

Framing the revolution: Mila Aguilar's poetry of transformation in *Journey: An Autobiography in Verse (1964-1995)*

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ABSTRACT

For more than three decades, Mila Aguilar has been writing and publishing poetry in various stages of her life: as a young college student, a university instructor, an underground cadre (as Clarita Roja), a political prisoner, and a born-again Christian. While these poems may have been written and published at the moment, her poetry collection *Journey: An Autobiography in Verse (1964-1995)* is a definitive anthology of her works spanning these 31 years. This book not only gathers her poems but also maps her transformation particularly from an underground cadre to a born-again Christian. In this article, I examine the following: 1.) the paratextual markers that invite the readers to approach her work autobiographically, and 2.) the poetic form and structure to show how the revolution frames Aguilar's life and how she frames the revolution in her poetry. Through this, I trace how her poems mark her early engagements and later departures from the National Democratic movement, and how her poems after her Christian conversion give a religious solution to the country's social problems.

Keywords: Mila Aguilar, revolutionary poetry, women's writing, National Democratic Revolution, Philippine literature

Born in Iloilo in 1949, Mila D. Aguilar studied English and Humanities in the University of the Philippines in the 1960s during the gestation of the militant mass movement. Immediately after graduation, she taught in UP while writing for the *Graphic* magazine from 1969 to 1971. She was assigned to cover the youth and student movement, which took her to various pickets and demonstrations. She joined the National Democratic (ND) movement in 1971 and went underground for 13 years. She assumed top positions such as chairperson of the Regional United Front Commission of Mindanao and head of the National United Front Commission of the Communist Party of the Philippines. Part of her revolutionary duties was to organize the middle forces by overseeing the mass movements and doing propaganda work. Her activities were mainly urban-based, although she periodically went up the mountains for meetings and assessments (author's notes in *Journey*; Maniquis, 1994, p. 506; Aguilar, "Poet, teacher, warrior").

Aguilar resigned from the party in 1983 when she got an unfavorable response from the Central Committee for a leaflet that she wrote expressing sympathy for Ninoy Aquino, who was then assassinated. When she was assistant director at St. Joseph's College, she was arrested in 1984 and later released after the EDSA uprising in 1986 (Maniquis, 1994, p. 506; Aguilar, "Poet, teacher, warrior"). She is a born-again Christian and a supporter of Bro. Eddie Villanueva—who was also an activist turned born-again Christian—in the 2004 presidential elections. Currently, she is vocal of the Rodrigo Duterte administration, and airs her criticisms against the War on Drugs and the extrajudicial killings in demonstrations and social media. She is also active in the campaign against the historical revisionism of the Marcos dictatorship.

Since her student years at the University of the Philippines, Aguilar has been writing poetry, which were published in the *Philippine Collegian*, *Philippines Free Press*, *Sunday Times Magazine* and *Graphic*. During the dictatorship, Aguilar wrote using the nom de guerre Clarita Roja, who was "the best known poet in the underground movement during the Marcos Regime" (Santiago, 2002, p. 151). Her works appeared clandestinely in underground newspapers. Her prison poetry was published in the collection *Why Cage Pigeons?* by the Free Mila D. Aguilar Committee, which was also a campaign to stop political repression and to free political prisoners like her. Through the lobbying efforts of her sister, Delia Aguilar in the United States, her political detention became a celebrated case overseas. The Women of Color Press, a feminist publication house based in New York, published two editions of her poetry in 1984 and in 1987, with an Introduction by Audre Lorde (Maniquis, 1994, p. 507).

Though these poems may be written and published in different decades, the anthologizing of Aguilar's poetry invites one to read her works autobiographically. The titles of Mila D. Aguilar's poetry collections explicitly define the autobiographical nature of her writing: *Journey: An Autobiography in Verse (1964-1995)* and *Chronicle of a Life Foretold: 110 Poems (1996-2004)*. She also wrote an autobiographical novel *The Nine Deaths of M*. These two poetry collections, which were anthologized later, characterized her life story. As Aguilar has written in "Writing Underground: A Personal Account":

The titles Journey, Chronicle, Autobiography, and Life, are apt. Though some of my poems may be able to stand alone, they hang together more as a continuing life story, an endless voyage of transformation, an interminable search for meaning and perfection. That is why I have made it a point, since putting together *Journey* — without initially knowing it — to put a date on each and every one of my poems. For they constitute a testimony of my dialectic with my nation and my Maker, that dialectic leading to the now foreseeable establishment of the Kingdom of God.

Personal transformation is the major theme of her life story. She elaborates this at length in her autobiographical novel that is written as a confessional. The teaser in the Amazon webpage for the *Nine Deaths of M* reads: "A spoiled youngest daughter, [Aguilar] plunges headlong into the Philippine underground in the darkest years of martial law under the Marcos dictatorship. Then she discovers God."

In this article, I approach Aguilar's body of works autobiographically, given that she indicates it as such. First, I briefly identify the paratexts that designate the explicit autobiographical theme of Aguilar's poetry collection. Second, I read Aguilar's poems by mapping how the revolution frames Aguilar's life and how she frames the revolution in her poetry. The evolution of her poetics also marks her engagements and departures to the National Democratic movement of which she was a part. This background also informs the fusion of god and country. Her later poems written when she was a born-again Christian also deal with the country's social and political issues. The poems also portray women since they include the subjectivities of a daughter, wife, and mother, among others.

Though she already released two poetry collections and one autobiographical novel after her Christian conversion, I only focus on *Journey: An Autobiography in Verse (1964-1995)* published by the University of the

Philippines Press in 1996 when Aguilar was around 47 years old. This book encompasses her poems written as a college-based writer, an underground cadre, a political detainee, and a born-again Christian. The poems in *Journey* were arranged to correspond to her life stages, thus providing a narrative of her life.

Through paratextual markers in the title, chaptering, introduction and preface, *Journey: An Autobiography in Verse (1964-1995)* summons an autobiographical reading of Aguilar's poetry. Paratexts, which are understood to be created after the main body is written, "mediate" between the writer and reader and "reframes" the understanding of the work (Smith and Watson, 2010, pp. 100-101). They can designate the genre of the text and such assign a "commitment" to truth-telling (e.g. the reference to factuality of autobiography vis-à-vis the fictionalization in the novel) (Genette, 2001, p. 11). The paratext then affects the reader's approach to the text since it "shapes and situates the narrative by constructing the audience and inviting a particular politics of reading" (Smith and Watson, 2010, p. 101).

The title establishes the "autobiographical pact" (Lejeune, 1989, pp. 3-30; Genette, 2001, p. 11), or the assertion of the factual nature of the text by designating the book as an *Autobiography in Verse*. The "autobiographical pact" in prose works designate that the "I" between the protagonist and the author are one; this differentiates the memoir and the novel, which closely resemble in form (Lejeune, 1989). However, "the autobiographical pact" may be different in poetry where the persona may be assumed to be different from the writer (cf. Kjerkegaard, 2014). Nevertheless, I argue that what is autobiographical is Aguilar's outlook and perceptions, particularly about the revolution, to reflect the different stages of her life.

National Artist Francisco Arcellana further expounded the title *Journey* in his Introduction: "The classic metaphor for life is the journey. Life is a journey over land. Or a voyage over seas" (xiii). By poeticizing the notion of life as a journey, Arcellana links these two concepts as a search for one's path. In her Preface, Aguilar explains the rationale of her book and highlights the belated realization of what perhaps would be her ultimate destination:

The poems in this collection constitute a journey launched early in my teens in quest of the meaning of life. It was a journey that necessitated — without, of course, my knowing so at the start — the discovery of three major actors in my life: Self, Society and Maker. It took me more than thirty years to unravel the correlation between the three, and even

now I suppose I should be wary to say that I already have.
(xv)

Like these paratexts, an anthology is also understood as being produced after a significant body of work has been written. In this case, Aguilar's works encompass the years 1964 to 1995, or 31 years. The evolution of her life is made apparent by the organization of her poems into chapters, which were labeled as "Periods". The "Periods" are designated by color—her early poems in the "Blue Period", her underground poems in the "Red Period", her prison poems in the "Purple Period". The last chapter, simply labeled as "Period", signifies the punctuation of her life stage as a born-again Christian. This progression of self-awareness therefore ends with god and religion.

The earlier poems of Mila Aguilar which were written under the "Blue Period" from 1964-1971 exhibit modernist strands, which show a fragmented self that feels anguish at the existing social order. Aguilar revealed that while the poems within this period questioned many things, there was still freshness of youth (M. Aguilar, personal communication, December 12, 2004). The poems in this period were written before she went underground. This encompassed her student and early teaching years. Some of these poems were published in the *Philippine Collegian* and national dailies.

Heavily influenced by the formalism of Francisco Arcellana (M. Aguilar, personal communication, December 12, 2004), Aguilar's poetry during this period exhibit a self-contained whole characteristic of the standards of American New Criticism. The poem "And Now Her Petal Tips Contain" displays vivid imagery with largely sexual overtones:

She blushed full bloom
It was quite sudden.
Some vagrant drops
Of rain had lapped her.
Then on her petals curled
Alluring raindrop worlds:
They stayed a while in her caress.
They caught a bee thereafter.
And now her petal tips contain
A thousand reddened drops of rain.

This poem uses the metaphors of the "bee" and the "petal tips" which are traditional symbols for the male and female sexual organs. The

other words from nature associated with the metaphors of the bee as male and the petals as female are "blushed full bloom", "Alluring raindrop worlds", and "A thousand reddened drops of rain", all associated with sex. Thus, this poem exhibits an objective correlative with sexual acts as the poem progresses from the initial attraction ("She blushed full bloom"), to the heightening and engulfing of a mysterious sexual passion ("Some vagrant drops/ Of rain had lapped her./ Then on her petals curled/ Alluring raindrop worlds:") and finally to the ultimate consummation ("They caught a bee thereafter./ And now her petal tips contain/ A thousand reddened drops of rain"). The sexual is then metaphorically depicted in terms of nature. In addition, this progression of nature also exhibits organic unity, as the poems starts from the blossoming of the petals to the consummation of the bee.

Later in 1971, Aguilar went underground and wrote revolutionary poetry. Aguilar's poems written within the "Red Period" are noteworthy for the ways in which they subvert the dominant perceptions of thought and feelings in a semi-feudal and semi-colonial society. These poems redefine relations that exist within the current stage of the national democratic revolution, which is anti-imperialist and anti-feudal with a goal towards socialism. Thus, the values depicted in Aguilar's poetry can be termed as part of emergent literature.

According to Raymond Williams in *Marxism and Literature* (1977), what emerges in emergent literature are "new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationships [that] are continually being created" (p. 123). Literature can help one view the possibilities of these future relations that are depicted as beautiful and desirable. Mao Zedong in his *Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art* (1942) acknowledges this function of literature as shaping one's consciousness. Literature can be used for revolutionary ends:

...life as reflected in works of literature and art can and ought to be on a higher plane, more intense, more concentrated, more typical, nearer the ideal, and therefore more universal than actual everyday life. Revolutionary literature and art should create a variety of characters out of real life and help the masses to propel history forward.... Writers and artists concentrate on such everyday phenomena, typify the contradictions and struggles within them and produce works which awaken the masses, fire them with enthusiasm and impel them to unite and struggle to transform their environment. (p. 14)

Informed by this revolutionary theory and aesthetic, Aguilar's poetry within the Red Period shows the dialectic of the revolution. These poems can be termed as "open poetry", which according to Gelacio Guillermo in *Ang Panitikan ng Pambansang Demokrasya* (1990), "subjectifies-objectifies the experience of reality moving on towards that realm of conjecture the necessity of which the reader, and history, may confirm." Open poetry is progressive and stresses that action is necessary in transforming the world. Thus, it challenges the readers, whether individuals or the masses, to radically alter social relationships towards a more meaningful change. This is done through both the fusion of the poetic form and the ideological content (pp. 129-130). This theorizing engages the agency of the human individual following the Marxist grand theory of historical materialism—which sees history as a contradiction of forces moving on towards the "end of history", which is communism. As such, Aguilar's poetry in the "Red Period" can be read as illustrating the basic tenets of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought in verse form.

Aguilar's poetry from this period shows that that the self is not separate from country. Politics also inform intimate and familial relations. This view is articulated in her poem "From a Revolutionary to Her Father" in which the persona feels a sense of nostalgia for her father because of his love for others, as found in the following lines, "How good you are/ Your love of truth/ Your clean simple life/ Your concern for others—". However, this concern for others is due to the feudal ideas of generations past, either of Christian charity or civic duty. At first, the persona is hostile to these feudal values imposed upon her father's generation, including his humanistic attitudes which come precisely from the feudal system. These are found in the following lines "And because you and your generation are one,/ I have rebelled against you,/ Gentle father,/ Insensitive to your goodness,/ Your purity, your love." The persona's rebellion against her father is depicted as a paradox since the persona rejects what are seen as positive values (such as "love of truth", "clean simple life", "concern for others") only because these values are termed as "The norms of the ruling class/ Foisted upon your hapless generation."

However, the persona later on negotiates this conflict of the old and the new when she was living with the masses and studying Marxist-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought. The persona now looks "with tenderness upon/ Your clean, simple life", since she realizes the continuity between her father's and her own love for the people. The difference is that despite the continuity of the bigger anti-feudal and anti-colonial struggle, which informs the oppression of both the past and the present generations, her father's social

praxis is without a revolutionary theory. However, this too can be subject to change:

There was a time I was young
And uncomprehending;
Like a rock now I stand tempered
But unshaken.
Live, beloved father, to see
This rock sculpted by your love
Help flatten the ruling class
That smothered your generation
And continues to rob your people

The persona, as “a rock[...] stand[ing] untempered” is “sculpted by [her father’s] love”. Ironically, this rock, which is formed by the father, challenges him to go against his traditional values. The new comes from the old. Thus, the persona deconstructs the feudal ties within a father-child relationship, which connotes a hierarchy in this symbolic order. The binaries of old/new, parent/child, adult/young are now broken through the dialectic of the revolution. This means that these binaries are not permanent; rather they are moving towards a series of perpetual change. The development of these contradictions then progresses towards a renegotiation of these binaries, in which the old ideas are molded into new ideas, the conservatism of the adults is fired with the revolutionary spirit of the youth, and the parent becomes one with the child in helping fight the forces which oppress them both.

The poem “*Linyang Pangmasa*”¹ is a poem written with a dialogic narrative, using a question and answer format. The poem starts with a skeptical old peasant, Tanda, asking why Andong does good for the masses. The answer of the persona “*namin (we)*” —thus depicted in the plural—is that Andong is a communist, as found in the recurring lines:

*Tanong ng matandang hindi makumbinsi:
Bakit si Andong, laging handang tumulong
Pagtatayo man ng bakod, pag-aalaga ng bata
O pagpupunla ng binhi?*²

*Kung alam mo lang, Tanda,
Ang bulong namin sa hangin.
Komunista siya, siya’y kaibigan.*³

There are three persons in the poem: that of Tanda, as one of the peasant masses; that of the persona “*namin*” as the collective omniscient narrative voice; and that of Andong, a communist who does not speak in the poem but whose actions are chronicled by the poem. Even if the dialogue with the “*namin*” is implied, the answer to the question is not voiced; rather, it is whispered to the wind (“*bulong namin sa hangin*”). The answer lies in the concrete actions of Andong. However, this poem is written with a dialogic sequence between the “*namin*” and Tanda, which shows the contradictions between the old selfish ways of viewing the world, into new selfless perceptions which sees serving the masses as an act of heroism. The dialogue reaches the point where Tanda has assimilated the standpoint of the narrative voice—the “*namin*”—as the omniscient speaking subject disappears, thus unifying this voice with that of Tanda:

*Kung alam lamang nila, ani Tandang
Matatag ang paninindigan.
Komunista siya. Siya’y kaibigan.*⁴

At first Tanda does not believe in the likes of Andong and wonders at Andong’s selflessness. However, the poem shows that Tanda changes from someone cynical of the community organizers like Andong to someone enlightened as to the reasons for the actions of Andong and convinced that Andong truly works for the betterment of the lives of the people like Tanda (“*Para sa aming maliliit na hindi kaanu-ano*”). This is shown through the repetition of the first lines in the stanza wherein Tanda speaks, and the changing of the tenses of these verbs:

*Tanong ng matandang noo’y di makumbinsi:
Bakit si Andong, nangahas magharap ng demandang
Ibaba ang upa ng lupa
Sa hayop na amo namin, si Don Ferding mapang-api?*⁵

*Tanong ng matandang noon nakumbinsi:
Bakit si Andong, nagtiyagang magpaliwanag
Sa paraang maamo’t nakangiting lagi,
Sa aking tinaguriang matigas ang kokote?*⁶

*Tanong ng matandang lubos na nakumbinsi:
Bakit si Andong, buhay ay ibinuwis,
Para sa aming maliliit na hindi kaanu-ano
Matapos ang lahat ng kanyang pagtitiis?*⁷

The change of verb modification shows the progression of Tanda's awakening of consciousness—from "*hindi nakumbinsi*" to "*noon nakumbinsi*" and towards the end he becomes "*lubos na nakumbinsi*". This is parallel to the intensity of the way Andong serves the masses, from helping with the harvest, organizing cooperatives, demanding a reduction of land rent, explaining principles patiently to them and finally, dying for the masses.

Aguilar subverts the dominant perception of the word communist as a terrorist to the emergent conception of the communist as a friend and ally of the people. Through the use of dialogue, these negative perceptions of the communist are being confronted, with the resolution of the peasant being won over to the national democratic line.

The question-and-answer form as a dialectical method is also used in the poem "My Son Asks", wherein the victory of the NPA uses the metaphor of the New Year. Like the New Year, the communist takeover is depicted as a moment of victory and happiness. The chaos that comes with the overthrowing of the current system is not to be seen as a time of turmoil, but as a driving off of the evil spirits with the coming of the new dawn:

My son asks
How it will be like,
The New People's Army's taking over.

My son,
It will be
The way the Manilans greet their New Year.

I speak not only
Of the explosions you can hear
But of the mirth you can smell in the air.

Long before its eve
You will already be hearing
A boom here and a bang there.

But the real rejoicing will come
Later on the eve of the new day itself,
When the volleys issue nearer and nearer
of each other
Until, rising to fever pitch
At the felicitous hour
The air fills with ceaseless roaring thunder—

The ceaseless roaring thunder
Of a million feet marching
Through the breathless streets of the city.

The metaphor of the New Year moves forward in showing that this New Year has an emancipating violence that culminates with the marching of the NPAs. The old ties and values are severed to usher in the new, and violence prefaces peace. Moreover, the much-anticipated peace involves everybody, especially the young, in working diligently for the socialist construction. This is found in the lines the persona addresses to the son, "Who, the explosions having ceased/ Can sleep peacefully now, to wake up fresh/ For the hard work on the dawn of the new day". Like the New Year, this new social order ushers a new life and new possibilities, for which one must work to realize.

The subversion of the dominant perception of communism as the enemy also takes the form of a re-writing of history. In the poem "The Movement is Everywhere", Aguilar chronicles the dominant and "authorized" version of history—which is the history of fascism—and undermines this with the "underground" version of history—the history of the movement:

1. On September 21, 1972
The fascist puppet laid down martial law.
In the course of one week
He clamped one thousand people in jail.

(By October 1, 1972
One thousand rebels and potential rebels
Had sprung up, seemingly out of nowhere,
Saplings born out of eleven years' care.)

5. On December 24, 1974
The pirate fascists made an nth series of raids.
In the course of one week
They bagged twenty underground workers.

(By January 1, 1975
Another hundred rebels yet
Had sprung up, seemingly out of nowhere,
Saplings born out of thirteen years' care.)

By specifying the date and stating the number of rebels who were caught or recruited, the poem becomes a form of discourse critical of official state history. Through the poetic form and the use of parenthetical statements, the “underground” version of history ruptures the “authorized” version of history. Thus, the poem also shows that history is a construct that usually privileges the powerful, but that can also be critiqued through a counterdiscourse—an alternative history.

In the second part of this poem, the “authorized” accounts of history disappears, and what is foregrounded is the “underground” version of history, which is brought to the fore and freed from the parenthetical enclosures: “Today there must be/Fifteen thousand political prisoners all over/ The country,/.....Today there must also be/Fifty thousand underground workers/All over the country, oldtimers/And ml [Martial Law]-worn.” Moreover, the second part lays bare the theory that informs this history:

As Amado Guerrero, beloved Chairman,
Is said to have said:
Even if the whole Central Committee perishes
In the enemy's hands
The Movement will survive
Because it has taken deep roots among the masses.

The source of its strength, its sustenance,
Is Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tsetung Thought

This poem foregrounds the discourse of the national democratic movement that has been rendered invisible by the State. As the basis for this alternative history, this ND discourse is imbued by the assumption that “the Movement is invincible.”

One of the most anthologized poems from the “Red Period” is “A Comrade is as Precious as a Rice Seedling”. This reaffirms the guerrilla’s struggle as being firmly rooted in the struggle of the masses. With an imagery that is based on the countryside, the poem places importance on an ordinary object—rice. Nonetheless, it is a staple food that sustains life:

A comrade is as precious
as a rice seedling
One of many, it is true,
but nurtured by them
whose faces grow dark,

and taut, and lined
for the sake of their rice seedlings.

A comrade is he
for whom the peasant's toes
get muscled and big
because, like a rice seedling,
he will grow, one of precious many,
to fill the hunger
of him who cared enough
to nurture little seedlings.

This poem shows that it is the peasant who lives for the comrade and not the other way around. In nurturing the comrade like rice seedlings, the peasant's "hands/grow thick and calloused". However, both the rice seedling and the comrade are not portrayed as mere static objects, but as active agents of growth and change:

And yes, beloved of the peasant
because a rice seedling
grows, not only to fill his hunger,
but to give birth
to other seedlings
who will give birth
to many more
who will fill the hunger
of generations of peasants
for food, and land,
and right.

The relationship of the peasant to the comrade and rice seedling is reciprocal and cyclical: so long as there is the peasant who would nurture the rice seedling, the rice seedling would grow and yield a plentiful harvest to feed the peasant. In the same way, the comrade cannot survive without the patience of the peasant to whom the comrade dedicates one's life. This shows that the guerrillas cannot survive without the masses guarding them, nor would the masses survive without the guerrillas protecting their human rights.

However, during the split within the ND movement in the 1980s, Aguilar's poetry shifted from the active and progressive metaphors of "open" poetry towards inward and withdrawn "closed" poetry. Gelacio Guillermo

in *Ang Panitikan ng Pambansang Demokrasya* (1990) defines "closed" poetry as poetry that establishes "a subjective-private world, self-enclosed, heavy with inertia, exhibiting a relaxation of style which is really an absence of resistance and not a mark of freedom." Moreover, "closed" poetry has a liberal humanist thrust as it stresses individualism in a society that is ruled by the discourse of a fascist power. Guillermo (1990) writes that "closed poetry" "presents vague social relationships, and its characters are given the illusion to define their own meaning in a solipsistic world" (p. 130).

Aguilar's poetry in the "Purple Period: The Questions Start" presents a splintered persona, which resists the collective subjectivity that is defined by the movement. By this time, Aguilar had already severed ties with the party and was questioning the proletariat, the party dogma, Christian dogma, and even the petty-bourgeoisie. Aguilar said she felt that everyone was "exploiting" everyone else. Thus, unlike the poems from the "Red Period", the fight was not an outward struggle against the bigger forces of imperialism and feudalism, nor an inward struggle of the self through an ideological remolding. Rather the struggle was towards an individuation of meanings, wherein one struggles to be an individual above any form of social and collective organization.

Thus, the persona feels isolated even within the movement. The poem "Comrade" depicts a Ka Liza oblivious to the persona's—a comrade's—sadness:

This morning, comrade,
after drowning out
the depths of my sadness
in a solitary bathroom
I was surprised to find
that Ka Liza had ironed
the pants and shirt
I had laid out for our meeting.
Had she seen
the silence in my eyes
upon waking, I wondered.
So much concern
to compensate
for someone else's self-indulgence.

The poem takes on a double-edged irony. On the one hand, Ka Liza does the persona a favor by ironing the clothes. On the other hand, Ka Liza is not shown as comforting the persona, but places the collective party

bureaucracy over the persona's personal feelings. Thus, the last three lines, "So much concern/ to compensate/ for someone's self indulgence" could be read as a self-reflection for the persona's unnecessary spillover of emotions, or as a sarcastic remark aimed at Ka Liza who refrains from getting involved in the acts of self-indulgence of the persona. Despite this ambiguity, the gaze goes inward and the last lines do not show the persona actively struggling to get out of the quagmire of self-pity.

This emphasis on isolation stretches the distance between "friends" and former comrades. In the poem "My Friend at the Crossroads" estrangement is accompanied by the lack of comprehension or unwillingness to understand the friend's problem. The stress is on what the persona *cannot* do; consequently the persona's attitude is towards self-negation and a feeling of failure:

My friend at the crossroads
and I cannot even comfort her.

She sits by the breakwater
but I cannot reach her.

Like surf rushing ashore
I stop past her feet,

washed out by wave upon wave
of the ocean that binds me.

I see but would not understand,
I feel but could not accept.

How like a bird
I would like to sing to her.

But I have failed
and now she would not let me.

The feelings that engulf the persona and her "friend" and the defeatist attitude in reaching out to each other suggest the futility of a union towards a collective struggle. The lines are written tightly, with only two lines per stanza. However, the poem uses the metaphor of the ocean that connotes a deep and vast vessel, thus creating a powerful spilling over of emotions. The persona is likened to the surf that fluidly reaches out to the

friend, but only touches the surface of the intensity of this sadness. Through the use of this metaphor, the personal emotions of the friend are vested with a sense of mysticism, thereby unknowable and unreachable.

The poems from the Purple Period also present a questioning of the movement. In the poem, "God and the Proletariat", the persona exposes the internal contradictions within the movement. While even Mao Zedong in his article "On Contradiction" (1971) would acknowledge that inner-party contradictions are unavoidable and even necessary for the growth and development of the movement (pp. 316-317), the ND movement is presented in the poem as static. The movement's powers are depicted as all-encompassing and absolute through its parallelism with God, which the persona dismisses as "abstract non-existent/ Blip!"

I have a friend
Who believes in God.
I always say,
What abstract non-existent
Blip!
Be sure you do not
Damn the world
Much less avenge yourself
On petty souls
Who've done you wrong,
In the name of
Your abstract non-existent
God.
I have a friend
Who believes in God.
I believe, on the other hand, in
The proletariat,
Represented by its vanguard, the Party,
Represented by the Communist Party of
the Philippines
Represented presently by—
Who sits in H.O. again?
I hope time will never come
That in collectivity with others do
wrong in the name of
My concrete, undeniable
(But not so palpable!)
Proletariat.

The persona defines herself in relation to her friend who believes in an abstract God. The persona verbalizes her contempt for the “abstract non-existent/ Blip!” that her friend believes in. Then she outlines her own belief in the proletariat (“I believe, on the other hand, in/ The proletariat”) that has a material existence, which she describes as “concrete” and “undeniable”. However, she distrusts the Party hierarchy who represents the proletariat and condemns the Party’s righteousness. She ends the poem with lines that hope that the Party will not use the proletariat as an excuse for wrongs the Party might do; just as she hopes that her friend does not use God as an excuse for wrongs that her friend might commit.

Although the CPP’s general principles are geared towards the masses, she does not equate the CPP with the proletariat. Rather, she presents the possibilities that the party actions may do harm to the masses. She mocks the representation of the party by the higher organ (H.O.) as an absolute and elitist authorial figure which, like God, can pass judgment on the unbelieving members. By doing so, the persona negates the collective body of the higher organ by presenting it as ruled by an individual. Furthermore, the persona mocks the collective in the runtogether lines: “ThatIincollectivity withothersdo/ wronginthenameof/ [...the] Proletariat.” This device calls attention to the loss of self-identity and implies the absence of individual critical judgment in working as a collective.

The persona in Aguilar’s poetry turns inward, particularly in the poems written while she was a political prisoner in Bicutan from 1984 to 1986. Even if she was detained as a political prisoner for her involvement in the movement, her poetry nonetheless exhibits the same questioning of the party hierarchy and decisions, as well as separates the party from the masses. Her poem “Poisons and Peasants” uses the metaphor of the mushrooms to differentiate the poisoned ones from the true edible ones, which on the surface can not be easily distinguished:

The poisoned ones, they grow
solely on hollow roots—
roots worm-eaten perhaps,
but anyhow long since
shorn of the grace
of sipping the earth’s nutrients.

Some hallowed people too
have hollow roots,
and grow only poisoned mushrooms

that, once eaten,
creep into your heart and brain
rendering you rigid
and hollow as they [...]

The metaphor of the poisonous mushrooms growing hollow roots can be read as referring to the shallow ideological roots of the party cadres who committed disastrous party errors. The corruption is not only on the physical level, but on the emotional and moral level as well, as found in the lines "to cripple/ the moral fibre of your being." Furthermore, the vanguard party is depicted as dispossessing one of his/her individual critical faculties and depth in theorizing. The poem says that following party decisions can be likened to eating poisoned mushrooms, whose venom has the effect of "rendering you rigid/ and hollow as they". Nonetheless, the poem gives omnipotent powers to the peasants, who are shown as capable of differentiating the poisoned mushrooms from the true by crushing the roots with their feet:

It's rather morbid,
this discovery,
but I'm also told
there is no cause
for worry. For the peasants
merely crush the roots
with their big feet,
to see which ones
will give. And that is how
they tell the poisoned
from the true.

The power of the vanguard party over the masses is then subverted: the masses are above the vanguard party as shown in the lines, "And that is what takes off/ my worry: /The wizened peasants,/ they will know." What is absent from this representation of the masses is that it does not take into account the fact that without any ideological remoulding, the subjectivities of these peasants would still be informed by the dominant feudal and colonial ideology which they had been interpellated with for centuries. The masses are portrayed as having an innate knowledge of what is true and false (as found in the assertion "The peasants, they can tell.").

The metaphors of Aguilar's poetry written in prison take on a liberative function. However this liberation is conceived in a liberal humanist sense, and is not clear about the Marxist conception of freedom as involving

the radical altering of the social structures. The oft-anthologized poem "Pigeons for My Son" uses the metaphor of the pigeons as the mother/political prisoner. The son frees the pigeons, which was given as a gift by the mother. The freeing of the pigeons signifies the wish-fulfillment of the son's desire to free the mother:

You'd think
that would have angered me,
or made me sad at least
but I guess we're of one mind.
Why cage pigeons
who prefer free flight
in the vaster, bluer skies?

The freedom encapsulated in this poem signifies a freedom from the harsh conditions of prison. The symbolism of the freed pigeons and the vast, blue skies are dynamic and connote an emancipation of movement as opposed to the constricting cages. However, the freedom signified here is open-ended: the freedom of flight can be read in many ways. It can either mean a mere release from the physical barriers of the prison bars, or an economic and political deliverance from the societal oppression that arises from a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society divided into classes. The absence of a clear reference to a socialist liberation, as well as the absence of the masses, stresses the flight of an individual who is being imprisoned by the totalizing power of the Marcos dictatorship.

The representations of oppression and liberation in the poetry of Aguilar change drastically, if one compares especially Aguilar's poetry written during the Red Period and the Purple Period. These two periods coincide with the growth of the re-established CPP and the later ideological splits and grave errors in the movement. The poems in the Red Period emphasize a collective subjectivity resisting the forces of imperialism and feudalism through the liberative powers of dialectical materialism, mass actions and ideological remolding. The poems in the Purple Period stress an individualistic self, who disassociates oneself from the movement and finds freedom in resisting collectivization. This kind of individualism affirms a pessimistic and self-defeating ideology, and negates the optimistic and revolutionary imaginings of freedom through an altering of the constricting social structures and redefining of social relations.

The poems in the last phase of *Journey*, which is entitled "Period", were written when Aguilar had become a born-again Christian. Although the poems within this period could be read as a metaphysical celebration of

the glory of God, some of Aguilar's poems deal with social problems. One of these is "*Ulat Hinggil sa Isang Dating Anak ng Lansangan*"⁸, which chronicles the familial history of rape, incest, child abuse, wife battering in the life of a street child symbolically named A.D. or Anno Domini:

*Bugbog sa ama,
Sa edad na lima
Nahagit na ng ateng gumala.
Anim na taong gulang pa lamang,
Nakapa na
Ng lalakeng pinsan na'y
Kalahating kapatid pa.
Taun-taon habang lumalaki,
Nakikita ang pambubugbog
Ng ama sa ina.*⁹

The poem is vivid with the narration of centuries-old oppression stemming from A.D.'s grandmother, a woman raped by a Spanish landlord ("*Ito ang kanyang kasaysayan:/ Lola'y taga-Pangasinan/ Kung saan/ May isang Espanyol na nakasakay/ Sa puting kabayo/ Na nabantog na/ Mahilig manggahasa*")¹⁰. It also portrays the dehumanizing conditions in the life of an urban poor. In addition, both A.D. and her mother, Tisay, are victims of incest ("*At dito/ Nagsimula ang gulo./ Si Tisay ay napilit magpakasal/ Sa isang nagkunwaring mayaman. / Nagkaroon sila ng anim na anak./ 'Nasok naman, kapatid/ Ng mapagkunwari, playboy/ Ng bayan. Nagluwal ng isa pa. / Nadiskubre ng asawa,/ Hindi pala kanya*")¹¹. However, the resolution negates the class and gender struggle by mystifying it through the language of Christian rebirth ("*Isang salita/ Ng pagpapatawad*")¹² (Translation mine), which gives the poem a metaphysical denouement:

*At dahil doon
Sa pamamagitan ng
Isang salita
Ng pagpapatawad
Ay maaring
Magbago ang lahat
Mapalis ang anumang
Hapdi ng nakaraan.
Si A.D.,
Anno Domini,
Sanlibo syam na raan
Syam na pu't isang taon*

*Makalipas ang mahiwagang pagsilang,
Dating anak ng lansangan,
Ay bumalik
Sa pagiging
Anak ng Diyos
At sa isang iglap
Ay nagbago ang kanyang
Buong kapaligiran.¹³*

What should also be noted about Aguilar's poetry, if read from Michele Barrett's feminist materialist framework (1985), is that gender ideology is not brought to the fore. The persona in Aguilar's poetry is not so much defined as a woman struggling for emancipation from patriarchy, but as a comrade who fights for freedom against imperialism and feudalism (in the "Red period"), or as a cadre critical of the movement (in the "Purple period"). At most, the image of the woman enters as a mother speaking to/about her son, in poems such as "My Son Asks" and "Pigeons for My Son". Only one poem, "Kuyakoy"¹⁴ written during the "Red Period", discusses male chauvinism regarding the division of household work. Lilia Quindoza Santiago¹⁵ (2002) notes that this poem questions the gender roles and the unequal distribution of work within a marital set-up, wherein the husband's reply to discussions regarding housework is his "kuyakoy" or leg-swinging (pp. 145-146):

*Ang tanging labi
Ng sobinismo ng mister ko
Ay ang kanyang kuyakoy.¹⁶*

*Tuwing hihilingin kong
Mag-ayos siya ng higaan pagkabangon
Ang sagot niya sa akin ay kuyakoy.¹⁷*

*Ginagawa naman daw niya,
Ala-una ng hapon,
Tatlong oras pagkabangon.¹⁸*

*Ang tanging labi
Ng sobinismo ng mister ko
Ay ang kanyang kuyakoy.¹⁹*

Lilia Quindoza Santiago (2002) points out that the poem "A Comrade is as Precious as a Rice Seedling" —with all its revolutionary potential—has failed to include the female sex as comrades by using the pronoun *he* (hence

"A comrade is *he*," italics mine) instead of *he/she*. Santiago attributes this to the limitations of the times, in which "gender issues in language were not as yet pronounced" (p. 151). It was also during this time (circa 1970s) that, even with the birth of MAKIBAKA, feminist theory was at its infancy in the Philippines. Judy Taguiwalo (1993) writes that although there was a distinct ND organization of women, the rallying call was still within the national and class struggle. Like other sectoral organizations, MAKIBAKA failed to locate forms of oppression specific to women—in this case, gender oppression (p. 39).

In conclusion, Aguilar presents the poems in this collection as a cycle beginning with a precocious teenager writing self-contained poetry that conforms to the academic New Critical standards; to an underground fighter writing revolutionary poetry; to a cadre leaving the national democratic movement; to a political prisoner victimized by the Marcos dictatorship; and ending by being a born-again Christian. Even if Aguilar is pursuing her own political and religious commitments in calling for national and moral renewal, the narrative presented in *Journey* shows Aguilar's return to a metaphysical God (in contrast to liberation theology that preaches active struggle). This return is also evident in the use of language. During the "Red Period", the word "*komunista*" is recuperated by Aguilar to make it a positive term in the poem "*Linyang Pangmasa*". During the "Purple Period", the word "proletariat" becomes abstract, a sign of the poet being critical of the Communist Party of the Philippines, which is likened to an "abstract non-existent/ God" in the poem "God and the Proletariat". During the last "Period", the resolution to all the world's problems is through the word of Christian rebirth in the poem "*Ulat Hinggil sa Isang Dating Anak ng Lansangan*".

Journey: An Autobiography in Verse (1964-1995) presents the narrative of one's commitment and eventual falling out of the revolution, where one's involvement in the National Democratic movement is but a youthful phase that would eventually end in disillusionment. However, Aguilar's struggle continues in a metaphysical realm and suggests the possible reconciliation of love of god and country. Aguilar's transformation is but one life story in the narrative of the revolution. Other life stories may point otherwise.

NOTE

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ENDNOTES

¹**Mass Line** [Translation mine]

²Asked the old man, who cannot be convinced
Why is Andong always ready to help
Building a fence, caring for the children
Or planting seeds? [Translation mine]

³If you only know, Tanda
We whispered to the wind
He's a communist, he's a friend. [Translation mine]

⁴If only they knew, replied Tanda
Firm in his belief
He's a communist. He's a friend. [Translation mine]

⁵Asked the old man, who then could not be convinced
Why did Andong fiercely demand
To our landlord, the animal Don Ferding the oppressor
To lower the rent of our land? [Translation mine]

⁶Asked the old man, then convinced
Why is Andong patiently explaining
Gently, always smiling
To me, who is known as hard headed? [Translation mine]

⁷Asked the old man, fully convinced:
After all of his sufferings
Why did Andong give up his life
For us little people who are not his family? [Translation mine]

⁸**News Regarding a Former Child of the Streets** [Translation mine]

⁹Beaten by her father
At the age of five
Challenged by her bigger sister to roam
At only six years old,
Already touched
By her male cousin
Who's also her half brother
Every year while growing
She sees her mother
Beaten up by her father. [Translation mine]

¹⁰This is her history/ Grandma is from Pangasinan/ Where/ There is a Spaniard who rode/ A white horse/ He is known as/ The one who likes to rape. [Translation mine]

¹¹And from here/ The problems came/ Tisay is forced to marry/ Someone who is pretending to be rich/ They had six children/ She is touched by the brother/ Of the pretender, playboy/ Of the town./ Gave birth to another one. The husband discovered,/ The child is not his. [Translation mine]

¹²One word of forgiveness [Translation mine]

¹³And because of that
With just
One word
Of forgiveness
Everything may change
To extinguish whatever
Pains of yesterday
A.D.
Anno Domini
One thousand nine hundred
Ninety-one years
After the miraculous rebirth,
Former child of the streets
Returned
To being
A child of God
And in one instant
Everything around her
Has changed. [Translation mine]

¹⁴**Kuyakoy**

¹⁵"Translated by Marra PL. Lanot in Lilia Quindoza Santiago's *In the Name of the Mother*, p 247. According to the footnote following Lanot's translation, '*Kuyakoy*' is a Filipino word referring to the to and fro swinging of a crossed leg, especially when a person is seated."

¹⁶The only remnant
Of my husband's chauvinism
Is his *kuyakoy*.

¹⁷Every time I ask him
To fix the bed after he wakes up
He answers me with a *kuyakoy*.

¹⁸He says he does it,
At one in the afternoon.
Three hours after waking up.

¹⁹The only remnant
Of my husband's chauvinism
Is his *kuyakoy*.

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