

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

Returning the Empties: Selected Poems 1960s -1990s by Lakshmi Gill

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Philippine Studies vol. 47, no. 4 (1999): 570–573

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erary life is skewered, the EDSA rebellion satirized ("The chain of protests, like the minute catenae of clitoral pleasure, swelled into the wave of this climax").

Other people write tomes that would be better off as doorstops. In 160 pages, Gina Apostol serves up Manila in the Eighties: swift, Swiftian, sexy, and sad.

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Returning the Empties: Selected Poems 1960s –1990s. By Lakshmi Gill.
Toronto: Tsar Publications. xi+170 pages. \$15.95.

In this profound collection of poems, Lakshmi Gill gathers together her poetry which was written over 30 years in Canada. Lakshmi Gill was born in the Philippines. Her parents were Indian, Spanish, and Filipino. She arrived in Vancouver in 1964 for her MA after her studies in the U.S. The literary critics affirm that she is a unique new figure in Canadian poetry because she is Asian. Buddha, Christ and Asian culture are unique in her poetry which is written in Canadian geography and culture. In her poems Lakshmi Gill affirms her Asian culture in her western reality. She is a young Asian. One critic says that she is "a woman with something good to say and not just a sob." She is a poet never content with present arrangements in life. She questions everything in both her Asian and her Canadian culture. She is young but intelligent. Her poems show a grasp of the complex and meta-physical ability of an Asian. She often casts a wicked eye on the Western attempts at being civilized. There is nothing unreal about her passions for they have spiritual grace. Her poetry as an Asian in Canada is actually very good because it combines what is good in both Asian and Canadian culture.

Lakshmi Gill herself says these poems were written in Canada because of "the climate (culture) of Canada." She also says these poems emphasize the influence of Canada on her, and often defeated her own Asian nature. But in the end, the climate of Canada and her personal Asian climate became one and the same! The title of this collection, "Returning the Empties," is really a metaphor from Canadian culture. It means that after we have drunk a case of beer in Canada we gather the empty bottles and return them to the store for the return of the bottle deposit. In that metaphor, Gill says that we must also drink these poems together—both Asians and Canadians—so that we will return from the emptiness of the contrast between Asian and Western cultures and have mutual unity in both our cul-

tures. We must be companions—componera and componero! That is a very good thought on the function of Asians in Canada. They must return from the emptiness of two different cultures and share more beer (and culture) together! Gill's poems in "Returning the Empties" are an affirmation of unity in the cultures of Asia and North America.

Asian, Canadian, Humanitarian and Spiritual

Gill's poems in this collection of her Canadian poetry are Asian, Canadian, humanitarian and spiritual interests. She affirms that an Asian in North America is often paranoid and pathetic, and shrinks from the natives. She says that the Asian notes the differences between Asia and North America, emphasizes those differences in his life and often crawls into a corner and hides from Canadians. The Asian is very oriental, dark haired and dark skinned when notes the differences between Asia and North America. He often hates allegiance in the two cultures and rejects the alliances between them. But Gill's poems also affirm the need we have of union between Asia and North America, and she points out God's will of unity in her poems. Canada is the country for many Asians for the future. It will be a home for alien drifters and refugees as it has always been in past history. New Canadians from Asia will cure each others wounds, dispense justice, and give love to each other, defend themselves from their enemies and help the Canadians, too.

Gill affirmed that she wants to write poetry in Vancouver. She said that Dublin, where she had been, would have been fun, Berlin was also bizarre, London was postcolonial, and New York was obsessional. But she writes in her poems that she is now very happy here in neutral Vancouver and Canada. Life in Vancouver is not ridiculous because it unites all things between Asians and Canadians. This collection of poems is for Asians to build an Asian temple in Canada. After they have built a temple of Asian culture in Canada they will be good people. Poems like this will unite them and Canadians, their culture and their countries.

Gill's poems are also very humanistic and spiritual. She writes:

Don't say that life in North America is ridiculous because in it everything unites all the differences between Asians and Canadians, and the troubled problems fall like old leaves from the tree in the Fall. Suddenly our problems abroad are gone and we sit together in our arm-chairs and wait for happiness together.

She also wrote in one of her poems:

In my class (she was a teacher) 6 of the 32 students are Catholics. The pagans in my class have never heard of God. They always ask me:

"What is God?" And so I explained God each day in my religion class. I follow the text of the Bible. I do that like the Maryknoll Sisters who taught me religion in the Philippines!

Lakshmi Gill's Summary

Lakshmi Gill's own summary of her poems in the Introduction to her collection of "Asian-Canadian Poems" in 1980 is a very good comment on her poetry in Canada. She says that she could not read western literature very well and she was also ashamed and sometimes angry that she spent her life in Western philosophies and ideologies. Now she says she tries to read western writing. My children, she said, are half-Asian and half-Canadian. They are growing up as both Asians and as Canadians. Immigrant poems in Canada are the portraits of culture. The point of view of Asian poems in Canada as an exhortation for Asians to retain their identity against the onslaught of Western literature and language. But like the grinding and polishing of stones, one must emerge as jewels after the battles and the misunderstanding between Asian and Canadian culture.

Lakshmi Gill adds in her commentary on Asian-Canadian poems:

In our long daily discussions, my father used to say that a true poet transcends both history and countries. Asian poets did not always follow that advice of Daddy because they felt that they had to give their children a literary heritage of culture from Asia. But we are here in Canada now and everything should be united. This collection of my poems is not a brick for smashing out the windows in Canada, but for building an Asian temple. After we have built it in our poetry, we will have a blessing and will invite everyone to share it with us. Then we will be able to discuss poems which transcend both time and culture.

It is a very good comment that these are good poems for Asians in Canada! Canada is also Asian!

Life In North America Is Not Ridiculous

Lakshmi Gill's best summary of her Asian poetry in Canada is her poem "Life In North America" which summarizes all her Asian poems in Canada. Her poem says:

Don't say that life in North America is ridiculous. For suddenly everything converges between Asia and North America and the troubles of different cultures fall like leaves from the trees. Immigration abroad is often time for panic. Foolish hands of Asians and Canadians drop

things and their selfish feet often step on them because of the difference in culture. But good nerves are strung tightly around the necks of foreigners in Canada and their modern yoke is work and work together. Suddenly the unity in culture is achieved and we collapse into armchairs to wait for our next society that is both Asian and Canadian. So don't say that life in North America is ridiculous for us Asians.

Gill's poems are very interesting reflections on the relationships of Filipinos and Asians in the western countries abroad. The Asians must really be united with westerners so that they will understand and practice western culture. Because of Asian unity in western culture, westerners will also understand and practice Asian culture. That's good!

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