

Women in Literary Arts, Cebu: Vigilant Voices

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Born out of poet Marjorie Evasco's research showing that there are actually more women creative writers than men but that less than 10 per cent of these women get published much less included in anthologies or taken seriously by the general public, the Women in Literary Arts, Cebu (WILA) gathered strength and breathed forth its voice.

Launched on September 25, 1991 at the University of the Philippines Cebu Audio Visual Room with multi-awarded Cebuano novelist Lina Espina Moore as guest speaker, WILA is composed of 16 Cebu-based female creative writers.

The core group of the organization is composed of Erma Cuizon, chairperson; Erlinda Kintanar-Alburo, vice chairperson; Ma. Paloma Alburo Sandiego, secretary; Ruby Enario, treasurer; and Marlinda Angbetic Tan, press relations officer. Erma Cuizon is the manager of the Philippine Information Agency (Region 7), a member and the secretary-treasurer of PEN, Cebu chapter. Erlinda Kintanar-Alburo is a professor at the University of San Carlos, a research associate of the Cebuano Studies Center, and regional coordinator for literature of the Cultural Center of the Philippines. Ruby Enario works with the United States Consulate in Cebu City. Her poems are widely anthologized and she is a member of PEN, Cebu chapter. Ma. Paloma Alburo Sandiego is with the Humanities Division of the University of the Philippines Cebu College. Marlinda Angbetic Tan manages her own outfit, the M. A. Tan and Associates, is a member of the Cebu Arts Council and edits the Cebu edition of a national magazine.

Eight months after its birthing, Robert Pableo Lim, Cebu-based writer, noted that WILA, "is not going the way that most writers' groups have conducted themselves: that of making some noises during its initial appearance complete with a set of high-fallutin objectives and after the introductory bravado, very little is heard of the group." Citing the focused leadership of Erma Cuizon, he describes the combined strength of WILA writers as considerable.

A year after, scholar and writer Resil B. Mojares devoted his "Footnotes to an Absent Text" column of the *Sun Star Weekend* (September 13, 1992) to "Women Writing" and looks forward to a workshop where he expects much of the excitement to come "from poets like Ester Bandillo or Leticia Suarez (WILA members) who are producing remarkably fresh and original poetry in Cebuano in the context of Cebuano literary tradition."

It is Mojares who articulates:

Gender is an important shaping principle in writing. Yet it is not always visible, masked in part by the common and persistent assumption that, in Philippine society, there is relative "equality of the sexes" and that, hence, gender is not a crucial issue. Yet a look at Cebuano literature shows to us how marginal women seem. While women constitute the bulk of readers for popular literature, there are very few women writers. In an anthology of Cebuano poetry produced by the Cebuano Studies Center four years ago, there were around 78 writers represented. Only four were women. The editors were not guided by any conscious bias, but the field of choice was simply male-dominated. (The situation today is not significantly different. Cebuano writers' organizations remain largely male affairs.) Women (and all she supposedly conjures) is an obsessive theme in Cebuano writing. Yet it is a theme, a representation, almost exclusively produced by men.

It is in this spirit that Mojares looks forward to the Ninth Annual Writers Workshop of Cebu on October 23-25. This year the workshop is organized by WILA and co-sponsored by the Cebuano Studies Center.

Committed to promote the arts in general and Cebuano literature in particular, to publish the works of its members either in book form or in anthologies, to conduct writing workshops and seminars, to hold activities literary in nature such as poetry reading sessions and writers' conferences, to forge linkages with other legitimate writers' organizations here and abroad (preferably with those of other women writers), to participate in writers' conferences conducted by other organizations nationally and internationally, to promote and prioritize the works of its members and to conduct research studies related to the literary arts, WILA has initiated several projects. Since September, 1991 WILA has come up with Children's Hour 1 and 2 during which schoolchildren were presented in a poetry reading session, reading or reciting nursery rhymes and poems written by WILA members themselves. During the UNESCO sponsored regional literary festival, WILA members were the resource persons and facilitator. Ongoing is a book project on Filipino children's literature, two creative writing workshops for WILA and non-WILA members and poetry readings.

For its first anniversary celebration, an afternoon of poetry reading was held at the Lincoln Center, Cebu. WILA members read each other's poems in English and Cebuano. Guest readers included WILA friends while a trio of women, Urduja Santos (WILA member) at the violin, Brigitte Rathert at the flute and Mila Nadala at the piano interpreted Sonata in C Minor by Johann Joachim Quantz. A special reading was done by husband and wife tandem Rene Alburo and Linda Kintanar. Choral reading by WILA members of "Rich Woman, Poor Woman" was accompanied by a dance interpretation by Mary Rose Villacastin.

Hoping to reach the golden age of 50 (the registration papers with the Securities and Exchange Commission reveal this intention) WILA has more than enough time to tell its stories, to decide whether to do away with or to carry well the seemingly elitist orientation associated with it, to search for and define woman-ness. It has more than enough time to give voice to women's needs and aspirations now cautiously, now prudently, but always with vigor. WILA cannot afford to be silent, for many are listening and more are willing to listen.