

## Review

### **The Paradox Is the Message *Agwat- Hilom* (NCLA-NCCA, 2020)**

**By Niles Jordan Breis, M.A.**

Much has been said about COVID narratives and other accompanying postulations. The topic, in fact, is a tiresome one, if not almost a trite concern for many since there has been a surge of anthologies, books, and other similar discourses or encounters solely on the pandemic. It should be noted, for instance, that in UP Diliman alone, more than five literary journals were devoted to COVID-related experiences and launched online while UP Manila/UP-PGH had its own as initiated by some writer-doctors. Even the Cultural Center of the Philippines opted to dedicate one of the *Ani* volumes to the lockdown tropes.

What makes *Agwat-Hilom* a cut above the rest?

For one, the list of contributors is highly selective, with the writers well-recommended by the regional coordinators who are literary artists themselves. The latter are familiar with the areas as designated and have kept themselves abreast with some of the best writers of the regions. Furthermore, the book is significantly inclusive, encompassing different genres and amplified by the use of diverse languages and their corresponding translations. As to trope range, the inclinations are as open as the universality of the topic at hand, and each work attempts to go beyond topicality. The real challenge, strictly, is in how a particular fiction could transcend, for example, the mere here-and-now of all pandemic-related tangibles relative to proximate lockdown restrictions. In many pieces included here, such transcendence may point to an admission of something powerful though not necessarily within the power of introspection or the fluency of silent reflection.

The primacy of paradox within the anthology and all the attendant stirrings present in the featured works seem to be a given and in entirety, there is a more pronounced persistence to emphasize the value of literary creation amid the pandemic. In the prefatory of Prof. Rolando Tolentino, such creation would always be essential and, in addition, he emphasized that writers must have clear assertions even against the false claims of the State surrounding COVID narratives. There is no dearth of pandemic materials, after all, and the anthology came out with 40 works in four genres, covering the clusters from NCR, Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao. All told, the pervading ruminative stream in almost all works, notably in essays and short stories, is the propensity towards the open-endedness of uncertainty as a notion. Yet still, such a condition bounces back on the gradient of the apparent despair-hope interlock as expressed in the Foreword of the NCCA Chair Nick Lizaso: “To unbind ourselves and to heal our souls.”

The paradox of *Agwat-Hilom* as distancing-healing also goes beyond the sheer binary of things. It is the prevailing message, and it tends to be back at the core, seeing the person more inwardly as if to focus on the fact that distance refers not only to others but to the self as well. It is no wonder that for some writers, a pandemic-centered work, long or short, appears largely cathartic, if not a plain consolation. But then again, real or imagined, most of the stories here are traversals and chronicles on/of dread in a certainly dangerous time to survive. In the book’s Introduction, NCLA Head Julieta Mallari does another echoing of optimism, however:

Finally, *Agwat-Hilom* is like a frame put around a particular scene in 2020: a spectacle of surreal colors of pain and ominous shadows of suffering when viewed closely. And “without distance, this closeness cannot cure.” However, through the lens of literature, particularly with the calm reassurance of words that restore courage and hope, distance may be created, and the scene can have a dramatic transformation: healing is communicated afresh.