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Leonora M. Fajutagana

Modern scholarship has for a long time approached the study of the relationship between literature and history with the assumption that the latter is more basic than the former, that history is knowable independently of literature. Literature, in its modernist conception, constituted the phenomenon to be explained, while history, a master narrative of modernity and patriarchy, provided the means of explanation.

Marxist studies, for instance, have dealt with literature as an ideological superstructure with history as its base. For example, there is the Althusserian conception of history as a "set of *real* conditions and relations invoked to account for the specific forms in which the *real* is signified or alluded to within literary texts (*italics mine*). This shares the same premise with Jameson and Lukacs who conceive of history as "an interpretative device for deciphering the meaning of literary texts," and even Eagleton, whose formulation on the string of significations between literary text, ideology, and history has been taken to mean that history functions not merely as literature's signified but also its ultimate source and referent (Bennet 1990, 41–43). Thus, even as both disciplines attempt to represent presumably the same reality, history has been generally accorded the status of metalanguage.

This view of history has since been challenged by poststructuralist linguistic theory, which questioned not only the idea of the past rendered in "pure" objective form, but also the notion of a linear and single history with a unified meaning and invested with explanatory powers. Postmodernism's attacks on modernist history have been focused on disputing the existence of a real, knowable past and in exposing its logocentric, Eurocentric, and monolithic character, thus undermining history's privileged status as a metalanguage. Moreover, as the poststructuralists would underscore, all historical events are discursive constructs such that "the world must be inscribed or become a text itself before it can be thought about or even lived in" (Landry and Maclean 1993, 139). Therefore, as a discourse and a product of a series of narrative and

rhetorical devices itself, history cannot function as an extra-discursive referent of any other text of discourse.

The earlier popular postulation of history among literary writers as context or background to literary text, on the other hand, is likewise naive ("naive mimeticism") for it betrays a simplistic view of literature as a mere mirror or window to historical truth and ignores the interplay of such factors as textuality, institutions, and conventions.

How the refiguration of history's role bears upon recent approaches to the relationship between literature and history should be engaging for students of either discipline, for the relationship remains intimate, albeit problematic. The apparent predilection for writing historical novels among writers especially in postcolonial settings has foregrounded an urgent desire to continue reconstructing the past.

The contemporary Filipino novel in English seems to bear this out. Writers like Cecilia Manguerra Brainard, Jose Dalisay Jr, Eric Gamalinda, Jessica Hagedorn, Ninotchka Rosca, Alfred Yuson, all pursued historical projects. Each has offered a radical version of Philippine history by drawing from the tools of poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism.

The latest writer to have taken up this project was Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo whose attempt at reconstructing Philippine history in the Palanca-winning *Recuerdo* (1996) suggests a revisionist conception of history but one not as yet fully explored in the earlier novels. While not as postmodern as Yuson's *Great Philippine Jungle Energy Café* (1987) which, in MacHale's (1987, 90) classification, would be an apocryphal novel because of its blatant anachronisms and its parody of "official" history, or as unabashedly postcolonial as Manguerra Brainard's *Song of Yvonne* (1992) which retrieves and foregrounds indigenous culture within the unmistakable agenda of promoting national identity, *Recuerdo* is nonetheless radical in its unique problematization of the relationship between history and literature and in its conspicuous and sustained privileging of the female discourse. This paper is an exploration of the revisions in the concept of the relationship of history and fiction set forth by Hidalgo in her novel, and how these bear upon her apparent feminist agenda.

History as Epistle

The novel's avowed epistolary style, which at once announces the text's bias for the informal, personal discourse of the everyday, also determines the rest of the strategies employed by the author. It establishes, for one, the bond between the narrator Amanda and her daughter Risa, who had not been able to open up to each other until—separated for the first time—they discover in their constant correspondence the power of words to bridge discontinuities in time. The two women's common desire to connect not only with each other but also with the rest of the family and the race they realized they knew so little about explains the text's fixation with uncovering the past.

This is accomplished through Amanda's narration—on installment—of the family history as she remembers it from her own mother's accounts. Even as they at times appear fragmented and incomplete, these episodes—each focused on a prominent ancestor from six generations of Amanda's family—constitute the main narrative against which the present personal and social problems are set. These stories, after all, are the memoirs, or *recuerdos*, which the narrator retrieves and then reconstructs as the family history in the form of a novel. In the end, however, Amanda tells her friend and critic that the project looks less like a novel than a mere "cluster of tales" (278).

Moreover, even as the tales trace one family's roots (to a Chinese merchant, an *indio* priest, and a Spanish gentleman) and detail the ancestor's personal struggles during the wars and against conventions and fate, they virtually become a people's history, situated as they are within the social conflicts which propelled Philippine history. With all their disjointedness and lack of focus, Amanda's letters to her daughter Risa thus become an unlikely medium for passing on the family history, which is also the nation's.

The letter as narrative strategy also enabled Hidalgo to weave together a variety of other discourses such as travelogues, memoirs, poetry, myths, archival documents, political commentaries, advice on domestic matters, and even gossip in an unveiled attempt to recover de-privileged discourses and voices and to assert their equality with conventional ones. This multiplicity of styles of discourse within the text also signifies the narrator's multiple layers of roles and voices such as that of a mother, historian, traveller, expatriate, bourgeois, and woman. The result is a kind of collage which, alongside the decentered narrative—because without an identifiable central character or main conflict—makes the text characteristically postmodern. This device is explained by the author (through Amanda) in the novel's last chapter, in a self-reflexive fashion when she writes that the epistolary novel enabled her to "put together all the stray bits and pieces...as a kind of tapestry...using many strands of many shades which somehow fit into the intricate pattern" (279). The text thus juxtaposes and at times even conflates such antitheses as past and present, and non-literary, personal and national tragedies.

Curiously, the text's narration and to some extent even the retrieval of the past is mediated by modern technology—i.e., with the use of the electronic mail as a means of correspondence—resulting in a sense of anachronism which is further heightened by the novel's Spanish title and subtitles (such as *El Chino Tomas* and *La Leonor, La Pobre Asuncion, Maestra Cresing*). Such technological mediation, however, is counterpointed by the text's fixation with manuscripts and its heightened awareness of the materiality of books, such as when Amanda tells her daughter about the books (by Filipino women) she picked up at the bookstore before leaving for Bangkok: "I like looking at them where they sit on my desk...I examine them by lamplight. They are beautiful books, crafted with love, sturdy but delicate" (4). Amanda, on several

other occasions, refers to various writers and their books, mostly to recommend them to her daughter.

This fascination with books—and thus with libraries and archives—reinforces the narrative's consciousness of the written word such as historical accounts and memoirs (of Amanda's mother). Thus, they recall Umberto Eco's tomes and labyrinthine library (*The Name of the Rose*) and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's cryptic manuscripts (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*) which not only bear the key to the secrets of the characters' identities but also spell out the destiny of generations. This focus on words and manuscripts aptly anticipates the text's poststructuralist view of history.

History and the Female

The primary purpose of writing history, the text maintains, is to preserve the stories for the next generations, "...so the children would not forget their ancestors...so they would not forget their story" (86). Such urgency in passing on the family tales to the next generation even dictates the tempo of the narrative and is most dramatic in the case of Amanda's mother Isabel who, at eighty, decides to defy the code of silence in the family to write her memoirs, determined not to lose the stories which until then "no one wanted to tell" (5). This rubs off on Amanda, who hands down the few and incomplete stories she has thus gathered to her daughter Risa before they slip away from her memory. She cannot wait for her mother to finish her memoirs, frustrated as she already is that none of the previous generations remembered to keep records. "One would think," she writes, "that it would have occurred to someone to keep a diary, if only to make sure that there would be a record of those fateful years" (43). But the idea, her mother reminds her, is preposterous, in the light of the "habit of silence" that had been cultivated for as long as the old woman could remember.

With Isabel, Amanda and Risa—representatives of the three surviving generations of Lucero women—converging in the narrative, it is clear that Hidalgo intends to entrust history and its perpetuation to the women. 'Together,' Amanda writes, "we shall draw strength from the same well that was the source of our ancestresses' power" (275). Incidentally, the women draw upon non-traditional genres to record history, with Amanda herself choosing to fictionalize history in a novel even as she declares that "Despite the persistent compliments of my narrative gift, I do not know how to write fiction" (137).

The problem clearly is not simply of memory lapse but of access. Amanda remembers how listening to her mother's stories was

...like standing before a window and looking out into another world.
But the window was much too small, the figures in the landscape too

far away, the landscape itself, dim and hazy. Strain as I might to grasp the details, they receded, wavered, faded away into shadows. (5)

Hidalgo makes it plain early in the narrative that Amanda's task—as well as hers—is made especially difficult by the fact of her gender, for the woman is not only unaccustomed to writing history, having even been a willing party to the suppression of certain stories, but her story is also absent from mainstream history. The women's foray into this heretofore masculine domain thus involves mainly the recovery of the lost stories, to fill the gaps and retrieve the missing pages of history. This is why Amanda, driven by the sense of the incompleteness of the tales her mother told her, goes sleuthing for the suppressed stories about some of her ancestors such as El Chino Tomas whose lowly roots his descendants have not exactly been proud of, La Pobre Asuncion who fell victim to incest, and perhaps the most scandalous of all, the exquisitely beautiful Leonor who defiantly carried on an affair with an Indio priest.

The many gaps in her family's history and Amanda's admission that she altered some tales—as she was certain her own mother also did—point to Hidalgo's stress on the annotative, communal nature of writing history. This is same view of history that Isabel Allende expounds in *The House of the Spirits*, in which the mother's "*cuadernos anotar de vida*" are passed on to other family members, for the blank pages and for the silences in the tales to be filled in by other voices, thus achieving a generational bonding through this shared activity of writing. Committing history to writing, therefore, becomes a means not only of preserving the tales but also for generations to dialogue with each other, in the Bakhtinian sense. It is an endless annotation, the historical text being always open to future voices and thus, always in the process of being written.

Premised on this openness and vulnerability of the historical text, Hidalgo's novel successfully makes room for the female voice and her secret tales in a contemporized depiction of the archetypal female storyteller figure in which the woman is defined by her words—or by the absence of words. Her empowerment is realized primarily through the power of words to form connections and relationships making it quite clear, then, that Hidalgo's gender politics is essentially circumscribed in the discursive power of language.

It is through the discovery and subsequent telling of the tales, for instance, that Amanda is able to exorcise the hovering fear of a family curse which was believed responsible for the early deaths of many of the men in every generation, including her father and her own husband. Enlightened about the social and historical determinants of the chronic tragedy from her archival explorations, she assures her daughter that "There is no curse." But even if there was, Amanda would have already been gratified and strengthened by the inspiring stories she uncovered of her ancestresses who survived without their men

to pull the family together, who learned to be independent and thus emerged as active participants in making history. It would, however, take somebody from the fifth generation to gather their stories for they never found the voice nor the reason to tell their tales. In Amanda's novel where it is mostly the widows (like her) and the orphans who are left to carry on, the female discourse definitely dominates. That history should be about and written by the women already constitutes a radical revision of modernist history; even more radical its rendering in such unconventional and disparate discourses as fiction, correspondence, diary and travelogue.

The most engaging parts of the narratives, however, are the portraits Hidalgo paints of Amanda's ancestors interspersed as they are with rich details and seemingly endless pop-culture trivia associated with the female discourse but which, in themselves, are a significant reconstruction of the country's cultural history, no matter if they have been reimagined, perhaps even reinvented, by the narrator. Her account, for instance, of a typical vacation in the Ramirezes' ancestral home is as truthful a depiction of Filipino lifestyle as any:

Then would follow a whole month of playing "luksong tinik" and "patintero" under the old santol trees, and "saing-saingan" in the treehouse . . . splashing about in the little river bordered by bamboo trees and "makahiya" plants; stuffing themselves with fluffy "bibingka" sold by Aling Doray outside the cockpit, and the "ukoy" sold by Aling Tasiang in her "sari-sari" store where the village gathered to gossip; climbing Aling Tentay's "balimbing, duhat, siniguelas" and "camachile" trees; scaring each other with tales of the "kapre." (219)

The fondness for relics—such as the blue "manton de Manila" which belonged to Josefina Tagle and which she wore until it was in tatters, the gold filigreed "relicario" of Leonor Ramirez, and the velvet box where Lola Paz kept her wedding things—also signifies the sentimentality and thus, the unabashed femaleness of the narrative. These relics are, after all, to Amanda like magical carpets that transport her to another time, as when she is allowed to unlock the glass doors of her Lola Paz's "aparador" and imagine the many stories that lay hidden inside the casement:

There were empty bottles of colored glass with multi-faceted stoppers—lapis lazuli and coral and ruby and emerald. I fancied they had once upon a time contained rare perfumes, magic potions, the juice of pomegranates, intoxicating ambrosia. . . There was a white porcelain jar filled with buttons. . . bits of lace and eyelet and embroidered organdie. . . a bald wooden doll in a faded sailor suit full of scratches (148)

The past thus becomes animated as the characters cease to be mere shadowy figures in sepia, and the events more than plain, sketchy accounts.

This fictionalization of history thus serves as another tool by which the woman's story is woven into a revisionist version of history, one where the real and the imagined are conflated so as to produce a pervading sense of uncertainty. This uncertainty is what Amanda herself ends up feeling when she writes in the postscript, referring to her finished novel: "This isn't memory, this is fiction" (278), adding that she could no longer remember which parts are real and which are imagined. Declaring that hers is "hardly a realistic narrative," Amanda hints at the postmodernist tendency of the narrative not only to refer to its textuality but also to doubt its own ability to make the past any more intelligible. The uncertainty of the woman's narrative in this sense serves to counterpoint the presumptuous claim of modernist and patriarchal historical narrative to accurately represent the past and thus constitutes a significant revision of the concept of history. Hidalgo's romantic style reinforces such opposition, for the text's recognition of the impossibility of uncovering the whole truth implies the inoperativeness of realism and leaves room only for such uncertain, excessive ornate genres as romance.

In many ways, therefore, Hidalgo has shown that the female discourse—embodied in the novel in the epistolary and romantic modes—is more tenable than the modernist realism of the men's narratives in representing the past, especially with the current privileging of marginal discourses and voices, and the poststructuralist repudiation of extra-textual reality. This means then that even as the women retrieve their lost tales with which to fill the gaps and the blank pages of history, it will not be enough for them to simply weave their way into mainstream patriarchal history. For not only has such a paradigm been largely discredited but their stories do not fit the old logocentric framework. With the growing postmodern sense of uncertainty about the meaning of any given narrative, what is ultimately produced is not history per se but only historical manuscripts. Amanda's narrative is thus simply another manuscript.

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