

WRITERS AND WRITING IN SOUTHEAST ASIA¹

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[The moderator for the
discussion was Patricia Arinto]

BUDI DARMA

There is really a big gap between good writers and the so-called common people. We understand that to be a good writer, somebody must be a good thinker and I express this observation because the number of thinkers in Indonesia is very limited indeed. They are often overburdened by assignments and jobs which are actually not in the field of writing. Because they are often invited to

many places and they are often invited to solve many problems, they cannot develop their talent. And this is one of the reasons why many Indonesians, if they have to write, are like animals — during winter they have to hibernate. They have to hide in order not to be disturbed by the public. There is an Indonesian writer named Umar Khayam who went to America in order to concentrate on writing. But even in America, Indonesians went to his home to chat until late at night. In the morning, he had to wake up and type again. We know that in order to be a good writer, we have to crystallize our observations and experiences and this is, of course, a difficulty that we face in Indonesia. I suppose there are writers who are good and who have the time to concentrate on writing. That is probably because it's quite easy for them to write.

What about the trends in Indonesian writing today? We Indonesian writers have a dream. In the dream, we are running, trying to get to a high place, maybe to the top of the tree and it's difficult for us to breathe. Suddenly we wake up in a cold sweat. Why is this so? Because we are afraid of something. We have a great problem in our own land.

When our ancestors saw danger, they went to high places, like flocks of animals. It is in this way that some writers write "unconsciously" about everything in the past, the archetypal things in human lives. In one sense, Indonesian writers are trying to make their national literature solid, ready to face the international world. But at the same time, every writer, whether or not he or she can feel it, is going back to the past. And because of this, there are many Indonesian novels which are historical. We want Indonesians to see our past in order for them to see what we are today, to make our identity solid. We also have ethnic issues in our literature. For instance, this subcultural group writes about their own values in national literature. And then we also have religious novels, religious poems. So this is happening in Indonesia. On the one hand we go farther, but on the other hand, we go back to the past life.

N.V.M. GONZALEZ

I didn't know where to start and how far, because my problem is how to keep away from generalizations. And so I am going to speak about myself in the hope that in what I say, you will also find yourself. It is very simple: I write to please myself. I don't know what the creative process is until I see it being done. And the only reason I can see it being done, [and] will certainly know that it's being done, is when I see my own work. Then, I see the work of others and I say: Suppose I were this person, how would I possibly explain my having arrived at this composition? And I usually find myself in the book itself that I am reading, written by somebody else. That's the way I like to approach the idea of writing — that every idea is a problem in itself. Every thought has its own ideology. And I don't like to propose to think of your ideology, nor do I hope to convince you about mine. But what I would like is for you to see something which you have not seen before. So I have learned to describe writing as that art of saying that which cannot be said.

This conference is one of the most exciting and, perhaps, is going to be one of the most interesting conferences that we've had, because it has stirred up our imaginations into a cohesive whole. Towards what? I really don't know at this point. During the last two days, we have been talking about ideology, patronage, rhetoric, but we have forgotten the artist — that, in the end, nation-building, literature-making, are literally not in the hands of politicians, not in the hands of teachers.

CHARLSON ONG

I have to admit I'm not very familiar with Southeast Asian literature, and maybe I speak for many of us here. Our influences are still largely European, American and I guess if we do speak of a Southeast Asian Literature, it will be a very young literature. I'm not saying that there aren't whole indigenous traditions. The idea

of Southeast Asia is very new. In fact, I think it could be problematic. I might be wrong here, but the earliest impression I had was in the 1960s — the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization. And it was really a military organization, an anti-Communist movement which eventually evolved into ASEAN. The concept itself has a lot of US or European background, even the concept of Asia itself.

Right now, we're having a run in the Manila stock market. And of course it's hurting some people — those who have small investments in the stock markets. It's happening to a large degree especially in Thailand. And of course we keep on saying we have nothing to do with Thailand, which is a different country. Conditions are different. But that doesn't change things. Investors look at the region as a whole, so whatever happens in Thailand or Indonesia, affects what happens in the country. That's a reality we have to deal with no matter how the economy of Southeast Asia evolves.

And so what we have to recognize is that for many decades, our relationship to each other have been defined by how each of our governments are related politically to the US and how our different cultures have reproduced American or Western influences. And so we have tended to see each other from that perspective. And so, again, defining the concept of Southeast Asia is still difficult.

For the contemporary writer in Southeast Asia, I see forces that are colliding. I think no matter what we say there is still the fascination, [the attraction] for the colonial, for the empire, the US, Britain, Europe. And then of course, there is the pull of the nation-state — being Filipino or being Indonesian or being Malaysian. I think that has to come into the picture. And then there is ethnicity, full ethnicity, regained ethnicity, as what Professor Budi Darma had mentioned. There is also cross-regional ethnicity — being Chinese or being Indians. The yearning for the lost grandeur of China or India or the Sri-Vijayan Empire also comes into play. So I think the writer, the postmodern writer, is caught up in these three forces

colliding and shaping the subject. The Southeast Asian subject, I think, is basically looking at how these three forces interact.

Now to talk a bit about my work. I've been working on a book called *An Embarrassment of Riches*. It's a novel that I've been working on for many years. I haven't been able to finish it because, just like in Indonesia, the writer in the Philippines is also involved in other things. And it is hard to hide oneself today in the age of information technology, because people can reach you somehow.

My novel is set in a fictionalized South Asian island called the Victorianas. It's a black comedy. The narrator is a person from the island; he is Chinese. He leaves the island because his father wants him out of the island. He comes to Manila, stays a few years, and gets into trouble. He loses his fortune and he returns because his friend is running for the presidency. His closest friend turns out to be the daughter of the island's richest Chinese entrepreneur — a tycoon who owns all the malls in that island. They win the elections and all that. But the new president decides to move, sell the presidential palace and move the office to the mall. And that sort of triggers the national uprising. I draw a lot from the Indonesian experience, from ethnic problems through the years. So I think of it as a Southeast Asian novel in that sense.

LEONCIO DERIADA

Writing literature is truly a creative process. It's like having a baby. Now, for you to ask me to give details on how to have a baby, I wouldn't have an answer. I would rather share with you my experience in what I call engineering the fiction. If there's such a thing as languages engineering, I think there can also be such a thing as literature engineering. You see, I teach in the Western Visayas, in a region with five [sic] languages: Hiligaynon (which is the lingua franca), Visayan, English, a brand of Filipino that is Visayan-based, Kinaray-a, and Aklanon. Linguists lump all the three

West Visayan languages simply into one called Hiligaynon, which is not quite true. After the Cory Revolution, the management of the Cultural Center of the Philippines changed in such a way that the CCP went to the grassroots. I am the region's literature representative to the CCP which had, probably by accident, suggested to young writers who were writing in English and Hiligaynon to experiment writing in their native language. I was referring to young writers who are native Kinaray-a speakers as well as the native Aklanon speakers. They did experiment and the result was simply overwhelming.

Let me explain further. The language Kinaray-a is the mother language of Hiligaynon — the main language in West Visayas. Hiligaynon grew through the Chinese. That's why the R's in Kinaray-a became L in Hiligaynon. Aklanon evolved from Kinaray-a in another way. For so many years, literature in Western Visayas was either in Spanish, [or] later in English and in Hiligaynon, because the outlets [the literary competitions] were in these three languages. The irony is that there are more speakers of Kinaray-a in the region. Hiligaynon happened to be the language of the elite — the Chinese and Spanish mestizos who then came from Molo, the old Chinatown, which was the center of culture. And so everybody wrote in Hiligaynon.

Politics had probably motivated these young writers in Kinaray-a and Aklanon to write in their language. I ran the writing workshops, with the help of Dr. Ma. Zenaida Bernabe-French and Dr. Alice Tan-Gonzales — two companions in engineering these new types of literature in our region. I always told young writers in the so-called marginal literature this: if they write in their native language, they empower their language. And if their language could be used in [everyday] life, if one could sing songs in their language, or if one could write his poetry in that language, recite their poetry in that language, or if one could pray in that language, then that language has dignity. It is equal to any language in the world. One did not have to be embarrassed to be caught speaking in that language.

I am glad we now have Kinaray-a writers who are among the best writers of this country.

I would even say that the best writers' group in my region, West Visayas, is the Kinaray-a group based in Antique. Two members of this group who started from zero in writing poetry are now doing MA in Creative Literature at the Silliman and De La Salle Universities, with full scholarships. Now, what I'm trying to say here is that we can initiate the development of literature in the so-called marginalized languages if the universities are interested in the development of local cultures, especially local literature. In our case I tell you that, we have succeeded very well in our mission — aside from producing literature in Hiligaynon and English, we now have two new types [of literature]: in Kinaray-a, as well as in Aklanon. The third [new type of] literature we have is writing in Filipino which is Visayan-based. That does not make many people in Manila happy, but then we do not believe that the national language is Tagalog. Now, a new type of literature is evolving in our mission. It is [written in] a type of Filipino which is Visayan-based.

VICTORIO SUGBO

I am going to give you a talk on the creative process of one who is writing in a marginalized literature. Writing poetry in Waray has rather been a difficult process for one who is used to English and is always at odds with his ethnic mother language. Somehow, my long exposure to English has drawn me away from its [Waray's] rich metaphors, and from the meaning of word terms which have been inaccessible to me. Waray is hardly a standardized language and even the dictionaries in Waray are inadequate. My going back to Creative Writing in Waray was initially an attempt to test my capability to use my ethnic mother tongue in the sound of metaphor. But the writing of a poem, in my case, does not start with a piece

of paper on the table. Rather, the process of creating a poem begins with a bus ride to Ormoc City at the Tacloban City bus terminal.

Between Tacloban and Ormoc, the scenic environment comes to my mind, and it is the time to start to pick up a memory or a concept for a story or even a dialogue between passengers on the bus. I spin my thoughts around a concept or a memory and by the time I reach Ormoc, the poem is more or less set. It is also at this particular time that I start to buy a notebook and a pen, and the Waray poem is written. Why am I writing in a language that seems to have been viewed with disfavor by its own people. It is probably my desire to regain ground and to show to the world community that this language that they have looked on with disfavor is still the best medium to express their own experiences and feelings.

MARJORIE EVASCO

Maayong hapon sa atong tanan. Good afternoon colleagues and friends. I'm glad to be here as part of this panel of writers in the discussion of the Creative process. When I accepted the invitation from Dr. Cora Villareal, I had the expectation that it's some kind of a reunion with writers whom I have met in other conferences, especially Southeast Asian writers.

And so allow me to place that in context. I started my apprenticeship and practice in Creative Writing in 1976. That was about twenty-one years ago when I attended the Silliman University National Summer Writers Workshop founded by the late Edilberto Tiempo and Edith Tiempo. Among the things I remember from that summer is the friendship I built with the Malaysian writers who were also writing fellows. We were almost twenty-three or twenty-five years old. From then on we started a mutual and continued exchange of our works, as well as the works of other Malaysian and Filipino authors.

Two years after, I met Singaporean writer Dadji Kinosalda who informed me about the writing produced by contemporary Singaporean writers, as well as the translation work being done in his country. In 1985, Solidarity Foundation sponsored a conference on Southeast Asian writers in Bali, Indonesia — and it was where I felt that my sojourns into the literature of Southeast Asia found its first watershed. In the conference — also attended by fiction writer Jose Dalisay, Ilocano poet Rey Duque, and playwright Malou Jacob — Filipino writers discussed with their contemporaries in Southeast Asia, among whom were Dr. Ungku Maimunah, Mohammad Uko, Shirley Geoklin Lim, and many others. We discussed the issues and problems facing writers and writing in the region. Traditional groups and changes, modernity and technological advances, the poetics, politics and economics of survival as a writer, translation and the publishing practices in our countries, and many other issues. I traced that path because this is part of the past — the coming together of teachers and students and writers of Southeast Asia.

When the writer talks of the creative process, she can either focus on the writing of a specific work or look at the development of her craft, so far, in the context of a larger development in the region, in the country, and in the world. If you remember about two years ago, a poet, Ricardo M. de Ungria, edited a book where ten Filipino poets discussed in the context of a single poem, the making of a poem, its creative process. That kind of discussion has been done and received well here in the Philippines.

As for the larger context, I would like to share with you my own development in the craft. My historical and cultural context include a liberal education, mostly conducted in English and focused on the study of Anglo-American literatures. My poetry then, from 1976 to 1992, which is about sixteen years, was written mainly in English. It was only in 1993 when I started re-writing some of my poems in English into Cebuano. These first attempts at mastering the poetic idiom of my native tongue and culture were influenced by the writers I met in the English Cornelio Pager Workshop in Cebu City. I would

like to acknowledge the presence of Dr. Linda Alburo here, who was the director of that workshop. These writers were mostly writing bilingually, not only in English but also in Cebuano. I was one of the panelists of this workshop and — while doing my homework of carefully reading and analyzing the Cebuano works — I recognized and rejoiced in the vigor and vitality of my mother tongue. I resolved to return to it in my writing to come home. Cebuano Studies scholar Resil Mojares, in his introduction to the first volume of Cebuano poetry, says: "For many Cebuanos today, to read Cebuano poetry is to experience something both intimate and strange." In a sense, it is the experience of poetry itself, but there is another dimension. It is also the experience of passing through ancestral grounds long forsaken, and, now, revisited and carefully reclaimed.

Part of this project of reclaiming a mother tongue and culture is my present work of translation. For me, as well as for some contemporaries in the Central Visayan region who started writing poetry using English, the decision and action of reclaiming what is ours is an exciting and invigorating process. Verily, it is like a second apprenticeship in the tradition and act of poetry — informed also by the poetic value precisely mastered in English. It is at this exacting juncture of the creative process that the writer recognizes the intercontextual and antetextual nature of writing today.

What does this project of reclaiming ancestral grounds mean in relation to the larger context of Southeast Asian literatures? It gives the writer, in my case Cebuano, a culturally specific context identified by a local community to which it belongs, and a good sense of origin. This sense of origin connects very well with the traditions of art — of the art of poetry in many countries of Southeast Asia. Dr. Muhammad Haji Salleh of Malaysia, for example, cited in his essay on the poetics of the *Sejarah Melayu* that the chanting of a story in his country is always preceded by the invocation to God and to the ancestors. The poet, who knows the origin of all things and every person's debt to ancestors, has a good chance of discovering and using the truth for the survival and growth of the community.

My sense of things is that the enhanced development of vernacular literatures in the Philippines in the next generation will parallel the growth of the literary exchanges within the Southeast Asian region — through the processes of reading, writing, and the translation on the language of the region. I would like to think that in the next few years, I shall be able to read, in English translation, the works of Southeast Asian writers and also have access to the works originally written in the languages of Southeast Asian countries. And in the spirit of the Southeast Asian poetics that invokes the importance of the life of the community and the service that the poet gives to the community, the acts of writing, translating, and reading in the region will have brought the bigger community of Southeast Asian peoples to a deeper realization of their similarities, and an enduring appreciation of the richness which their differences offer.

QUESTION

Prof. Gonzalez, it seems that there has not been much change in the thematic substance of your stories. But you are telling us that, in the creative process, it is the writer who is more significant, not the writing itself. In other words, it is the singer and not the song. So how are you able to be consistent in the thematic substance of your work?

N.V.M. GONZALEZ

That's a very hard song to sing. Well, my problem is to fight off the temptation to answer all the problems of the world. That is why I picked up this small thing at a time. Because the more you know how to pick up the object, the more you find ways and means of picking it up better. It's very easy to know everything. There's a tradition in Asia where the writer is the guru, and the guru is the writer. We have a tradition of the writer being a leader of the country.

We have a tradition of storytelling as part of our history. You know, it is very tempting to be a great Filipino writer, but to pick up a pencil and be just a simple pencil-picker is very hard to do. Maybe, I can tell you a little bit about it in due course, but that I think is the only answer I can give you honestly...

VICTORIO SUGBO

In my case, I write for myself. And the reason why I continue writing in Waray is that I find it exciting to write my own experiences in the Waray language. I find I'm using my language with a certain freshness, because I have not been using that particular language for literary purposes; I've used my particular language primarily for conversation. The good thing about a language like Waray is that it is not standardized. And because it is not standardized, it is easy for a Waray writer to get words from other languages and use them for our own purposes. I usually give some of my poems to some of the poets in the college who also read Waray poems. They help me evaluate my own work. Right now, in Region VIII, we do not have newspapers or magazines where we can publish our works, but it seems that the student paper in the college is starting to publish Waray poems.

N.V.M. GONZALEZ

As you described what you were doing, I said to myself: "This is the way to go." A writer is essentially a person who, by his very nature, alienates himself from the world. So here is a situation where your world and yourself are completely united, and that's a wonderful feeling! We are all split up — we are all fragmented — but your situation is wonderful. And I know how it feels.

When I started writing *The Bamboo Dancers* years ago, I thought I would write it exactly the same way as you would; that is to say,

using the Tagalog we had in our time. Prof. S.V. Epistola here is witness to the event. We would ride on the bus and talk about the book, and we would talk about the people so closely, that people around us would think we were talking about our neighbors. You have no idea what great pain we are causing our younger generation by completely violating them from the environment through a language which you and I never wanted anyway. But there we are. So this was a beautiful experiment to have happened.

I brought my manuscript — seventy-five pages of *The Bamboo Dancers* — to *Liwayway* [magazine]. I called it (at that point it wasn't finished) *Tabing sa Dagat* — a phrase from your good friend Balagtas. And I felt very happy because that connected me with Balagtas, with history. I felt one with this universe. But some people there [at *Liwayway*] didn't like the idea. "We couldn't understand what you're doing," they said. So I hurried to finish the whole thing in English, and the *Tabing sa Dagat* never got through. But you know what "*tabing sa dagat*" means? It is the union of the water from the mountains and the water from the sea, and that journey there is really our culture — and I was able to do that in this language. I hope you'll be able to do it in your mind — in your next book.

QUESTION

This is a question for Prof. N.V.M. Gonzalez. You said that you wrote for your pleasure? How do you know that you have reached that kind of pleasure?

GONZALEZ

Very interesting question. But I'm never sure that that pleasure has been reached. Are you familiar with union psychology? I didn't know about this before. But, later on, I understood that the thing I was doing is really a consummation of the concept of gestalt, and

a unity within itself, so that the parts combine, add up to something greater than the whole, and there's a sense of unity of what you and I feel. When I reach that point, I can forget about it — and do something else.

QUESTION

Isn't it a form of selfishness not to think about any kind of reader?

GONZALEZ

Well, when you plant a flowering plant and it grows, do you feel selfish for letting it grow? Well, the reader must be like me, unfortunately, and I think you'll find out that I am in your mind, as well as, sometimes, you're in my mind. I mean [literature] is an object made out of minds, an entirely different thing from what you and I know — bite for bite. So, generally, there's a mistake in our thinking. It's made up of words — not your words, not more. It's the words of an entire culture. And that's what we [writers] do, we only give the illusion that it is yours, but actually, it's not yours. It's somebody else's. And I think that's how literature works when we let it go on its own power. And we try to give it that power.

QUESTION

This is addressed to Professor Evasco and Dr. Sugbo. When I translated a poem, my poem, from English to Kinaray-a, I discovered that I had created a new poem. Would you give a comment on this?

EVASCO

Yes, I had the same experience. I tried my hand at translating twelve of my poems from English into Cebuano, and I really discovered that they have a mind of their own, and very hard-headed about where they wanted to go. In fact, that's probably what I am trying to do with my dissertation: they are parallel, and so the poems actually speak to each other. There's some kind of a dialogue going on between the languages. And so the English poem speaks to the Cebuano one, and the Cebuano poem speaks to the English one. But they are not one-on-one alike, I think, because of the mediation process. When you translate, you make certain lexical choices and other things, technical things. Also the grammar is very different. So I'm happy with having two poems. If I have about eighty poems, so far, in my writing life, times two, that's 160 poems.

SUGBO

Merle Alunan used to tell me that whenever I write in English, it doesn't sound like an English poem, but it sounds like a Waray poem written in English. I had a similar experience when I wrote a poem, which was published in the *Philippine Collegian*. It started as an English poem which, when I showed it to Merle Alunan, sounded strange. So I said maybe this poem would read better if I translated the poem into Waray. It did sound better and the lore fell into place because I used a mythic framework for the poem. Alunan told me that this is the best version of the poem. So the poem now remains a Waray poem.

QUESTION

Dr. Budi Darma, the poem "The Prostitute of Jakarta" [by W.S. Rendra] is quite bold. How does it affect writers like you and how does it affect government authorities in Indonesia?

DARMA

Rendra is a very famous Indonesian poet. If I'm not mistaken, he wrote this poem when he was in America — in New York City. The reaction of the people, at that time, was favorable; this poem was one of the poems which had made him more popular among the Indonesian public. There is something charismatic about Rendra; people are more interested in him rather than the poem. When he was invited by an artists' council to read his poetry, somebody asked him after his poetry reading, "Rendra, why don't you cut your hair?" The question had nothing to do with the poem [he had just read]. And then, somebody else commented, "Rendra, I thought you are a man, but it seems to me that you are more like a woman." But, anyway, the content of the poem is also popular. Why? Because it touches the heart of the people. Because it reflects reality. But then again, what about Rendra himself. In this poem, he praises prostitutes, but, at the same time, what he does in everyday life is actually contrary to what he says. In this case, people have different attitudes towards him. People like his poems and his charisma, but, at the same time, the people doubt about his personal integrity.

QUESTION

Dr. Sugbo said, "Recall your experiences, then, probably, you could write." Could Dr. Sugbo perhaps elucidate?

SUGBO

I was always told by my professor in Creative Writing, in the workshops which I have attended, that we have to write from our own experience. But, you see, the poems that I write do not deal with my own experience. Those poems are not just mere descriptions of experiences because I was exposed to the lore of my region. I mix lore with my experiences, like the lore that I

learned from my farmer-uncle, and use them as part of my poem. That's why Alunan says I'm very much concerned with the superstitions and the belief in that area. And I think these very superstitions are the ones that I've gotten from the environment and I use them as a springboard of my poems.

QUESTION

Dr. Budi Darma, how does part-time writing in Indonesia affect the quality of literary production?

DARMA

Many writers cannot write a lot because they don't have time. William Faulkner said that writer cannot reach real satisfaction. After finishing writing, he knows that he had not finished. That's why he writes another, and goes on writing. Once a writer is really satisfied with his writing, according to William Faulkner, it means the writer is committing suicide. Even Indonesian writers who are already at the top of their profession, with solid reputations or achievement, are encouraged to rewrite a novel again [sic]. In this case, it means both the writers and the public are aware that these writings can be made better.

QUESTION

Prof. Deriada and Prof. Charlson Ong, what is the most difficult part of the writing process?

DERIADA

To me, writing is all a game. There are more important things to do

than writing. To me, writing is not a matter of life and death. I write if I have the inclination, and I have time. Between washing the dishes and writing, I would rather wash the dishes. Yes, to me, it's all a joke, it is all a game. I won't die for writing. Certainly, there are more important things to die for. So, I'm afraid I've disillusioned you, but that's the fact. Maybe, that's the reason why I have lasted for so long. I haven't been serious about it.

ONG

I'd rather be dead than wash the dishes. But, I think, it's finding that I have, as Prof. Darma has pointed out, the Southeast Asian Condition. As for the Philippine situation, especially writing in English, we don't have a big market. There isn't really a publishing industry to speak of. You can publish, but it's a small market. You can't really live off fiction writing, you always have to do something else — whether write some other stuff or going to business or smuggle goods. I think that's the problem. We can't live of writing. The only writer who had been able to do so is Frankie [Sionil] Jose. In terms of quantity, he has been able to come up with books every year. He has managed his career well. He has a bookstore. So I guess it's really finding the time or the better conditions for writers.

QUESTION

Charlson, you are also a Chinoy [Chinese-Filipino]. Are you in the mind of your major characters, or do you write about the mind of the Chinoys in general?

ONG

I remember Nick Joaquin was also asked who he was in all his books and he said, "Everyone and no one." I think it's the same

thing. I think it ties up with the question earlier. It's impossible to write without memory. Once you choose to use that memory, then it is no longer entirely yours. It becomes public domain. And you treat it as artifact. You try to, at least, stay away, keep away from it somehow, but you always play around with the facts you know. But, I think, the emotional content — the emotional truth — is what drives you. There's always some truth, some personal truths about what you write.

QUESTION

Prof. Gonzalez, do you believe that writing is a product of inspiration or craftsmanship or both?

GONZALEZ

Very beautiful question because one of the most misunderstood words in the language is inspiration. Inspiration is just a thought. But you work it out. You find a way of expressing it in terms of your art. Let's not go into that because that is difficult. But what was your question again? Did I believe in inspiration? Of course, I believe in inspiration — if inspiration means an idea you have to work out. But what is an idea you have to work out? Here's the problem.

An idea in politics is different from an idea in literature. An idea in fiction, you have to express in fictional terms, meaning you have to put the idea in the lives of fictional characters. And, please, don't ever think that fictitious characters are drawn from life. They are not drawn from life. They are drawn from the head of the writer who remembered something about life or tried to make up something about life. But they are not one-to-one, and that's the way to go about it.

QUESTION

What do you feel when you know that somebody has translated your work into another language?

GONZALEZ

One thing that you feel is that you don't know how good the translator is, and you will never be able to check, because you don't know the language. Another thing is that you hope they may know your work. But you think it's flattering. Of course, it is. Isn't it nice that some people outside your community, outside your country seem interested to do something about your work? I think that's very nice.

QUESTION

Do you feel that the translations aren't good?

GONZALEZ

Well, that fear does not enter my mind because many of the good things that you have read were translations. Who has not enjoyed reading translations? The British writers enjoyed the translations from the Russian by Constance Garnett which were later were found to be not too good translations, after all. I read a lot of Russian materials, not in the original, but in translation, and these translations help me greatly. So there's nothing to regret about translation. What is to be regretted about translation is that not more of it is being done. We should have more and more translations. I'm happy to say that one of my books was translated into Malay. And the Malay writers have a very well-coordinated organization. They sent me royalties. And they have very beautiful

editions of [my book]. And so I'm very grateful for that. Another old book of mine that was translated — also in Malay — is a collection of Filipino stories and it was very good.

DARMA

The question is very general, but, please, imagine this — suppose we have a literary work and it is translated into another language. From this language, it is translated into still another one. So it has been translated and retranslated into so many languages. Now, just imagine what will happen if the translation of the translations of the translation is translated again into the original language? Just imagine that, in this case, of course, as writers, we have to accept this. Sometimes of course we are not satisfied with the translation. But the translator can have his or her own interpretation, because, anyway, a translation must also be influenced by the translator's own cultural context.

QUESTION

When does a writer know he has reached a level of excellence?

DERIADA

I don't think the writer knows, I think the critics do. The moment I'm happy about my work, I have succeeded. But a writer who sees himself as excellent, I think, is going to harm his work as a writer.

ONG

I think there are a lot of criteria that one can use. As Leoncio

[Deriada] just said, sometimes you look to the critics; but not all the time, because sometimes, you know better. You ought to know what you're trying to do. If you listen to the critics, sometimes you end up not knowing what you started out trying to do. But anyway, when you have written something, it's public domain, and you never control what people say about it. Of course, you strive for standards of excellence, but, in a sense, your work is never done. As NVM [Gonzalez] has said, you keep on picking up the same thing, until you feel you've done it right.

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