chooses to portray such a scene in an era where such scenes were better left "behind the curtains," is itself a significant act of protest. However, Manalang Gloria appears to distance herself, as poet-persona, from the scandal of such a scene by adopting a third person point of view. Moreover, she utilizes circumlocution—

25. Angela Manalang Gloria, "The Mountain Pool," *Philippine Magazine*, 31 March 1935, XXXII, 3, 143.

26. Angela Manalang Gloria, "Song of Awakening," *Poems* (Manila: By the Author, 1940), p. 42.

27. Angela Manalang Gloria, "Querida," *Poems*, 1940, p. 75.

that is, she describes the events inside the room by describing the setting outside it: the door, the light, the limousine.

Were it not for the title, the reader would be hard put to determine what the poem was all about. In fact, today, Manalang Gloria coyly expresses surprise at the moral objections reportedly raised by the judges of the Commonwealth Literary Contests: "It just said that inside there was a light; outside there was a limousine—*o ano, wala*, nothing. Only four lines."²⁸

But even as a poem about a *querida*, could not the poem be read as a "moral lesson," a stern if subtle warning to those who would contract sexual liaisons of this type? The "light" of the lovers' shared passion is a "question mark"; the limousine is "empty," the night brims with "emptiness." Are not these images, after all, those of futility and emptiness?

However, one is still disturbed by the ambiguity of these same images. It is true that they are images of emptiness, but they are also images of luxurious fullness. The lovers' passion might be a "question mark," but it is a *brilliant* question mark. The limousine might be empty, but it is nevertheless a *limousine*. The night might be empty, but it is a *brimming* emptiness—suggesting that there is another "space" which passion creates, and this space passion fills to brimming with a meaning only the lovers understand. What society regards as an empty pursuit becomes, for the lovers, pregnant with significance. Is Manalang Gloria saying that passion has its attractions and is not to be totally condemned? Manalang Gloria's door does not seem to be fully closed, her curtains not fully drawn.

In "Soledad" [1935], the reader finds himself/herself thrown once more in the turbulent world of forbidden love:

It was a sacrilege, the neighbors cried,
The way she shattered every mullioned pane
To let a firebrand in. They tried in vain
To understand how one so carved from pride
And glassed in dream could have so flung aside
Her graven days, or why she dared profane
The bread and wine of life for one insane
Moment with him. The scandal never died.

But no one guessed that loveliness would claim
Her soul's cathedral burned by his desires,
Or that he left her aureoled in flame. . . .

And seeing nothing but her blackened spires,
 The town condemned this girl who loved so well
 And found her heaven in the depths of hell.²⁹

The poet/persona appears at first to be scandalized by the affair. She introduces the townspeople as a powerful sanctioning force on the lovers, emphasizing the terrible ostracism and alienation that such women will suffer as a price for their defiance of social mores.

The use of religious imagery adds a moral dimension to the situation. The affair is compared to the desecration of a cathedral, and worse, to the profanation of the Holy Eucharist Itself. Soledad's sexual passion is not mere scandal but sacrilege, leading not only to social ostracism but ultimately to spiritual damnation.

This is certainly one reading of the poem, but is it the poet's? Nowhere in the poem does she make a categorical statement of condemnation; in fact, she makes possible an altogether different reading of the poem by offering us the perspective of Soledad herself.

The speaker tells the reader in the second stanza that Soledad's lover left her "aureoled in flame." This suggests either that she worshipped and revered him as a saint, or that she herself acquired the halo of sainthood—the halo awarded to those who love passionately despite tremendous suffering. The town views her affair as a sacrilege; Soledad, however, sees it as a mystical union with the god of love, a union which elevates herself and her lover to the status of "sainthood"—in a pagan religion. For Soledad, passion is not sacrilege; it is sacred.

Whose judgment is right? The townspeople's? or Soledad's? More critical to the present discussion, does the poem submit to the social code that forbids expression of Soledad's sexual passion or does it subvert that same code by acknowledging that her passion is real and ecstatic as well?

However, "Heloise to Abelard" [1940] abandons almost all ambiguity, verging quite precariously on the brink of open rebellion.³⁰ Here is the complete text of the poem:

That I have loved you is beyond denial.
 That I have sinned thereby is not so plain:
 Call me, O joy, and though your voice were phial
 Of hemlock, I would drink of it again.

29. Angela Manalang Gloria, "Soledad," *The Philippines Herald MidWeek Magazine*, 6 March 1935, IV, 31, 1.

30. Angela Manalang Gloria, "Heloise to Abelard," *Poems*, 1940, p. 39.

There is no god to make me now surrender
 What startling height of folly we have known,
 What new Gomorrha builded on this wonder
 Of hellfire surging through our veins alone.

O heady rapture of desire forbidden,
 Forbidden lips forever haunting mine!
 If to my hunger you are fruit from Eden,
 If to my thirst you are nepenthean wine,

If this is sin, then never will I be shriven
 Who, drunk with Hell, now dare the curse of Heaven!

In the poem, Heloise defiantly refuses to give up her love for the monk Abelard, and entertains no regrets of their shared passion. The sexual references are unmistakable: "hellfire surging through our veins," the "startling height of folly we have known," "nepenthean wine"—all of these suggest the urgency of erotic passion. Even the Biblical references have sexual overtones. Gomorrha, for instance, was the sin city of the Old Testament, symbolic of carnal pleasure. Moreover, Heloise's references to the "heady rapture of desire forbidden," to "forbidden lips forever haunting mine" are direct references to sexual passion.

What makes the poem subversive is Heloise's total lack of contrition for her behavior. In fact, she does not even perceive her actions as immoral: "That I have loved you is beyond denial/That I have sinned thereby is not so plain." She stubbornly refuses to submit to the ethical codes of society, claiming her own moral orthodoxy with Luciferian righteousness: "There is no god to make me now surrender/What startling height of folly we have known"; "If this is sin, then never will I be shriven/Who, drunk with Hell, now dare the curse of Heaven!" The threat of alienation from earthly as well as heavenly spheres of power do not seem to frighten this rebel-woman. Ostracism and spiritual damnation seem to be small prices for her to pay. She is truly a Hell-loise.

The poet's assumption of the persona of Heloise herself and the forceful eloquence with which that persona expresses her passion may lead the reader to assume Manalang Gloria's tacit approval of the affair. But does she? After all, the poet could have been merely doing what an actress does: assume a role and play it as convincingly as possible. Moreover, Manalang Gloria may also have intended the poem—with its suggestive language and passionate rhetoric—to show how passion can lead poor souls to perdition, allowing the intensity of their emotions to blind them to the enormity of their sin, thus depriving them of the grace of contrition.

These erotic poems are titillating precisely because of the ambiguity, the ambivalence with which Manalang Gloria treats the subject of sexual passion. In these poems, can Manalang Gloria be said to assume an attitude of condonation or condemnation? The editors of *Poems* (1950) obviously thought her position was the former and subsequently censored them. But for most readers, the question remains: Is Manalang Gloria guilty of subverting the dominant culture's definition of woman, or is she not—and if so, to what degree? This ambiguity is precisely the *modus operandi* forced upon writers belonging to the muted culture, the means by which they can make their voices heard without being summarily silenced.

OPEN CONFRONTATION: "REVOLT
FROM HYMEN"

In the poem "Revolt from Hymen" [1940], Manalang Gloria abandons the strategy of covert subversion and engages in open revolt against the male-constructed myth of woman.³¹ Following is the entire text of the poem:

O to be free at last, to sleep at last
As infants sleep within the womb of rest!

To stir and stirring find no blackness vast
With passion weighted down upon the breast,

To turn the face this way and that and feel
No kisses festering on it like sores,

To be alone at last, broken the seal
That marks the flesh no better than a whore's!

The poem describes one woman's revolt against the dominant male culture, but it could very well be the feminist manifesto of the period.

What is the nature of the revolt? It is a virulent protest against the purely sexual/reproductive role that men have assigned to woman, i.e., the role of "whore." For another name for woman is Hymen. She is prepared all throughout her life to become man's companion in sexual activity and procreation. Her education prepares her for nothing else. The Maria Clara code emphasizes the importance of chastity, and yet, ironically, really enjoins a woman to develop herself as a desirable object for men's pleasure. Moreover, chastity, which ironically makes her most seductive to man, largely consists in keeping the

31. Angela Manalang Gloria, "Revolt from Hymen," *Poems*, 1940, p. 106.

hymen intact until marriage. It is woman whom man has named *Hymen*, whom man has depersonalized into a mere sexual organ, who now revolts and claims her own freedom. It is a revolt that originates from woman-named-Hymen; it is also a revolt *from*, that is, against hymen-ization. She demands to be humanized, rather than hymen-ized. Hymen-ization deprives her of her true identity as woman. This is effectively conveyed through the central image of the poem: the man's kisses festering on the woman's face "like sores." The speaker suggests that hymen-ization disfigures her face, distorts her true nature and negates her true value as a person.

The speaker in the poem is utterly *revolted* by this type of debasing union with man, and thus rejoices in being alone, and free from the weight of his leprous passion. She yearns "to sleep within the womb of rest," that is, to return to some kind of Earthmother, the source of the eternal feminine, from whom she may recover her face and her name.

There is no mistaking the tone of this poem: it is angry, bitter, harsh. There is no room for ambiguity—the poem speaks in virulent first person, and offers no hint of other perspectives. It is a woman's emphatic and unconditional "NON SERVIAM."

It is no wonder then that this poem made the judges in the Commonwealth Contests—all of whom but one were male—"see red";³² it was, according to Manalang Gloria's own account, the main reason why *Poems* did not garner any prizes.

SEXUAL POLITICS: POSSIBLE POSITIONS IN THE BATTLE OF THE SEXES

What then are the possible positions a member of the muted culture might take vis-a-vis the dominant culture regarding the myth of woman as Maria Clara?

One, of course, is capitulation—as exemplified in the poems "To A Lovely Woman" and "Virac," where woman resigns herself to sweet annihilation as man's vassal.

Another is the position of hostile confrontation, where woman breaks away from the feudal relationship with man, and challenges him now from a position of equal strength. Such a stance is exemplified in the poem "Hate" [1928],³³ the full text of which is quoted:

32. Alegre and Fernandez, *The Writer and His Milieu*, p. 60.

33. Angela Manalang Gloria, "Hate," *Poems*, 1940, p. 84.

They clutched at the corridor railing —
 motionless, unspeaking —
 Five spans of the iron balusters separating them,
 Five times the farthest distance between two
 planets separating him and her . . .
 And the night came on.

"Hate" dwells on the impossibility of love between a particular man and woman. However, it may also be taken as a poem on what the Ardeners refer to as the male and female "wild zones"—those zones of experience and consciousness so uniquely male or female that neither can be shared nor understood by the other. "They clutched at the corridor railing—/motionless, unspeaking—/Five times the farthest distance between two /planets separating him and her . . ." indicates that man and woman are "worlds apart," that the difference between them is of cosmic proportions. They each partake of an otherness so radical as to completely eliminate the possibility of communication. Their individual languages are "wild"—garbled, unintelligible to each other's ears—so that they remain "unspeaking." Moreover, they resist any thoughts of conciliation, locked in positions of inflexible antagonism.

The poem sets the stage for a battle of the sexes. It presents the arena, and captures that moment when two hostile forces eye each other with silent fury before they commence attack. "And the night came on" indicates the beginning of the battle. "Night"—usually the time of feverish union between man and woman, now becomes the time of battle. In this poem the speaker seems to be saying that woman can never be one with man; he is in fact a competitor, a rival for the much-valued space of cultural dominance. Hate, and not love, will be her liberation.

But is there no alternative to capitulation but confrontation? Is there no alternative to "love" but hate? Is there no way of sidestepping the mines of that sexual battlefield? Are there only extremist positions?

The poem "Old Maid Walking On A City Street" [1940] indicates yet another possibility for woman.³⁴ Here is the text of the entire poem:

She had a way if walking through concupiscence
 And past the graces her fingers never twirled:
 Because her mind refused the heavy burden,
 Her broad feet shovelled up the world.

34. Angela Manalang Gloria, "Old Maid Walking on a City Street," *Poems*, rev. ed. (Manila: By the Author, 1950), p. 80.

Here is woman dismissing love/marriage as a mere concupiscent episode, dismissing it—without a thought, it seems—as a viable option for her. She is no “lovely woman,” no ethereal dream—her fingers never “twirled graces” and her feet are broad. However, she strides through life confidently, meeting it eye to eye with a healthy self-respect—all this is implied in the image of her feet “shovelling up the world.” Her mind “refuses the heavy burden” of male-prescribed codes of behavior. There does not seem to be any antagonism towards man, not even the acknowledgment that a battle of the sexes exists, but simply the matter-of-fact statement that woman can get along quite splendidly without him. There is contentment and confidence in her chosen solitude. Man is neither lover nor enemy. He is simply not a force to reckon with.

But is solitude the only alternative to extreme positions? What about marriage? Is it necessarily capitulation? Can there be no conciliation?

Manalang Gloria's “To the Man I Married” Part One [1940] suggests that there can.³⁵ However, such a conciliation, such a coalition must preserve the independence and integrity of each party; peace can only be based on justice—so to speak—on giving each party sizeable room for independent maneuver:

You are my earth and all that earth implies:
 The gravity that ballasts me in space,
 The air I breathe, the land that stills my cries
 For food and shelter against devouring days.
 You are my earth whose orbit marks my way
 And sets my north and south, my east and west,
 You are the final, elemental clay
 The driven heart must turn to for its rest.

In these lines, Manalang Gloria pays man a supreme compliment by calling him her “earth” which grounds her, serves as her base, locates her, as it were, within a specified reality. Moreover, he is her refuge, whom “the driven heart must turn to for its rest.” However, she has needs which she acknowledges that her husband cannot fill, needs of a probably more aesthetic nature—dreams which he cannot share. She confesses that even when he holds her in the security of his arms, she finds herself “lift[ing her] keening thoughts to Helicon.” But she is quick to assure him: “You who are earth, O never doubt that I/Need you less because I need the sky!”

35. Angela Manalang Gloria, “To the Man I Married,” *Poems*, 1940, pp. 27–28.

The poem speaks of a love rooted in a frank realism and honesty. The speaker admits that the man she married is not her entire world. She must still "mount a separate height" in quest of her selfhood. He is not the "sky" which she yearns for. But he is the "earth" which she cannot do without.

In other words, marriage can be a happy compromise between capitulation and confrontation. Marriage can institute an equal sharing of resources between man and woman. The battle of the sexes is won, not by one, but by both sexes.

DOUBLE-VOICED DISCOURSE:
"BUT FOR THE WESTERN STARS"

Belonging as they do to the muted culture and suffering from the consequent lack of access to the language of the dominant culture, women writers are often forced into silence, euphemism or circumlocution in their speech. The result is what is referred to as "double-voiced discourse," containing both a dominant and muted story embedded within the text.³⁶ Therefore, Showalter says, reading women's literature from a feminist perspective often entails deliberately looking for the submerged text, intently listening for the muted voice.

We conclude this essay with a feminist reading of one of Manalang Gloria's most popular poems, "But the Western Stars" [1928] because, as the best example of double-voiced discourse in her canon, it is also the poem in which her muted voice is heard most clearly.³⁷

Set me adrift on the bay tonight,
Tonight when the gray winds blow,
Over the waves to the western stars
My banca and I must go.

You would have built me an altar here
Where lingers the wave-born dew,
And I would have taken the silver dusk
To gather young dreams for you.

But the western lagoons and the lonely stars —
They whisper across the sea,
And I must away to a misty shore
That calls through the dark to me.

36. Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," p. 34.

37. Angela Manalang Gloria, "But the Western Stars," *The Literary Apprentice*, U.P. Writers Club, 1928, p. 10.

Then set me adrift on the bay tonight,
Tonight when the gray winds blow,
And over the waves to the western stars
Evening and I will go.

"But the Western Stars" has traditionally been read as a poem on death. Critics have noted its similarity to Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar" where the speaker bids farewell to his beloved as he is about to go on a journey across the sea, which is the journey to death.

However, it is the traditional (the male's tradition, feminist critics would assert) reading of this poem that—so to speak—"kills" it. Read from a feminist perspective, it becomes a poem on *life*, or more specifically, on *birth*; it may be read as a woman's coming to life, as her awakening from the death/sleep of a consciousness thoroughly informed and infused by patriarchal values.

The speaker in this poem asks the addressee, who can be said to be male, to set her free: "Set me adrift on the bay tonight/Tonight when the gray winds blow." There is a journey which she "must" make apart from him, a journey "over the waves to the western stars." There is a voice persistently calling her to make this quest. Her destination seems full of uncertainty and peril: the "western lagoons" connote sunset and therefore death, the stars which beckon are "lonely," the shoreline obscured by "mist." The way to her destination seems equally perilous and uncertain, as she must cross the sea in darkness, amid "gray winds." And yet there is a mysterious voice, which "whispers across the sea" and "calls through the dark," and she, mesmerized, must sail to its music. This journey that the speaker must make may be interpreted as the female quest for identity in a male-inscribed world. It is woman's quest for her own significant action, her own autonomy and interiority. It is indeed a lonely, perilous quest, full of uncertainty—for she will be buffeted by the winds of the dominant culture, seeking to push her back to the land of meek submission and angel purity; she will sail through "darkness" as the lighthouse beacons point only to male promontories. The shores of female identity are misted and undefined, undiscovered—waiting, as it were, to be "put on the map."

There is, of course, the speaker says, an alternative to making the journey—that is, to stay "here," where the addressee would build her "an altar" and where she would "gather young dreams" for him—a typically male fantasy. He would worship her, put her on a pedestal of beauty and virtue—as one would do with a Maria Clara or a "lovely woman"—idealize her beyond reality, stylize her into a heavenly ideal—and thus protect her from the waves, the wind, and the darkness

of earth. She would, however, "gather young dreams for him"—a curious preoccupation. It seems fine that she is allowed to "gather dreams," as this would indicate her capacity to set her own goals and visions. But the dreams are "young dreams," the dreams of a child, rather than the dreams of an adult cognizant of the need to be one's own person instead of a trusting dependent. This is logical, for if this woman were to dream "adult dreams," i.e., dreams about her own autonomy and identity, she would not want the "altar" built for her. Moreover, these dreams cannot be anything but "young" for they are *gathered* and not *created* by the speaker's mind. And if they are gathered, they cannot be gathered from anywhere else except from the garden of patriarchy, where dreams of Maria Claras bloom. The poem also says that the speaker will gather these young dreams *for* the addressee. Does this mean that she will dream *for* him, i.e., map out the vision by which he is to live his life? No; since these are young dreams, they would serve as delightful, refreshing distractions for the man—in the same way that a basket of gathered flowers would—and would not in any way substitute for his own "dreams"—which presumably are "adult."

Read in this way, "But the Western Stars" is a rather subversive poem, subverting the male-constructed myth that woman cannot define herself apart from man, that solitude in the quest for identity would be her death. In fact, "But the Western Stars" may be read as a feminist manifesto—at least for the women of Manalang Gloria's time, who were trying out their "bancas" for the first time in the sea of male-constructed history.

But while the message may be subversive, the medium remains conventional. The romantic images expected of women's poetry are there: the gray winds, the silver dusk, the wave-born dew, the lonely stars. The melodic rhythm is there too. Most of all, there is the speaker's voice, not shrill but soft, its tone not so much demanding as pleading. It is almost as if the speaker were deliberately *muting* her cry for freedom, so as not to unduly alarm the addressee. The net effect is disarming—and therefore, deceptive.

CONCLUSION

At the outset, the claim was made that Angela Manalang Gloria's literary reputation has, over a period of fifty years, remained virtually stable. That is, she has been and continues to be regarded as a major figure in the history of that first generation of Filipino writers in English. Villa, Rotor and Lopez, the foremost critics of her time, accede to her

secure position as the "master of the tender line," a superb artist in the area of romantic verse.

However, the grounds upon which this reputation stands need to be re-examined and re-affirmed from more contemporary perspectives. One of these perspectives should be feminist criticism for, as Showalter claims,

In the purest feminist literary criticism we are . . . presented with a radical alteration of vision, a demand that we see meaning in what has previously been empty space. The orthodox plot recedes, and another plot, hitherto submerged in the anonymity of the background, stands out in bold relief like a thumbprint.³⁸

Or a voice print. A feminist reading such as we have proposed in this essay is one way of identifying the authentic, if muted, voice of Manalang Gloria.

38. Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," p. 34.