

**“WE ARE LEARNING TO OVERCOME”
THE TRANSFORMATION AND SOCIAL PRAXIS
IN THE LIFE AND POEMS OF LORENA BARROS**

MARY GRACE R. CONCEPCION

Lorena Morelos Barros was born on March 18, 1948 to Romeo Barros and Alicia Morelos, who met in Baguio. Some accounts say that Romeo Barros died of a heart attack when Lorena was four months old (Bernardo 7), while others say that Alicia Morelos rejected him and returned to Manila when Lorena was six months old (Gomez 44). Lorena studied at the St. Joseph’s College during her elementary years, at the Far Eastern University during her high school years, and graduated from the University of the Philippines with a degree in Anthropology, *cum laude*, on April 11, 1970 (Gomez 47-58; Bernardo 20). She founded MAKIBAKA (Malayang Kilusan ng Bagong Kababaihan), an organization that advances the women’s causes within the ND (National Democratic) movement (Gomez 60-61). When Marcos declared martial law in 1972, she went underground, was captured, and detained at the Ipil Rehabilitation Center. She escaped, went to the countryside, and was killed during a military ambush in March 1974 (66-74). She was 28 years old (Gomez 78-79).

This paper aims to analyze the poems of Lorena Barros written from 1966 to 1974, which encompasses her days as a student at the University of the Philippines until her involvement in the underground movement. The framework for this study is materialist feminism, which focuses on gender construction in ideology. The methodology for this study is taken from Michele Barrett’s essay “Ideology and the cultural production of gender” (1985), which focuses on how gender ideology is formed through the production of the literary text, as well as its consumption and representation. The category of production analyzes the material conditions of the women writers and how these influence their form, style, and outlook, as well as the production of the text in

social and literary institutions. The category of consumption looks into the reception and valuation of the literary text, while the category of representation studies the portrayal of gender ideology within the text (Barrett 77-79). This paper aims to discuss the images of oppression and liberation in the poems of Lorena Barros in relation to her class origins, educational background, and organizational affiliations, as well as the discourse of the National Democratic movement and the women's movement the 1970s.

Lorena Barros was seen as a symbol of exemplary strength and courage among women, both within the ND movement and outside it (Gomez 79; Santiago 151). Her greatest contribution to the ND movement is her establishment of MAKIBAKA, for which she was the founding chair. Judy Taguiwalo writes in "Marching Under the Red and Purple Banner: Notes on the Contemporary Women's Movement in the Philippines" (1993) that the founding of MAKIBAKA in the 1970s was significant during that period for it helped articulate the woman question within the broader framework of national and class oppression. In addition, it helped organize women within the ranks of revolutionary forces (36-39).

While Lorena Barros is known as a revolutionary fighter and martyr, she is also known as a poet. She was a writer for the *Philippine Collegian*, a member of the then-elitist UP Writer's Club, and a fellow of the Iloilo writer's workshop. Her poems have been published not only in underground publications, such as *Ulos* (1973), and anthologies of protest/revolutionary writings, such as *Kamao* (1987), *Mga Tula ng Rebolusyong Pilipino* (1982), *Muog* (1998), but also in collections of Philippine women's writings in English, notably *Sarilaya* (1989), and Lilia Quindoza Santiago's *In the Name of the Mother* (2002).

Unfortunately, only a few of her poems have been widely circulated. The most published poem is "*Sampaguita*," followed by "*Ipil is harder to bear*" and "*Yesterday I had a Talk*" (all of which appeared in *Kamao*, *Mga Tula ng Rebolusyong Pilipino*, and *In the Name of the Mother*).

Neither did she publish an extensive collection of her poetry. Instead her poems are scattered in the literary pages of the *Philippine Collegian* and some anthologies. She may have written more, but the tumultuous times of the Martial Law period may have caused her poetry to be lost, destroyed, or burned for security reasons (Santiago 150).

According to a personal correspondence with Alex Dacanay and an article by Ramon M. Bernardo entitled "Lorena Barros: *Walang-Kamatayang Alamat ng Isang Makasaysayang Dekada*" (1986), those that have been saved by her mother and sisters were washed away when her family's house in Muntinlupa was flooded. In addition, Barros did not keep a spare copy of her poems since she was not "posterity conscious" (Bernardo 18). After her death, members of the MAKIBAKA collected her poems, letters, articles, and biography for a book (Bernardo 24), which remains unpublished. This book was lost when the Center of Women's Resources (CWR) relocated their office. Even with the efforts of Prof. Judy Taguiwalo and myself, the book could not be found and the CWR did not keep a duplicate copy. Given these circumstances, I have exhausted all possible means in trying to recover the poems of Lorena Barros and found only those published in the *Philippine Collegian* (issues dated from 1966-1969) and in various anthologies listed above.

Nonetheless, her life has been written about countless times. Her biography written by Maita Gomez is included in the book *Six Young Filipino Martyrs*, which was published by Anvil in 1997 (second printing, 2000). The article "Lorena Barros: *Walang-Kamatayang Alamat ng isang Makasaysayang Dekada*" by Ramon Bernardo appeared in the 1986 issue of the *Diliman Review* while the *Philippine Collegian* included her biography, entitled "Lorena Barros: Woman Warrior" as part of its Young Martyrs Series in 1997. In addition, articles on student activism and the Philippine women's movement mentioned her name and gave details of her life.