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Coming Home, by Pantoja-Hidalgo

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(as suggested by Rafael) and deciding to raise her fatherless child, but even here, there is a strong evidence of resignation: "Bahala na ho sa 'kin ang Diyos." It is Margarita, the "villainess," who shows greater control of her life and a determination to remain herself despite marriage and the demands of conventional society. She is defiant when commanded by her husband: "Huwag kang lalabas!" "Doon ka sa kuwarto!" "Umuwi ka na!" She lies and she cheats and she runs away to meet her married lover. In the end she dies in the hands of an equally driven woman (Marina), but not before she has lived her life the way she wanted.

It is perhaps typical of the time the novel was written that the desirable woman still evinced Maria Clara traits, and the assertive woman was not the norm. But then, this was sometime before Lea Bustamante of Lualhati Bautista's *Bata, Bata, Paano Ka Ginawa?* charged onto the literary scene, with her fierce banners proudly raised.

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Coming Home. By Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo. Pasig, Metro Manila: Anvil Publishing, 1997.

After the multi-awarded historical novel *Recuerdos*, Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo returns to what she does best. *Coming Home* is a collection of her magazine articles, newspaper columns, journal entries, and conference papers written within the last few years. The contents are varied: reminiscences, literary criticism, confessions, reviews, an interview with fictionist Gilda Cordero-Fernando, and of course, travel essays, probably Hidalgo's forte.

Nostalgia is the keynote of much of the collection. Hidalgo revisits antique haunts and familiar faces, relives childhood pleasures and adolescent mischief, celebrates old family rituals and social ceremonies, now only half-remembered and even less enjoyed. Her essays are peopled, for the most part, by old teachers, maiden aunts, itinerant friends, priests and nuns, writers and academics, some of them already gone but all lovingly recollected from, and perhaps also mystified by, the magic of memory. There are Sister C- and her mother, "an elegant, old lady with her hair pulled back in a bun, always dressed in a *terno*," Tita Pacita who was a "wonderful storyteller," Miss Molina in "sheer stockings with seams running down the back in clear, straight lines," and Mr. Soli, the "burly ex-G.I." who sold coffee and pancakes.

In her reminiscences, Hidalgo brings to mind, except for the suburban settings in some of them, scenes from Amorsolo's idylls or stills from a well-

made costume drama. In "Boomtown," for example, she describes a family picnic to Tagaytay:

When we came up [from playing], Mama would have a pitcher of fresh *buko* juice waiting for us. We would gulp it down thirstily, rest for a few minutes on the hammock, then drag our bicycles out to the highway. We were not allowed to go beyond the Gardners' cottage to our left, and Mr. Soli's Cliffview Motel to our right. But we often pedalled furiously uphill past the Gardners' to the bend in the road beyond which lay Batangas, or downhill past Mr. Soli's little coffee farm to the "crossing," where the farmers came to peddle *sayote*, *kaimito*, *buko*, bananas, papayas, and a sweet called *bucayo* (73).

Hidalgo is at her best describing places, especially those that no longer are or else have been altered irreversibly. As in a pointillist painting, she lays out the details, piece by seemingly trivial piece, until she assembles, not just a picture but a complete mood. Her description of her family's old house in New Manila—from the dirt road that led to it to the rooms it contained, from the *capiz*-shell windows to the garden of dahlias, chichirica, begonias, bouganvilleae and yellow bells that they overlooked, from the *sari-sari* store across from it to the empty lot turned basketball court beside it—evokes, rather than states, the meaning of "home."

In some instances, the reminiscences come with a Wordsworthian wistfulness, a mourning for the "good old days" that are no more. In "Colegio," for example, Hidalgo takes us back to a world without computers or calculators, videoplayers or CDs, where leisure meant stopping by the Rizal Monument "to watch the changing of the guard." While it was "a naïve and technologically backward place," she admits, "it was a safer one" (58). "*Ubi sunt qui ante nos fuerunt?*" Hidalgo asks. Where are those that were before us?

But these essays are more than sentimental musings about times past. Here and there Hidalgo manages to provoke her readers to rethink the familiar. In "Pampahaba ng Buhay," for example, she describes a typical Sunday in Hong Kong where she and her friends are taking a break. There are Filipino women

spreading out small *banig* or newspapers or making do with the bare pavement; to eat *adobo* out of styrofoam boxes, or read letters from home and Tagalog paperback romances, or show each other the contents of shopping bags, or give each other pedicures, or gossip, or—a bit of a surprise, this—playing scrabble; and looming around them, the palaces of sleek steel and polished glass, the chic boutiques with their discreetly displayed signatures" (24).

It is a subtle commentary on an inequitable social system that forces women to seek menial jobs abroad, and it is also perhaps an ironic self-criticism. Here is, to borrow from another of her essays in the collection, "yet another alienated middle-class woman" (159) identifying with the poor Filipinos in Hong Kong who are certainly not there on a vacation. "My countrywomen," she calls them who probably would not be able to enter the "palaces of sleek steel" as she could.

In "Pinoys Down Under," Hidalgo recounts, without the strident outbursts that can sometimes do more harm than good to the feminist cause, the travails of being a woman. And in "A Gentle Colonization," probably the best essay in the collection, Hidalgo describes the subtle—and hence effective and ineradicable—"colonization of the mind." "Those innocent-looking books invaded virgin ground, staked their claim, and took irrevocable possession. I was captured, and was blissfully happy in my captivity" (13).

When Hidalgo ceases to reminisce, she discusses literature, although even then the memories trickle in. She tells us about her influences and favorite writers (among them, Isak Dinesen, Gilda Cordero-Fernando, Kerima Polotan-Tuvera, Nick Joaquin), her childhood reading and favorite characters (the March girls, Anne of the Green Gables, Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm). More fascinating, however, is her account of how her stories and the novel *Recuerdo* were conceived (in settings that naturally engender moods, memories, and stories) and finally born ("urgently," "intensely"). The nostalgic tone ends when she reviews books. Her incisive comments reveal a keen mind, cutting without being tactless, critical without being destructive. For example, while she acknowledges the creativity behind Dr. Edna Zapanta-Manlapaz's non-traditional biography of Angela Manalang-Gloria, she also remarks that "sometimes, Manlapaz stretches things a bit" (114).

These essays record Hidalgo's thoughts about various topics, but what ultimately emerges as *the* subject is Hidalgo herself, the woman as writer. We are introduced to a sensibility well-informed, sensitive, and sophisticated, but not unblemished by doubts. In "The Story of My Stories," we read the following journal entry:

Something pushes me toward history. Maybe it's a historical novel I wish to write? Not really. More like a "tales my mother told me" kind of thing. But as a novel. A kind of novel. Maybe I can't write a realistic novel. Maybe I can't write a novel. Maybe I can write something like *Woman Warrior*" (160).

In the end, it is this honesty—and humanity—that disarms.

If there is any objection that can be raised to the collection, it is one that the author herself has anticipated. "It must be a kind of vanity to assume that in the future, there will be those who will be curious about what it was like for me and my contemporaries" (x), she writes in the preface. Collections

such as this tend to be egotistical, private, and sometimes a little self-indulgent. Who, after all, is Jimmy Abad, Wendell Capili, Preachy Legasto, Neil Garcia, or indeed, Hidalgo herself, outside the small academic circle that their stories should be worth remembering?

But like Whitman's spider ever launching forth "filament, filament, filament out of itself," writings like Hidalgo's *Coming Home* will catch somewhere. There will be people—and not just other writers in English or academics—as eager to listen to Hidalgo's stories as she is eager to share them, for ultimately, what these essays do is to rouse the desire in us to look back and remember—a desire that can be described only by using the now unfashionable and much-discredited word "universal."

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Women Reading: Feminist Perspectives on Philippine Literary Texts.

By Thelma B. Kintanar. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1992.

This book is a collection of essays on the reading of Philippine literary texts from a feminist consciousness. It tries to present how the texts are interwoven with the reality of what is it to be a woman in the context of Philippine culture and society. The texts span several generations and begin during the times when women were accorded an elevated status in the society, long before the Spanish rule changed this special status. They extend up to the present times, when women writers try to reestablish this formerly enjoyed status, not only in the literary field but most especially in day-to-day living.

The book starts with a journey through the literary history of Philippine literature, both oral or written. As clearly stated in the first chapter, "The writer and her roots," the book tries to establish the seemingly overlooked and forgotten linkage of contemporary women writers to their leaders, their forebears, not only in the less remote past when the Philippines was still under the patriarchal rule of the Spanish colonizers but even earlier, in precolonial times, where women served as priestesses and religious leaders. Therefore, they were the bearers of several forms of literature, particularly oral literature, and possessed roles of prime importance. However, things changed when the Spaniards came.

The importance for the contemporary Filipino women writers and their counterpart in other countries to search for their roots in order to have a sense of tradition is amply emphasized in the book, for it asserts that women have become the result of "what had been done to them, and what little