

A PEEK BEHIND THE WALLS

MARICRIS D. MARTIN

The education and upbringing of young women in convent schools has long been shrouded in mystery and an unmistakable air of exclusivity. Pop culture (both local and foreign) has been propagating clichés and stereotypical depictions of convent-bred girls, yet there hasn't been an outright confirmation (or denial) of such depictions from the women themselves—at least, not until 2005 when Anvil Publishing came out with *Behind the Walls: Life of Convent Girls*, edited by Cecilia Manguerra Brainard and Marily Ysip Orosa.

The book contains 29 essays by as many women who were educated in exclusive, convent-run institutions at a certain period of their lives. Most of these institutions are based in Manila, although a few are found in other regions of the country such as Mindoro, Batangas, Bicol, and Cebu. The essays cover a period of 70 years and are arranged in chronological order, from pre-war years to the 1990s.

This paper aims to answer the question: How do the autobiographical narratives in *Behind the Walls: Life of Convent Girls* represent convent-schooling as a homogenized female experience that transcends geographical location and time? Do these autobiographical narratives succeed or fall short in deterritorializing such experience?

Cecilia Manguerra Brainard's introduction to the book traces the history of convent schools in the Philippines, saying that the nuns from Europe came along shortly after the Spanish

lay claim to the country in the 1600s. They established convent schools for girls such as the College of Santa Catalina, Santa Rita Academy, College of Santa Isabel, and College of Concordia. The exclusive schools that are more familiar to us today were established later, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries – Assumption College in 1892, St. Paul’s College in 1904, and St. Scholastica’s College in 1906 (Brainard and Orosa, 2005, vii).

According to Brainard, “These schools developed the reputation of providing excellent academic training as well as proper training in etiquette and manners, an idea that persisted even when the Philippine public school system was beefed up at the turn of the century with American rule” (Brainard and Orosa, vii). Academic training is something to be found in all educational institutions. It is the “proper training in etiquette and manners” that sets convent schools apart from the rest. The blurb written by Felie Prudente Sta. Maria puts it best: “The allure of exclusivism lives on in the desire to join and perpetuate the *colegiala* network.”

Writer and columnist Krip Yuson comments on the contribution of the book to Philippine Literature:

This collection of essays has long been overdue, and should fit very nicely into that special niche of Filipiniana that uncovers the mystique behind a Filipina. What influence and reach these ‘colegialas’ or ‘convent-bred’ ladies have had, and continue to exercise, on the Philippine societal landscape! Beyond the elitist tradition of education under foreign nuns and their successors is that continuum of poise and grace, good manners and right conduct, knowledge and moral strength that has come to characterize our women of substance (blurb on outside back cover of *Behind the Walls*).

He also cites the fact that the country’s two female presidents were both educated in convent schools to attest to the socio-political reach of these institutions.

The 29 essays in the book are called "stories", "memories", and "recollections". The book is a collection of women's stories or what may be called "herstories". In explaining the term "herstory", Eleanor Sarah Reposar (2005) quotes Amelou Reyes:

More than just a clever reworking of 'history' and its implication of male dominance (as His Story), Herstory is already gaining ground "as an evolving methodology [that] can ... guarantee women's place, not only in the past but also for the future". It is also "the feminist reconstruction of history that can serve to transform gender relations from domination/subordination to equality/equity and empowerment" (Reyes, 28; quoted on Resposar, 159).

In line with this development, the past decades have seen a rise in the production of literary texts among women. The fact that there has been a shift in feminist criticism from the study of the female characters in male writing to the study of female writing itself over the past three decades indicates that there is a healthy pool of woman writing worthy to be subjected to criticism. However, in her Editor's Preface in *Pinay* (2000), Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo writes that:

Perhaps it is foolish to hope that Filipino literary scholars and critics should focus on women's writing in what is still a marginalized genre, when they have only begun to pay attention to mainstream women's writing, like fiction and poetry. Nevertheless, one hopes that anthologies such as this one will help to call attention to the lack, and perhaps initiate critical discussion in the field (xxiii).

The "marginalized genre" she refers to is that of *autobiographical narratives* – a genre which has a relatively short history in Philippine literature, and one that largely, if not totally embodies the essence of "herstory."

Reposar asserts that the stories in Rosario Cruz Lucero's *Herstory* are indeed, excellent examples of "herstories" in that they engage in what Toni Morrison and bell hooks call *re-memory* or "the politicization of memory (Drake) and memory, (Drake,65) 'grounded in a recuperated relation to the historical' (Foreman, 369)" (Drake and Foreman quoted in Reposar, 160).

In 1994, Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo's dissertation in Comparative Literature (DECL, CAL, UP Diliman) was published by the Ateneo de Manila University Press. *Filipino Woman Writing: Home and Exile in the Autobiographical Narratives of Ten Writers* is a study of autobiographical works (memoirs, personal reflections, excerpts from diaries, journals, or full-length autobiographies) of women writers who were born between 1904 and 1944. These are: Paula Carolina Malay, Maria Luna Lopez, Carmen Guerrero Nakpil, Kerima Polotan Tuvera, Barbara Gonzales, Cecilia Manguerra Brainard, Sylvia Mayuga, Estrella Alfon, Rosario Garcellano, and Gilda Cordero Fernando. This work is of significant importance in feminist literary criticism in the Philippines not only for its choice of primary texts, but for giving birth to the term "autobiographical narratives".

The categorization of women's writing as "herstories" and "autobiographical narratives" has become necessary since autobiographical narratives are not merely a reporting of events or a recounting of events in a person's life, but something that is based on a mesh of memory and imagination:

They no longer believe that autobiography can offer a faithful and unmediated reconstruction of a historically verifiable past; instead it expresses the play of the autobiographical act itself, in which the materials of the past are shaped by memory and imagination to serve the needs of present consciousness. Autobiography in our time is increasingly understood as both an act of memory and an act of imagination. (Eakin, 1985; cited by Hidalgo, 3).

More importantly, there has been a vital shift of focus in the process of coming up with an autobiographical narrative:

Janet Gunn shifts attention from the writer to the reader of autobiography, and proposes an alternative to classical autobiography theory that starts not from "the private act of self writing" but from "the cultural act of self reading." The "reader" here is both the autobiographer who is, in effect, "reading" his or her life, and the reader of the autobiographical text who, in the encounter with the text, is rereading his or her own life. (Gunn, 1982, 90; cited by Hidalgo,3).

Hidalgo bemoans the lack of criticism of this kind of woman writing (or of woman writing as a whole); although, twenty years before this, Elaine Showalter (1979) had already coined the term "gynocritics" to address such lack:

In contrast to this angry or loving fixation on male literature, the programme of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories. Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition, and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture (172).

The study of autobiographical narratives undeniably falls under gynocritics since it focuses "on the newly visible world of female culture" – it provides a clear and honest view of what has long been silenced and tucked in the pockets of the private sphere: the female experience(s). The female culture, if not the female or the woman herself, is indeed, "newly visible", considering that for a very long time, women have been subjected to various kinds of marginalization and misrepresentation. In fact, Gayatri

Charavorty Spivak's statement that "the sub-altern cannot speak" (Bahri, 199) is a situation that feminists have yet to change. Spivak further states that the "historically muted subject of the subaltern woman... was inevitably consigned to being either misunderstood or misrepresented through the self-interest of those with the power to represent" (Bahri, 199).

According to Deepika Bahri, "feminist theory and postcolonial theory are occupied with similar questions of representation, voice, marginalization, and the relation between politics and literature" (201). In postcolonial studies, the subaltern is also known as the "other", which occupies a peripheral role in Western modes of discourse. One of the germinal texts in postcolonial studies is Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which is defined as "a mode of discourse by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period" (Patajo-Legasto, 3; quoting Said, 2-3).

Priscelina Patajo-Legasto considers Orientalism as a form of "world-ing" or "other-ing", since it "refers to forms of discourse produced by Western, logocentric, binary frames" that serve to legitimize the hegemonic role of the colonizers over the colonized people (4). Postcolonial discourses, which are aimed at a critical and analytical response to such forms of "world-ing" and "other-ing", "include 'imaginative' or 'creative' and theoretical and/or critical writings that seek to establish alternative objects of knowledge in cultural studies or that experiment with non-mainstream literary modes and rhetorical strategies" (8).

Given this, Patajo-Legasto asserts that postcolonial studies go beyond the limits of geographical and temporal locations and become a matter of positionality:

From this deterritorialized subject-location, the "others" are attempting to make whole their fractured/deformed identities in order to create new identities and modes of existence outside

universalizing / homogenizing Eurocentric perspectives (8).

The concept of "deterritorialization" is defined by Karen Kaplan as the "displacement of identities, persons and meanings that is endemic to the postmodern world system" (Kaplan, 188). As a form of defamiliarization, it "enables imagination, even as it produces alienation, 'to express another potential community, to force the means for another consciousness and another sensibility'" (Kaplan).

According to Deepika Bahri, "a postcolonial feminist perspective requires that one learn to read literary representations of women with attention to subject and medium of representation" (200). Women have been and still are the subaltern in both feminist and postcolonial discourses. This position of subalterity nevertheless allows us to "deterritorialize" and actively evaluate our stance. In literature for instance, autobiographical narratives are considered to be an "effective medium for marginalized, silenced peoples" (Pantoja-Hidalgo, 86), thereby being a useful tool in deterritorialization. Pantoja-Hidalgo also quotes Linda Andersen:

The woman who attempts to write herself is engaged by the nature of the activity itself in re-writing the stories that exist about her, since by seeking to publicize herself, she is violating an important cultural construction of her femininity as passive or hidden. She is resisting or changing what is known about her. Autobiography may self-consciously exist for her as an *alternative identification* (86, emphasis mine) (quoted in Hidalgo, 86)

Thus, autobiography or autobiographical narratives, becomes an issue of representation. According to Edward Said:

Those with the power to represent and describe others clearly control how these others will be

seen.... Representation is always fictional or partial because it must imaginatively construct its constituency (as a portrait or a "fiction") and because it can inadvertently usurp the space of those who are incapable of representing themselves (quoted by Bahri, 205).

Autobiographical narratives by women writers, being written by and about these writers themselves, thus serve as "protest and means of empowerment" (Pantoja Hidalgo, 86) since it enables women to finally wield the power to present and represent themselves in the way they desire. Moreover, as earlier stated by Reyes, such narratives (as embodiments of "herstory") "guarantee women's place, not only in the past but also for the future" (Reyes cited in Reposar, 159).

The experiences of the 29 writers in *Behind the Walls* are strikingly similar, in spite of the differences in educational institution, geographical location, and time. Manguerra Brainard ascribes this to the timelessness of a convent school education:

...the articles have a timeless quality—that is, they describe school lives that were similar regardless of the political and social circumstances of the time. Major events had occurred in the Philippines during this time, the highlights being World War II, the Marcos regime, and the EDSA Revolution. But except for a few, most of the articles describe a life of order and discipline, of religion, of books, of gentility, of starched uniforms and nuns' headdresses, of mild pranks, of fears, of insecurities—light as well as dark experiences shared by other convent-school graduates from other places in the world and even from other times (viii).

These experiences are characterized mainly by nostalgia, being subjected to rigid rules, being conditioned to put utmost value on virtue, and a sense of pride. The writers all came from nine

convent schools and their regional campuses – College of the Holy Spirit (formerly known as Holy Ghost College, and its campus in Calapan, Mindoro Oriental called Holy Infant Academy), Assumption College, St. Scholastica’s College, St. Theresa’s College (Manila, Quezon City, and Cebu), St. Paul’s College, Maryknoll College, St. Catherine’s School (Cebu), St. Agnes Academy (Sorsogon), and St. Bridget’s College (Batangas).

The nationality of nuns running the convent schools is somehow considered as a factor in how they run their schools:

Did the nuns’ nationality strongly influence our upbringing? *Colegialas* today agree that French and Spanish nuns stressed obedience and proper conduct in their students; the Americans, personal responsibility and social consciousness; German sisters emphasized order, discipline, and dependability; and the Belgians, intellectual savvy. Despite the wide spectrum of teaching styles among the schools, *colegialas* had many things in common—memorized prayers and lots of rules. (76)

But then, this idea isn’t expressed by many of the writers. The homogeneity of their experiences is practically absolute in their stories.

The feel of nostalgia is heavy in many of the texts. Milagros Delgado Enage says “Happiness is talking about my *colegiala* days and Holy Ghost College. One invokes the other” (4). This feeling is evidently stronger in women who wrote about their convent school experiences before the war. A tinge of lamentation over how much the times have changed is also noticeable in these texts. A few examples are Delgado Enage’s pronouncements:

I belonged to the so-called gentler era, the first half of the twentieth century when “knighthood was in flower.” Girls dressed as girls; boys behaved as boys. Girls were offered seats on the bus; they were wooed and courted, and not the other way

around. They knew when to speak and when to be silent, a feminine sensibility that kept the men mystified and yearning.... On the other hand, men who kept their cool, their good looks and fine manners held women entranced and breathless. They were gallant and romantic because women were *mahinhin* (modest), gentle, noble, and feminine, possessing virtues that drew forth men's utmost respect and deference and kept them at a distance. Yes, woman was hoisted on a pedestal! An obeisance lost to the present generation that is suffering from an epidemic decline in public civility. (5)

Lourdes Busuego Pablo has a similar opinion of those times: "Those were indeed days of grace and civility, a true elegance of spirit, a strong sense of duty and responsibility which always accompany privilege" (24).

The rigidity of rules imposed by venerable (and often formidable) nuns is something shared by all women in the book. Maida Paulin Antigua points out the common thread that binds convent schooling to a Catholic upbringing in this country – "They [are] both governed by the rules of threat and fear of retribution and dire punishment" (100). Norma Celis-Sawitz even claims that "The importance of self-control, sacrifice, conscience was impressed on us ad nauseum" (162) while Penelope Villarica Flores quotes her school's Mother Superior saying "You get to exhibit the etiquette that goes with privilege. Strict discipline, structured tasks, and complete obedience to the rules: that's the only way to develop character" (39).

These rules range from something as simple as a school uniform (and a very specific way of wearing it) to more serious matters such as being prohibited from reading particular books and taking up certain sports: "We were free to read anything except a few books which were banned because either the nuns or the Board of Censors considered them too erotic (e.g., D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*) or too subversive (e.g., Rizal's

Noli and Fili" (32); "Several girls were, in fact, taking ballet lessons in secret for fear of being expelled from the school. The nuns said that their hymens would get broken when they did the "split." By the same token, horseback riding was likewise prohibited" (58).

There was a common convent-school disdain for non-religious schools, particularly the "godless" UP:

Going to non-Catholic schools in the United States—or even the University of the Philippines—for college was not something *colegialas* were supposed to do, lest we become atheists, communists, rebels, or fallen women (77); They did not let me take Journalism at the University of the Philippines because they suspected that there I would turn activist at the snap of a finger. Instead they sent me to this harmless convent school on the far, far end, where fine, well-bred young gentlemen went to look for their future wives (189).

Such brand of discipline seems to incite two opposite reactions – approval and rebellion. On the one hand, many of these women seem glad to have been subjected to it: "I believe I was born to study in a convent school.... I liked the order, the structure, the discipline, the spiritual motivation that ruled my life there" (20); "During school reunions in the United States, we would talk about how our life of order and discipline had shaped and continue to shape our individual lives" (32). On the other hand, quite a few share their stories of small rebellions:

Most of us stayed away from drugs for the inherent reason that it was not our nature to give up control of our lives. Most of us did try alcohol and tobacco. We teased our hair, plucked our eyebrows, painted our face, shaved our legs, wore miniskirts, crossed our knees while smoking Salem cigarettes and sipping a glass of wine, like eager young warriors ready for combat (90).

The emphasis on virtue is also something shared by all of the writers regardless of which school they attended: "To be Mary-like, and therefore ladylike, was of supreme importance in my school. Order, neatness, modesty (we did not cross our legs nor chew gum), simplicity, hard work, goodness, spirit of service were to be done to perfection" (7); "Purity was a virtue that we were to guard day and night, not that temptations lurked in every corner, for encounters with the opposite sex were severely limited" (30).

Non-adherence to the rules that are deemed to protect one's virtue, especially on the ones that specifically refer to clothing, has actually resulted in expulsion – "I wish I had protested the expulsion of a college classmate who wore at her grand debut an evening gown with the offending spaghetti straps" (30). This emphasis on virtue is something the nuns were adamant about, despite the dire changes that swept the country. After the war, for instance, they still insisted on dresses with sleeves for the girls to which one of the writers replied, "Mother, if she puts sleeves on my dresses, my brother will not have a shirt!" (15-16)

A strong sense of pride for being the "select few" is also a common trait in the texts:

Well, I'd like to believe that the Holy Ghost alumna is a mature, responsible, and well-rounded individual, as a result of a healthy integration of discipline between school and home. She can look back with pride, nostalgia, and gratitude to her alma mater's masterful handling of her development as a total woman (5).

"You are the *crème de la crème*," one of the nuns used to drum into our heads. We were always led to believe that we would be leaders, role models, and we were expected to serve our communities one day" (110).

Along with this sense of pride came a certain degree of disenchantment: "We were let out of the convent walls with the wild illusion that we were the best, the cream of the crop, only to discover with much shock, the many others who were stronger, brighter, and more competent" (143). Still, for others, an awakening of consciousness that there are bigger things beyond the walls of the convent schools did come: "Perhaps it was because of this blissfully ignorant and cocoon-like existence that the Teresiana *colegiala* of the fifties and the sixties was so vulnerable. For her, life's problems were magnified a hundredfold" (67).

Many were also aware of the existence of social classes, in spite of their "cocoon-like existence":

There is a certain aura to the image of a *colegiala*. She is delicate, refined, cultured, reserved, and well-mannered, quite separate and distinct from the loud, boisterous, and unruly public school students. In Philippine society, the *colegiala* belongs to the privileged upper class families because going to a *college* costs a lot of money. It is ironic that while the religious orders profess the vow of poverty, their mission to educate caters to the rich (153).

One went as far as participating in activist work: "It was a double life, shuttling from the typical degenerate petty bourgeois life (as my collective then referred to it) when with my regular friends and dorm mates, to the other supposedly noble, committed life of the activist" (193).

Another developed notions of nationalism from her family which she also hoped to find in school, but wasn't able to:

Under their tutelage, we became better Catholics, in thought, word, and deed. But although they instructed us to love God above all and to love our neighbors as we loved ourselves, the nuns could not teach us how to be proud of being

Filipinos, nor how to love the Philippines more than ourselves and our own selfish interests. Fortunately, many of us learnt that at home (85).

The telling of these women's experiences within the convent-school walls poses potentialities of deterritorialization. In contrast to simply being the subject of representation, they are finally able "to express another potential community, to force the means for another consciousness and another sensibility" (Kaplan, 1987, 188). In these narratives, they speak of their experiences, speak of their thoughts and feelings that they have not been able to publicize when they were still in the confines of their convent schools.

Women who attended convent-schools have been inherently displaced in the sense that they were put under the care and jurisdiction of (mostly foreign) nuns who strictly adhered to the basic rules of the religious – rigid training in academic as well as "proper training in etiquette and manners" – which is something that is not experienced by the vast majority. The homogeneity and almost identical quality of these women's experiences within the convent-school walls (in spite of the different religious orders that run them, and the various locations they were in) says much about how these women's experiences as well as thoughts were shaped by the training they had in their most impressionable years. European notions of modesty and gentility have been deeply inculcated in them, except for a few who managed to break free of their "cocoon-like existence".

The book had the potential of territorializing a female experience that apparently encompasses decades as well as regional divides, but it stops there. The nostalgia and sense of pride expressed by the majority of writers in the book even appears to strengthen these women's displacement and otherness. They delight in being an unattainable, not completely understandable lot who are entirely different from the rest. In telling their stories, they are not "creating new identities and modes of existence outside universalizing/homogenizing Eurocentric perspectives" (Patajo Legasto, 8), but are in fact

strengthening such perspectives. Even the few who experienced a social awakening fell short of deterritorialization since mere awareness is still a step short of actually acting on it.

It is therefore not surprising that one of them spoke of contradictions in the process – “When we remember life within the convent walls, we speak of contradictions—those seats of error but of innocence, of mistaken views yet of good intentions, of ignorance but of devotion, of torment short of redemption” (50).

NOTE

This essay was written for Professor Priscelina Patajo-Legasto's CL 122 class (Critical Approaches to Literature II) Second Semester, 2010-2011.

WORKS CITED

- Bahri, Deepika. “Feminism in/and post colonialism.” *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*. Edited by Neil Lazarus. UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004. pp. 199-220.
- Drake, Jennifer. “Looting American Culture: Bharati Mukhenjee's Immigrant Narratives.” *Contemporary Literature*. 40 (Spring 1999): 61-84.
- Foreman, P. Gabrielle. “Past-On Stories: History and the Magically Real, Morrison and Allende On Call.” *Feminist Studies* 18 (1992): 369-380.
- Kaplan, Caren. “Deterritorializations: The Rewriting of Home and Exile” In *Cultural Critique*, 6 (Spring 1987): 187-198.
- Manguerra Brainard, Cecilia and Marily Ysip Orosa, Eds. *Behind the Walls: Life of Convent Girls*. Manila: Anvil Publishing, Inc., 2005.
- Pantoja Hidalgo, Cristina. *Filipino Woman Writing: Home and Exile in the Autobiographical Narratives of Ten Writers*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1994.

- Pantoja Hidalgo, Cristina. "Home and Exile in the Autobiographical Narratives of Filipino Women Writers." In *Philippine Postcolonial Studies*. Q.C. U.P. Press, 2004. pp. 85-107. Second Edition. pp. 82-104.
- Patajo-Legasto, Priscelina. "Introduction: Discourses of 'Wording' and Philippine Postcolonial Studies." *Philippine Postcolonial Studies*. Edited by Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo and Priscelina Patajo Legasto. Q.C.: U.P. Press, 2004. pp. 1-17. Second Edition.
- Reposar, Eleanor Sarah. "Herstory and Rememory: Reinscribing the Woman in History in the Fiction of Rosario Cruz Lucero." *Diliman Review* 52. 1-4 (2005): 127-172.
- Reyes, Amelou B. "Herstory in Gender Mainstreaming." *Herstories: A Global Movement: Proceeding of the International Congress on Women's Role in History and nation Building (Evolving Women Centered Paradigms through Herstories for the 21st Century)*. Manila: National Centennial Commission-Women Sector and The Philippine Women's University Development Institute for Women in Asia Pacific. 1999.
- Showalter, Elaine. "Towards a Feminist Poetics". *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Modernism Through Structuralism*. Robert Con Davis. Ed. New York: Longman, 1986.