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Ballad of a Lost Season and Other Stories, by Pantoja

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BALLAD OF A LOST SEASON AND OTHER STORIES. By Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1987. 188 pages.

There is pleasure and pain in reading Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo's *Ballad of a Lost Season and Other Stories*. The pleasure comes from her keen sensitivity to detail, and the smooth readability of her prose. The pain is in the stories themselves, in the characters' conflicts and confusions that may be all too real, or all too familiar, to many a reader.

The central characters in this collection of short stories are lower- to upper-middle class women, each at a particular crisis point. All are physically attractive (except for one) and intelligent, and have the strength of character to strike out for themselves even if their choices eventually bring regrets, disappointment, heartbreak.

Women readers could probably identify with one or more of these characters: Viol, a young professional in "Ballad of a Lost Season"; Olivia, a rich executive's pampered wife in "The Outsiders"; Julie, the country girl turned Manilaña in "Provinciana"; Medy, the ultimate supportive wife in "Kababayan"; Vida, the abandoned wife in "Vida"; and Fe, the underprivileged college graduate turned domestic in Korea, in "The Tree of the Perfect Plum."

These women's crises stem from two sources: their relationships with the men in their lives (husbands, boyfriends or ex-boyfriends, admirers), and the needs and frustrations that go with their positions in the social scale.

The basic themes in Hidalgo's stories have appeared in countless other works of fiction before: lost loves, loneliness of various kinds, social ladders that cost too much to climb. But Hidalgo's delineation of character (especially of her women characters) carries her narratives beyond the ordinary. Capturing details of manner and appearance, nuances of speech or modes of expression, she creates individuals who are unique enough to keep the reader intrigued, and familiar enough to get the reader involved.

One of the best examples of how Hidalgo projects character through telltale details is in her introduction of Medy Deveza in "Kababayan." Medy is seen through the eyes of the narrator, one of the circle of Filipino businessmen's wives that she joins in Thailand:

One evening, as we girls were gossiping over our noodles and iced coffee while waiting for our husbands to finish their bowling game, Medy Deveza walked up to our table and introduced herself. She was a wiry, vigorous, plain-looking woman, wearing orange bermuda shorts, and her hair teased into a formidable-looking helmet. Her husband, Mr. Lester Deveza, she informed us, was the Embassy's new Financial Attache. She pointed him out, and then bestowed upon us a wide, friendly smile, which revealed two gold-rimmed caps, and told us that she was happy to meet such important members of the Filipino community in Bangkok as ourselves. (p. 79)

In that single paragraph are hints of the loud, rather tacky social climber that Medy is, but there is something else too: a transparency, a confident openness that later enables her to deal with her greatest social trial with panache.

In "Provinciana," Julie Patag's early discomfort with her new Manila-born-and-bred crowd is sensed by Lito, friend of Manoling Delgado, who later becomes Julie's boyfriend:

It had been a small party, about eight or ten people, dinner, drinks. Later, they had all decided to go to the Manila Hotel—to walk by the sea wall, the girls said . . . and to listen to the new singer at the lobby bar. And then they had driven out to the Philippine Village Hotel, to play the casino.

Julie had been very quiet the whole evening. *Apagada*. From a distinct lack of ease, Lito felt.

And the few times that she had opened her mouth, it had almost invariably been to sound, somehow, the false note. *Oh, what an interesting insight! or Is that a scientifically verifiable fact? or Yes, it was such a profound movie!* Things like that.

And the accent. Not quite phony. But not real either. *Exagerada*, that was probably the best word for it. Trying too hard. (p. 54)

Through such minute details Hidalgo adds dimension to her characters, and enables a closer understanding of their motivations as they confront moments of crisis.

It is in her use of images, however, particularly of seashells and flowers, that Hidalgo best projects her women characters' mystique. These images are so unobtrusively placed in the stories that they may be missed at first—until the reader notices that at some point in each story (with the exception of "Kababayan"), a shell or flower image is juxtaposed with the central character.

In "Ballad of a Lost Season," Jaime Ilustre—Viol's long unseen childhood friend turned college flame—suddenly shows up at her office to give her a farewell gift: a golden shell. Jaime has just read of Viol's approaching marriage.

In "The Outsiders," Olivia is in a flower shop, where she and Luis Corvera (with whom she attempts to start an affair) have arranged to meet "for coffee or something." When Luis arrives, he sees her "among the flowers, one hand outstretched to touch a long-stemmed yellow rose, her chin poised gracefully on the slender stalk of her neck. . . ." (p. 44). Another scene has Olivia dreamily thinking of "luminous corals, sea shells, islands wavering like images on water, a little girl [herself as a child] in a red bathing suit. . . ." (p. 40).

Julie the "provinciana" has an ashtray on her office desk—"a small inverted seashell, with little rosebuds on one edge" (p. 57). It is a piece of kitsch that, along with the other "odds and ends" on her table, reflects Julie's lack of urban polish—the quality that endears her to Manoling.

In a scene in "Vida," the main character suddenly bursts in on her friend Risa, "all windblown hair and blooming cheeks, her arms filled with long-stemmed red carnations" (p. 160). The cause of Vida's excitement: a dinner

party that she plans to host, and to which she will invite, among other newfound friends, her new love—the PLO member, Raouf (p. 161).

In "The Tree of the Perfect Plum," Fe, the central character, first experiences the Korean spring in the form of the many-hued blooms growing from the nursery window of the home where she lives and works:

First came the vivid canary yellow of the forsythias, then the deep fuschia of the azaleas, then the snowy white of the magnolias. For a few enchanting days there was the fragile blush of the cherry blossoms. And finally, the brilliant red and orange of tulips, the yellow and purple of pansies, the rainbow hues of carnations and long-stemmed roses. And everywhere, the new grass. And the feathery willows. And the silvery poplars. And later, the white acacia flowers. And the pollen whirling about like snowflakes in the cool, crisp breeze. (p. 171)

Only in the case of Medy in "Kababayan," as earlier noted, does the author refrain from images of shells or blooms. It would not have been appropriate, for in this short story collection, Medy is a woman apart. She is far too strong and transparent for the delicacy and mystery conveyed by these images. Medy inspires, not fascination, but affection and a kind of amused admiration for her guts.

The rest of the women characters in the book, however, do have all the loveliness and vulnerability, the complexity of character, that the seashells and multi-petalled flowers seem to mirror. They act with inner strength, with apparent conviction, and face the world with quiet dignity, but they are confused too. They make clear-cut choices, but suffer terribly when they discover that these do not, after all, lead to the happiness and fulfillment they had expected. Furthermore, they seem full of desires and impulses that confound the other characters in their world. Their complexity challenges the reader to scrutiny and analysis of their personalities, but the challenge seems too destructive. To get at a shell's core, one must smash it open; to get at a flower's heart, one must tear off the petals one by one. Who would want to do that?

In *Ballad of a Lost Season and Other Stories*, Hidalgo allows her reader to look briefly into the workings of the middle class woman's soul. It is a rewarding experience.

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