

From Sign to Culture: A Study in Meaningfulness

MA. LILIA F. REALUBIT

I. Introduction

Contemporary literary writing in Bikol focuses on the region as a site of resistance to colonial policies and discourses. These new works are sensitive to the local particularities of community life, especially the collective self-image of the people. The concept of social responsibility is central to postcolonial theorizing. More than just serving a political purpose, the works point to an important aesthetic realization in postcolonial writing, especially with its use of postmodern stylistic devices as strategy to interrogate social theory and practices.

Two writers are presented: Merlinda C. Bobis and Alvin Yapan. Bobis wrote narratives in English and a performance play in two separate texts, English and Filipino. Yapan wrote his novel in Filipino. The works in Filipino will familiarize the non-Bikol with Bikol ways and values. English and Filipino are used by contemporary Bikolano writers as part of their daily experience.

How the texts generate meaning is our task. These texts being both language and literature involve both linguistic competence and literary competence; and as informed readers we bring to this analysis a knowledge of both competencies plus "an implicit understanding of the operations of literary discourse." (Culler 113-114). As Culler asserts further, it is a fact that the "texts which are regarded as literary are in any case language." (114)

This study is confined to the objective structure of language as employed in the text and in the process of literary communication, mainly through textual analysis and a form of inquiry called semiotics. Best known as an approach to textual analysis, it involves identifying the constituent units in a semiotic system and how they provide the potential for meaning. At most, this study tries out the use of semiotics in Filipino English and in writing in Filipino.

II. Sign, Signified and Signifier

We then draw on the concepts of semiotic theory such as sign and code "which enable literary works to have the meanings they do for members of a given culture." As vehicles or carriers of meaning, they relate with other signs, verbal, non-verbal or both. The linguistic sign is composed of a two-sided psychological entity called the signifier, or the material or physical form of the sign; and the signified or mental construct. The relationship is purely conventional, dependent on social and cultural conventions (Turner 13).

Signs are organized in two ways: by paradigms and by syntagms. A set of associated signifiers, though each is significantly different, is called a paradigm. An orderly combination of these interacting signifiers in a meaningful whole is a syntagm. Paradigmatic analysis seeks to identify the various paradigms and the elements which can substitute for each other; syntagmatic relations determine the combination potentials of language. A narrative syntagm is a linear model composed of three phases, a chain corresponding to the beginning, middle and end.

Identifying a sign requires reference to a code of which it forms a part; a framework within which signs make sense. The codes "we use are the result of conventions arrived at by the users of those codes, thus, also the values of the users will in some way be incorporated into those codes." (Fiske 4-5).

Other approaches are used in finding out how the texts generate meaning. A text is a structured ensemble with relatively solid symbolic combinations and certain formal relationships between the signs contained in it. Texts exist in relation to others. In fact, all texts are potentially intertextual because of their shared cultural, generic and linguistic codes.

Deconstruction is a kind of reading whose purpose is to reveal the assumptions behind a text for critical purposes. It "exposes silences and gaps between what is valued and devalued, traces the sedimentation of meanings and documents contradictions and ambiguities within texts and discourse practices." (Cherryholmes) To deconstruct a text is to read closely and focus on points where a binary opposition reveals incongruities in the logic or rhetoric.

Feminist criticism, seeks to restructure power relations with respect to discourse and social relations. Social inequality between man and woman in the Bobis narratives can be traced to unequal power relations and to the system of representation.

The semiotic notion of intertextuality is observed here. Julia Kristeva's two axes, horizontal and vertical, are especially useful in this study of Bobis and Yapan.

Semiotics is often encountered in the reader-response theory. Here the reader is at the forefront of critical attention. "In the text, only the reader speaks," declared Roland Barthes. That was followed by Michael Riffaterre's: the text "as language does not come to life without the active participation of an informed reader." Some of Bobis' narratives like "Storm" and "The Sadness Collector" would be enjoyed with an acquaintance of the regions ethnic and cultural ways. Yapan's *Ang Makamandag na Kwento ng Ibalon* would likewise be better understood with some knowledge of the Bikol folk story "Ibalon". The reader's construction of texts, while culturally mediated, is the source of meaning both in the cultural history and social ways that preceded and conditioned them.

A. Merlinda C. Bobis

1. White Turtle

White Turtle is a book of 'little narratives' written in English. It was first published in 1999 by the Spinifex Press Pty. Ltd. in Australia and re-published by the De la Salle University Press, Inc. for the Philippine Edition. The narratives are about the remarkable experiences of ordinary people that occur in distinguishable contexts of interaction. These are enigmatic tales, some mystic and quirky but all interesting. Of the 23

titles, we chose to study 13 stories which tell about how culturally colonized are the Bikols.

The subtitle "little narratives" comes from the French social critic Jean-François Lyotard (1984) who thinks that "grand" or "meta-narratives" may be replaced by little narratives which invoke the creative, playful and self-defining validation of local discourse...." (Loader 8)

In her "little narratives" Bobis uses postmodernist stylistic devices. Postmodern and postcolonial are sister movements with desires and efforts geared to being able to speak and bring the margins to the center. As Loader points out, a new definition of the narrative stresses "...the reality of a sequence (that) is not in the 'natural' succession to the actions which compose it, but in the logic which is revealed and risked and satisfied there; ...not the observation of reality, but the necessity to vary and transcend the first form available to man, i.e., repetition: a sequence is essentially a whole at the heart of which nothing is repeated; logic here has a liberating value—and the whole narrative with it;... Narrative does not show, does not imitate; the passion which can excite us upon reading a novel is not that of a "vision"... , it is that of meaning, i.e., of a higher order of relation, which also possesses its emotions, its hopes, its threats, its victories: 'what happens' in narrative is, from the referential (real) point of view, literally, nothing; what takes place is language alone, the adventure of language, whose coming never ceases to be celebrated.

2. Fish-Hair Woman

Estrella has a 12-meter long hair, which she considers as a painful memory, not a crowning glory. Only after the government war against the rebels does she realize its worth as a net to trawl corpses in the river where the bodies of the rebels are thrown. On times like these, the military and the "salvaged" watch as Estrella, the fish-hair woman, is at work.

Along the river bank, Sgt. Ramon, in charge of the operations, is rude to her and jealous of the Australian Tony McIntyre, who has chanced upon her by the river that moment and who becomes her lover. Tony is tender and sympathetic with Estrella even as he is horrified and inconsolable at the sight of the dead bodies on the water. After seeing the

macabre war, he almost breaks apart and so vows to take Estrella out of the village and bring her to Australia.

Associated signifiers in Paradigm 1 are Ramon who is rude to her and orders her about, and who is jealous of her Australian lover; plus the local ways and beliefs that pin her to the community; With Paradigm 2 would be Tony who loved her but would take her away from her people. Thus, the two men in Estrella's life represent two sets of associated signifiers in two contrasting paradigms--Ramon and Tony, each associated with the binary opposites of enclosure and freedom, respectively. Who does Estrella choose? Her dilemma is compounded by her love for her "beloved river." She knows Australia would not be home, though she believes in destiny.

On the last night of the trawl, Sgt. Ramon commands Estrella to go down the river to fish the dead. Despite her aching scalp she knew that she could not escape her final appointment. Seeing that she has hesitated, Ramon insults Tony and shoves his lips into hers "as she quickly retaliates by biting his lips and kicking him in the groin and lashing him with her braids and screaming cur,cur,cur!"

And as she, Ramon and the soldiers trudge to the river, her unbraided hair held by the soldiers like a bridal train, she remembers Tony and how he loves her, and is aware that even the soldiers knew that she would never leave her heart on the bank again.

Hair is the sign; its 12 meters length is signifier representing the concept or signified enclosure. Ramon and Tony are signifiers. Likewise, Ramon and his rude ways signify enclosure, and Tony who is loving and sympathetic to Estrella signifies freedom. Estrella, in hitting Ramon (he latter deserves it) has made her choice, and thus has drawn the interacting signifiers of the narrative to a syntagmatic close.

This story has connections with another story titled "Curse" which Bobis has also written for the same book. Her reference to memory goes beyond to her childhood. "She has secret powers inside," comments Pay Inyo, the village medicine man who also figures in that story where a little girl named Iya is born hairless. Note the close connection of the name Estrella with the nickname Iya, whom Pay Inyo helps with growing

her hair with his herbal concoctions. Here intertextuality shows that texts have contexts.

A Bikol notion correlates extraordinariness in the human body with outstanding abilities such as a bright mind, long life or good luck. In another way, the 12-meter long hair is a fabrication or human reality in hyperrealistic extremes

3. An Earnest Parable

The story "An Earnest Parable" puts together five different culinary experts of different nationalities, each speaking, eating and sharing with each other various delicacies and languages in pleasant camaraderie. The author provides a way for considering a dialogue of similarity and difference, the similarity for taste and speech, and the difference in lexicon and sound but which "Every tongue—owner's soundings, especially those that were heard as foreign noises, seemed to orchestrate in everyone else's middle ear into something intimate and comforting." This is saying that everyone in that circle each speaks a strange language that is appreciated by all.

There is a Sri Lankan tailor, a baker from Turkey, a Filipino cook, an Australian couple with the fish shop and the Italian butcher. They all speak, eat and listen with care and passion and share each other's languages and delicacies.

For the sign tongue is the signifier tongue; there is the signified language, or dialect, or foreign noises and speech—elements in the paradigm substitutable and each contributing to the meaning of the whole, when combined syntagmatically as they, the speakers, all decide to learn and taste each country's dish. We take the treatment of language here as "a material entity with priority over the content of the story" (Thornborrow & Wareing).

Indeed, one of the postmoderns whom Bobis uses as reference notices the absence of a conventional narrative closure in postmodern narratives.

4. Fruit Stall

The narrative reveals a series of cultural differences between a Filipina wife and an Australian husband. The husband divorces her for petty reasons: she was always sending something to her parents in the Philippines, and writing letters to them in her native language; she was mango-greedy and grape-starved, particularly during conception. He brings her to a hospital for abortion because he does not want a brown baby.

Unbeaten she puts up her own fruit stall in Australia where she likes the cleanliness and the freedom. She also has two reasons for not returning to the Philippines—her mother believed in strange gods and her father was “grapeless.”

Now in her own fruit stall, she hides her Filipino identity from her customers and imagines she has white skin. Besides her false pretenses and values, she has no love for her parents and much less for the land of her birth.

Two defined paradigms are presented through the text's sequential relationships: the husband's complaints and what he did to her as Paradigm 1 and how she, after the divorce, set up and managed her own stall, Paradigm 2. As a result she as sign and as signifier has become completely westernized, the signified—a real case of “faking.” No longer a Filipina, this one.

5. Border Lover

“Border Lover” is written like a soliloquy. On the flight back to Australia, the author addresses her grandmother as she recalls their last meal together and the banter, ideas and all. She tells her about what she learned of Western thought and of her “entry into their arts, their academies.” But Grandmother retorts.

What about your thought, our thought back here? Aber daw, are they interested in what I have to say as well, ha?

The conversation is interesting and humorous as well. The author explains:

That's beside the point, Grandmother, Look, Western thought can be so engrossing. How to explain—yes, feminism had saved me.—

Ano? Pimini-piminism? Just what are you saying, you silly—

Oh, yes, Gran, here's a perfect example. Feminism has saved me from the enslavement of the kitchen and had opened inspiring and once unimaginable doors for me—and it could have saved you too, you know, from all this toiling before your old bloody stove, if only—

Anong pakiam ninda?—I love my stove. LEAVE MY STOVE ALONE!

The Grandmother and the author each has her own sign system. The sign "native thought" of the Grandmother gains its value from its relation to other values like the author's "Western thought." Native thought, is saying what grandmother wants and doing what she wants. As to feminism, she claims the kitchen is her domain and for her stove to be left alone. Of Western thought, she says that the author's English is unFilipino and her accented dialect is strange. Grandmother's thoughts are hers--Paradigm 1, let's say.

The author reasons out that where she's at, it is necessary to talk in English although her mouth is still as granddaughter. But as she grates the coconut and ponders on her English as criticized by Grandmother, she remembers the white light of Australian winter and fish and chips. This is Paradigm 2--to include the author's musings of herself, her identity. On the flight back to Australia she writes a poem for her Grandmother and whiles away with "fancy squiggles on paper. At touchdown she acknowledges that everything is a bloody grist for the mill."

There are two discourses here--that of the author and that of the grandmother, two women, both strong in their way of thinking. . The younger has hoped to change the older but in the end acknowledges to herself that "everything is a bloody grist for the mill." We recall the first narrative in this series titled "An Earnest Parable" where Bobis writes:

You see, the tongue had an excellent memory. Even when it had moved to a new mouth, it still evoked the breath of spices, sweets and syllables of the former host. It has never known to forget anything, least of all the fact that it was once the soft, pink flesh of a South Coast mollusk...

I would take this as a declaration of her Filipinoness, that being in a foreign country, she will never be known to have forgotten her native language and her native country.

6. Colours

"Colours" tells of a man on the fourth floor of a flat which overlooks the bedroom of a woman he often stares at. The man had a special case of blurring in his eyes; but he can see the woman wearing bright-colored dresses and scarves.

They finally meet at the bus stop. She greets him first, but all he says is "That's a pretty yellow. Cheerful," to the conversation she tries to open. Some days later she knocks at his door asking for help to bring the husband to the hospital. He accompanies her and she is grateful. But again he does not talk even if he wants to hold her hand. Then she disappears and he never sees her again.

Paradigm 1—he is speechless in front of her. Paradigm 2—she tries to be friendly, but he hardly responds.

The succeeding paragraph rounds up the interacting signifiers in an orderly combination or syntagm. He admits that he has fallen in love but soon falls out of love before he could declare it. True, he has tried to make contact with the woman but then he says it is an absurd wish; he remembers "a tear on her lash but dismisses it as a limp metaphor;" then he falls asleep, a sound prosaic sleep."

There is a hint of play--the man is not serious with the game he has started. There is self-mockery in the way he regards himself, in his "repudiation of convention and "of the heroic maleness of post-modernist denial against "the female acquiescence of matter, of the world, history,

tradition" (Connor 1997, 24). Postmodern features too, can be identified in the use of the colors.

7. Storm

Take this 14-year old housemaid of this drunkard of a master who violated her in this story, and who thinks it is a coconut frond that hit, bruised and bled her.

To start with, the storm has blown so hard that afternoon that when the lights go out and she tries to light candles and fix the rattling window latch; the master has meanwhile forced her to sit beside him and locked his arms around her.

She must have fainted, she thought, for she saw a coconut frond with her own blood peering down from the hole on the roof. Then she hears the coconut trees keening like old women tearing--at their hair and lashing at her, howling with the wind "wake up, wake up! She got up!" and finds her breasts bruised and bloody between her thighs. She goes out of the house to gather more coconut fronds to "Dig into his skin. Dive each frond into him! As "the keening in her breast told her..."the keening like old women, "a metaphor used to mean it was a bad, and sad thing happening to her. And when she had driven the fronds into every part of him she was surprised that there was little blood which was not even hers yet she knew that she was never going to be the same again."

She has no one turn to except her childhood friends--at play as they fashion darts from coconut fronds, her childhood friends--who are always there in her hour of need.

The poor innocent girl--the signifier (and what sad things are happening to our young girls who are raped the signified) does not know what has happened to them. Coconut fronds, as we know, will hardly alleviate the pain and humiliation of rape. But it is used here as a symbol. This is irony "as response to a world perceived to be in fragments..." "a world in need of mending." Postmodernism "allows for the articulation of opposing attitudes and contradictory literary forms together." (Connor 123).

8. White Turtle

“White Turtle” is a mythical tale of a turtle charged with a most important task. “It bears on its back the dreams of Iraya’s dead children as it dives to the navel of the sea. Here are buried little girl and little boy dreams that later spread into corals which are the color of bones. After many funerals, they grow bigger and lighter in color, eventually turning white, bone white.

Sang and talked about by 70-year old Lola Basyon at a seminar in Australia attended by a crowd of anthropologists, journalists, writers and others, everyone in the audience loved the woman’s story as Lola Basyon chanted for the second time... “a wave of salty air... an unmistakable tang pervaded it...!” Then a little girl sees the turtle enlarge, white and beautiful. She wants to touch and pat it, but the mother grabs her little girl who cries in protest. One man argues it is all a hoax. This breaks the spell and everyone moves—some have doubted, a man has thought it was cruel; a woman believes it is smuggled in and not quarantined so someone has called the police.

Two groups talk about the turtle—those who believe: the little girl, Lola Basyon, and the policemen (as Paradigm 1), and those who do not—the mother of the little girl and others who have doubted, believed it was smuggled, and called the police—as Paradigm 2. Even the police are “dumbstruck” as Lola Basyon “wanted to plead for them to be gentle with it” but could not speak even in her own tongue. The two paradigms are brought together by the action of the police who instead of dealing with the “turtle” harshly, look at it “with eyes full of understanding... and lifted it with utmost tenderness as if it were a holy, precious thing.”

9. MacDo

“MacDo” tells of two sisters, the elder working as a clerk to support themselves, and the younger who goes to college even if she has a lung ailment. Money is not enough. Often they share an orange for breakfast and a sweet potato for dinner. An order for noodles is usually divided into two—*bating kapatid* or halved for sisters. In a cubicle without a window and on a small bed, they sleep in opposite directions.

That day at McDonald's, where they go for a hamburger, they wait for the X-ray results of her health examination. The younger sister coughs and the white napkin shows a red stain—blood! The sisters rush out as the diners notice the blood-stained piece of white napkin.

Two paradigms: (1) sisters work very hard to be able to sustain themselves. But there is not enough money so they skimp and deny themselves of proper food and healthy living conditions. As a consequence, the younger sister gets sick. (2) Small jobs with starvation pay are not enough to keep the body healthy. The signifier little pay brings sickness and poverty, the signified or meaning of the narrative.

10. The Kissing

Manolito at sixteen is the best cook in town. To each dish he concocts, he would whisper endearments starting with the ingredients pre-cooked and on the whole dish-cooked.

Padaba, padaba, padaba...beloved, beloved... Such was his chant to each yam, to the slivers of coconut meat, to every ingredient of this special dessert, wooing each one to be in its best flavor....

Employed in the service of Don Miguel, he is told one day to put the cooked dishes near the portrait of Clarita, the Don's daughter, who has died long ago. The portrait of the beautiful girl so moves him that he could not suppress his desire to kiss it. Just as he bends down, the Don sees him, strikes him with his fists, and immediately asks him to leave: "Get out of my house," Don Miguel screams.

Heartbroken, but undaunted Manolito decides before leaving to try kissing her again. After all, he hasn't really kissed her so "he could perhaps leave with the taste of actual kissing." That and the thought of Don Miguel's accusation has emboldened him. He suddenly stands up, saying:

I am strong and tall, very tall, two heads taller than the master of this house. And I shall prove him right in his accusation.

He tiptoes towards the dining table...circles it, arms outstretched, but the portrait is not there. Manolito then sinks into the empty chair and weeps.

For, besides kissing he wishes her to taste his *linupak*. He is proud of his cooking because of its taste. He also wants to look for the dish that could make the dead come alive. As he had said, to love and to cook were the two things he did best. Thus around the keyword "Kiss" are the variants passion, taste, desire, berry lips, flavor and a hundred other endearments--all used in the story which fit into the paradigmatic position of similarity which can be attributed to Manolito as Paradigm 1.

The place of the body in the analysis of gender... particularly desire (Kannch) in this case is anything but simple. There are two clear-cut groups--male and female in the binary view of gender relations. The female is an object of desire; thus the female here is a portrait on canvas. Manolito is the other signifier, an ardent lover of the girl he has loved, symbolized by the portrait... love, the signified. Much as Manolito craves to kiss the portrait, he is forbidden by Don Miguel, Paradigm 2. It is the failure of the second kissing when he leaves, still muttering his enchanted "padaba, padaba..." that to Yaya Conching meant he would be all right, syntagmatically.

11. Shoes

Young husband brings his little girl to visit her mother who works as housemaid to Mr. Jose, a septuagenarian who owns the land they till. The wife is a helper in the Don's house submitting herself in exchange for the family's temporary shelter in the rich man's farm. But on this day of the visit, the old man says that his wife has been sent on an errand and would take a while so he needs not wait for her return.

All the time, a baby's cry is heard from inside the house. Nestor, the husband, knows that the baby is his wife's and the old man's but he does not say anything. They leave after a while as he carries the child and her shoes which gave her much trouble on the road. In contrast is this rich septuagenarian with a beer-belly, who takes advantage of his tenant's wife and would not even allow him to see her. Nestor, the tenant, is the sign and the signifier of the signified conformism and fatalism. He has no will to

change his own attitudes nor the initiative to solve the problem. So the landowner takes advantage.

12. The Sadness Collector

It is a common situation in many families today. Husband and child remain at home while wife works as a domestic helper in a foreign country. Rica, now five years old, was just three when her mother left. Her father works in a factory and attends to her only in the evenings. Sometimes she watches TV and plays with the pretty little things sent by her mother. Early this year a picture of her employer's baby was included in the packages sent.

Father and daughter Rica are signs each distinct from the other. Sometimes Rica does not like to eat supper and father resorts to scolding, cajoling or telling stories. She likes especially the story of Big Lady who comes in the evenings to eat the sadness she has gathered from the homes. Filled with images about the Big Lady, Rica whiles away the time by drawing stick figures of her with a tummy that grows bigger everyday. She knows that it will eventually burst and she waits for that moment.

That evening her father comes home late as usual to avoid answering her questions about the baby in the picture. But he is drunk and shouts. "That whore!" (in reference to his wife who has decided to stay for another year in Paris) as he kicks the pots and pans in the kitchen that fall clattering on the floor. Rica screams and collapses as he takes her in his arms. The father, both in anger and remorse tries to assuage and comfort Rica who believes it is the Big Lady who has come back. For venting his anger at his wife he realizes that the havoc he created has caused his daughter's fears so he assures her of his love without telling his real feelings; he even hides his closed fists behind her back as she tells about the Big Lady while the father curses his wife. That Rica does not understand her father's pain is for her good.

Clearly, the father is the signifier which means sadness, the signified. Rica, also a signifier, and the father have had enough—two years to suffer the absence of the mother. Each tries hard to keep sane, each a paradigm complementing the other. It is the father's outburst that draws a syntagmatic whole and gives meaning to the narrative.

Actually, the notion of a Big Lady who comes at night to eat the uneaten food of children who refuse to eat supper is a Bikol folk custom. I remember that as a child, I used to be told about the Big Lady by the family help when I would refuse to eat supper or even finish the food on my plate. I see this now as a pre-constructed articulation connected to hidden spirits which Bikols use to threaten children who can be difficult at times.

13. Before the Moon Rises

"Move, Move," the soldiers order the villagers to move away with the butt of their guns, but they do not mind the old woman who lives alone in a hut away from the village. Everyone thinks she is deaf and a witch. Everyone is afraid of her and her long, long white hair. But this is emergency. The government is catching rebels and evacuation must be done before the moon rises.

Soon a girl looking for her dog chances into her domain. A soldier, only a boy really, the old woman thinks, orders her to get out. At this, the crowd jeers and dares him to command the old woman but he fires a shot with his gun hitting a girl. It is the boy-soldier who is shaken by the wound he inflicted on the girl. The old woman tears the hem of her skirt and applies a tourniquet on the girl's wound. The leader of the troop orders the crowd to get going but the old woman asks for the girl to be brought to her hut. "Who are you to _____?" the leader asks. "I am Selma of the North and South...." "Insolent hag!" the soldier points his gun at her. The crowd is tense.

But the old woman plucks a strand of her white hair and ties it around the gun's muzzle and begins to sing:

Hare baya Nonoy,	Don't, my Son,
Sabi kang bulan.	the moon said
Hare baya Nonoy,	Don't my Son.
Pagkawati an saldang.	Play with the sun.

At this the soldier throws away his gun and drops to his knees, offering his palm to be rubbed by the old woman. Without any sign the crowd converges in her hut, warming up to her. In a change of mood, they ask for

stories about wounds, a tall green man asks; about tears, says the weeping boy; about the moon before it rises, from another in the crowd. "My hut has become the village," she says to herself. Except the girl she was kind to curses her. The mother, hearing the girl, "shushes her.... The whole village echo the chiding sound while embarrassedly searching her face.

Against a hundred year old woman is the whole village; she, a kind and helpful one; the villagers, the opposite. Two opposing paradigms brought together through syntagms which draw them all together finally.

The old woman is the signifier. Unafraid, she faces the soldiers and the whole crowd. The villagers, despise her. Paradigm 1—all the kindnesses, she did for the rowdy villagers and rough soldiers contrast with Paradigm 2—all the wrongs they did to her. The signified?—the old woman age, character, dignity—the signifier..

14. Jar

In "Jar" the man seems to find his equal in the sexual game. Or is the woman here more adept and clever? She is a salesgirl in the man's antique shop, and today she is late again for work. Her alibi is that she attended belly dancing. But she knows she will be sacked from the job so she prepares the scene for the confrontation by leading him close to the cupboard where the favorite jar is kept. As he raves, she will keep rubbing the jar alternately with her stomach as he follows with his hand on her belly. She teases him because she knows he cannot resist her. In fact, she will ask: "Don't you want to know why my belly's growing a black mouth?" She rehearses the whole scenario which she creates. His answer is: "You can be funny sometimes—and I love it. Oh, will I miss you." He will say: "You can always come and visit, y'know." Then a little later, he will say: "But maybe, we can postpone your leaving, hey?"

This man is a sexist, a womanizer. He will get what he wants to satisfy his ego. Woe unto the woman who gets into his trap for he has no qualms of conscience. All that is Paradigm 1 and he is the signifier of the signified weak.

In this story he will leave it to the woman to leave or stay. And the woman will stay. Being in that condition, she is pregnant and she will stay.

And she needs the job. Of Paradigm 2, she is a strong and crafty one, the signified from the way she talks about her navel and her rubbing of the jar and her stomach. She signifies power and control over the man's actions.

The jar is a metaphor of the body. It is a prototypical model for describing parts of an animate being. The round part of the jar is belly, and the woman's provocative actions show that she can lure him. She has to work hard because a replacement has been taken. The fact that he cannot make up his mind about letting her go is of great advantage to her. Now she is determined to have her way, "to undermine the phallogocentric order that defines her as marginal." The signs man, woman and jar are associative or contrast each other but combine syntagmatically

15. Performance Poetry: "Cantata of the Warrior Woman: Daragang Magayon"

Introduction

This play is based on the legend of *Daragang Magayon* (Beautiful Maiden). It is one of the first legends the Bikols would remember and tell when asked for stories. Attributed to Mayon (short for Magayon 'beautiful') Volcano, whose peerless shape and fiery history, is Bikol's pride, the legend tells about Daragang Magayon who dies from a stray arrow when her two suitors fought. It is believed that from her body arose the volcano known the world over.

The play is full length in six parts. Written in two texts, English and Filipino, each shows the primacy of language as a shaping instrument to reveal the author's vision. The two texts cover almost the same number of pages—English, 122 and Filipino, 138, including the Prologue which consists of four parts each. Scanning the lines, I found almost a one-to-one correlation between the texts. Each text has four introductory parts in the form of a dialogue between a bird and the mountain. Very intriguing is the play of names of the gods and deities.

An epilogue with a coda completes the play. The whole text is suffused with a haunting sense of the beauty and grace of the finely crafted lines. I read both texts but I do not think I can do justice to the Filipino text and even write in it as well as Merlinda Bobis.

Summary and Analysis of the Play

A very young Daragang Magayon, twelve years old, is brought by her nurse Sirangan to join the village women in performing the ritual dance against Bakonawa, a mythical dragon or crocodile, who is known to eat the moon every fortnight thus causing a lunar eclipse. The woman, to them, could not fight. "...this his preening thing" they questioned. "See her arms smooth and shapely, how can they strain to bend the bow? "Instead they ask her father for sons to lead the tribe and to save a "peaceful future."

"Give me time. I must speak to my daughter," the Datu replied.

"Time? There is no time. You are a father to only one girl. Do you know how it is to father many lost sons?"

In one of the most poignant scenes, Datu Makusog pleads and cries to his daughter. Daragang Magayon, after "spilling this curse on women" and who would rather bleed by the blade than be bedded," finally consents. The Sandugo is celebrated; wedding will take place in two years.

However, in protecting Daragang Magayon from Datu Pagtuga, Sirangan is struck dead. "It is no brother who murders in my house," warns Datu Makusog, who calls off the marriage, admires and offers a toast to her beauty. The women are surprised that their princess should dance with them, her slaves. The men especially the Elders, disdain her inability to fight. They ask her father Datu Makusog instead for sons to lead the tribe and "to save a peaceful future." They even suggest that she be offered to the datu:is in neighboring tribes so she can bear sons who can be hunters and warriors.

In no time, a man named Ulap seeks refuge from "the wind," and Daragang Magayon admits him in her room. Enraged at this action, the Elders berate her. They threaten to feed her to the Bakonawa and give her as a prize to Datu Pagtuga. They even blame her for Datu Makusog's captivity by the men of Pagtuga.

It is the women who speak in her defense. On the matter of Ulap, "we own and will our bodies," they say. [This is now a feminist declaration. When she asks the Elders to go fight with her, not one of them accede. ,

Unafraid and not wanting to be left out, the women volunteer. As the women attested: Daragang Magayon had shown oneness with them: she had danced with them; she had waited with them for their daughters. To Sirangan she had suggested: "Let me offer my palms to our women. I will heal them."]

But there is restlessness in the tribe. The Elders fear a war without a leader. To the women, they ask: "Do you want to lose your sons again?" Ulap wants to help but he is silenced. Of Daragang Magayon's daring, they are skeptical of what they say was her "childish boldness." They knew she had to go to Datu Pagtuga within six days, but were afraid she may fail the test of virginity because she had slept with Ulap; and if Pagtuga knew, "it would be the end of all of them." But at the command from the First Elder to take her to Pagtuga, she is so like the leader ordering them: "Stand back I make the decisions here. Without my father, I take command." One of the women suggests a consultation with the *Kibang*, an oracular ritual. And in a minute she dashes to the sea in a boat without outriggers, falls from the boat that has kept rocking, and swims while calling out.

Shall I marry Pagtuga?

As she sinks into the "wall of fire-water" the women call her names, the boat rocks and she meets the sea-creatures in the leaping waters with the answer:

What fish does not swim against the current?

Typical of the tradition of the ancient gods to speak in riddles, the answer is tantamount to saying that she did not need to follow what the tribe demanded of her, i.e., to marry Datu Pagtuga.

No other sign in this play is bigger than Daragang Magayon, who also is the signifier woman and the signified freedom/power. Together with the village women, they make up Paradigm 1, in contrast with the men especially the Elders of Paradigm 2. A binary gender division is the cause of the opposition between the paradigms. The tribe by tradition regard the male as dominant over the female so a marriage between Datu Pagtuga and Daragang Magayon would assure them of a peaceful future except

that she does not like him. In their aspiration for peace and security, they have played along with Datu Pagtuga who "helped them once in a war.... [so she deserves a prize.]" Ulap could not be a contender; he was an outsider. "Stay away from this," she tells him.

Daragang Magayon's quickness of mind senses the Elders consternation so immediately she declares: "I make the decisions here. We will fight a common enemy, Trust me." But by this action, she has resisted male power and is seeking to restructure power relations. As an Actant (Greimas 129) she has participated in three semantic axes: communication, quest and ordeal--and succeeded.

The play can be viewed as a feminist paradigm of oppression and transformation through poetic lines that delineate and transcend a sexual circle game. Performing the *Kibang* gives a traditional color and consistency to the play as it juxtaposes the elements and interacting signifiers to round up the narrative and form a meaningful whole. The play of power between Daragang Magayon and the Elders interlinks syntagmatically.

As theater, the play has a balance of words and pictures which theater audiences today will not regret because they are the type who will appeal to more energy on stage.

How does drama mean? Sue-Ellen Case writes: "The signifier is the ensemble of elements in a theatrical production that compose its meaning--the text, the actor, the stage space, the lights, the blocking and so on. The signified is the meaning or message which is derived from this signifier by the collective consciousness of the audience" and/or reading. This paper would have included a comment on the theatre presentation of the play had I seen it. Play or dramatic writing, however, is not just language. It denotes elements fleshed out in terms of the codes of dramatic fiction. There is a legend of three mountains: Isarog, Asog and Mayon. Asog, the smallest of them, provokes Mt. Isarog to a fight by saying Mayon is better shaped than his rugged form. Isarog however scolds Asog and speaks fondly of Mayon. The play however insinuates that Pagtuga is from a neighboring tribe, which could mean Isarog's tribe. Of course, it could mean another one. (Am just being defensive, being of Isarog; no offense.)

II. Alvin Yapan

Novel: *Ang Makamandag na Kwento ng "Ibalon"*

Alvin Yapan's novel titled "Ang Makamandag na Kwento ng "Ibalon," marks an advance in Bikol writing (even as it is written in Filipino). It is in the form of a story within a story following the episodic "Ibalon".

The novel is written in twenty chapters of 497 pages. A 40-page Pambungad (Introduction) explains the writing of the novel—from the number of years it took him to write the novel, three years, that is, to the writers and books that influenced him. A list mentions Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Year of Solitude*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children* and Ngngi's *Petals of Blood*, among others.

The critical study will focus on the internal structure of Yapan's novel. In the first place, "Makamandag" is a creative response to his deconstructive reading of "Ibalon" and other folk stories. As basis he draws on Bikol cultural ways, particularly a process called *prolepsis* which says that "through culture people are allowed to project the past into the future, thereby creating a stable interpretive frame which is then read back into the present as one of the important elements of psychological continuity."

Secondly, there is none here of the typical novel that consists of one text that flows directly from beginning to end. "Makamandag" is rendered in two texts, each with a structure, the two structures of its own merging towards the end in a thematic unity. In treating the work as an autonomous entity, I am concerned with first, the internal organization of the first or fixed text in which the words are part of the narrative, and the second or free text in which the textual element is different but structural logic and thematic content are the same. My second concern is how these texts flow and throw light on the message that the texts enunciates. An abstract of the first text follows:

Bino, the rich Nueva's only son and heir, marries Selya, the housemaid, even if his parents disapprove of her. Misfortunes come to the family during the war. Bino is hit in the loins by a Japanese bullet thus incapacitating him; Selya is raped by the Japanese; his

parents are tortured and burned together with the palay in the granary.

Nene, Selya's daughter as a result of the rape, is a school teacher and entrepreneur. After running to Malacañan to demand a return of the image of the Virgin of Peñafrancia which people say the First Lady Imelda stole, she disappears mysteriously. Whether she followed Mr. O'Brien to America and married him is not clear.

Boboy, Nene's son with an NPA officer, lapses into a deep sleep after seeing his fiancée's dead body. Grandmother Selya entrusts him for cure to the Albularyo who tells him stories after stories, especially about "Ibalon". But Boboy disappears one time and his dead body is found floating with the nymphs in the river.

With Bino and Boboy's deaths, Nene's disappearance and Selya's preoccupation with cockfighting, "Makamandag" brings the readers at this point to limbo. Only the Albularyo, a close family friend who knew all their secrets and who saw Nene and Boboy grow up, is alive—the witness to all the events and circumstances in the novel. But he is sad saying: *"Pagtatakhan kong muli kung sa ganito na lamang ba magtatapos ang labat, sa isa na naming pagkamatay at pakikilibing."*

The main story represented by the above abstract is postulated here as the initial situation of the narrative. It stops at the death of Boboy, and his mother Nene's disappearance. Grandfather Bino dies and Selya, though alive could not be expected to do anything. Thus as a narrative the parts that should tell what next these characters should have done and will do are missing. To the parts such as complication, climax and resolution that will resolve the problem of inaction and passivity enunciated clearly in the underscored sentence above, he finds a solution in discourse. He conceptualizes a new structure by infusing the narrative with folk stories. He explains:

Maaring ipasok ang buong kasaysayan sa balangkas ng alamat. Ito ang tinangka kong gawin sa kuwento, pag-aaralan kung paano ipapasok ang buong kasaysayan ng Pilipinas sa loob ng isang kuwento.

Sa balangkas naman ng nobela matatagpuan ang pagtatangka kong paghalu-haluin ang mundo ng teorya at kritisismo at mundo ng malikhaing pagsusulat sa loob ng isang naratibo sa pagbasa ng epikong "Ibalon."

Why was "Ibalon" chosen among all those in the large repertoire of Bikol folk stories? Yapan writes:

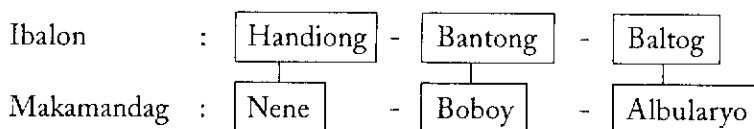
Kung bakit "Ibalon" ang ginamit na lunsaran ng aking nobela, personal ang aking dahilan. Bikolano ako at nais kong makapagbigay ng ambag sa pag-aaral ng epikong ito. Ang pangalawang dahilan ay ang pagtugon ko sa kontrobersiyang pumapalibot sa Ibalon na hindi naman daw talaga ito epiko, na orihinal na akda talaga ito ni Fr. Melendreras... nais kong patunayan sa loob ng aking nobela na hindi na ito mahalaga, na narito nga ang lakas ng epikong Ibalon, sa hindi pagkakahon nito sa mga tiyak na diskurso ng epiko, pagsasalin, tulang tradisyonal o kung saan pa mang kategoriyang nais itong ikulong ng mga katutubo. Ang usapin ng orihinalidad nito ay napako na lamang ng silbi bilang case study sa kursong *Methods of Literary Research* dahil inako na ito ng rehilyon bilang pag-aari nila.

What is the Ibalon? How was it amalgamated with the initial situation of the narrative? "Ibalon" is an ancient folk story about how the Bikol land was cleared of wild and gigantic animals and made ready for habitation. The first settlers headed by Baltog killed a huge boar; the second group led by Handiong got rid of the land and sea monsters, and built settlements, agricultural tools, household and cooking utensils, weaving loom, banca and a writing syllabary on stone. The leader Handiong made laws equal for all. A third man Bantong slew the monster Rabot, that the people rose in triumph and joy except Handiong who was perplexed. Here the fragment ends.

On the other hand, "Ibalon" does not have an individual author as it is the product of collective minds. It is a free text, a flexible narrative. A study of the internal structure of this folk story can reveal certain realities. Three main episodes can be drawn out—the stories of Baltog (lines 29-56), Handiong (lines 66-232) and Bantong (lines 208-224). The stories are held together by a structural logic and thematic content, i.e. by arrangement

of the episodes as events progress. Flexibility is another quality of a free text. In those ancient times, retelling the "Ibalon" was a must for the people in order to be freed from danger. To do this, one chose from any of the episodes or characters to create a story.

Yapan tries to do the same thing. The process of amalgamation involves the following processes. First, Yapan recomposes the Makamandag narration into episodes or significant units such as Nene's story, Boboy's story, Bino's story and Selya's story. Only the first two, plus the Albularyo's story, are fundamental; Bino and Selya's stories are backgrounders. The Albularyo, even in his role as narrator, cannot be left out; he is an active participant in the Nueva affairs. With almost everyone gone, it is he who picks up the threads. He tries hard to save Boboy; he is concerned about Nene, whether she has indeed gone to America; he thinks of Selya who has entrusted Boboy to him and whom he wants to marry even before Bino marries her. The episodes are narrative blocks, sequential by nature and non-causal in order. Putting together the episodes of the two narratives "Ibalon" and "Makamandag" in paradigmatic order results in a schematic diagram as follows:

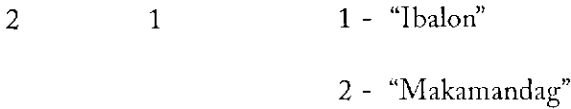


The "Makamandag" tale relates directly or indirectly to the "Ibalon" story in character and action. The major characters are presented in two different ways of binarism, namely: pairing, and ambivalence. Baltog and the Albularyo are both frustrated in love; Baltog loved Takay but it wasn't meant to be because she was a nymph. Albularyo loved Selya but Bino married her. Handiong did not understand that when he had captured—Oryol "natuklaw na siya ng babaeng sawa," he was already captivated by female python. Yapan explains some more:

Ang kapangyarihan ng isang lihim ay ang tamis ng awit ni Oryol...umalingaw-ngaw...sumusuot...lumilingkis...mapangakit sa tainga ng isang Handiong na hanapin ang pinagbubukalan ng tubig-awit na iyon.

Nene is active in family and community affairs. But she has fallen for Mr. O'Brien and follows him, she makes it appear, to America. Boboy's story compares with that of Bantong in that both do not understand what love is. Because of the death of Estela, his fiancée, Boboy refuses to hear stories about love; likewise Bantong, in a state of ambivalence, does not understand the friendship of Handiong and Oryol and why Handiong has acted differently.

To make things clearer, Yapan puts together the two narratives, the free text "Ibalon" and the fixed text "Makamandag," using the former to enframe the latter as in the diagram:



The "Makamandag" story or 2, is inside the "Ibalon" story or 1. Being on the outside frame which encompasses the inside story, its scope is meant to be comprehensive, total; or, that the sociocultural and psychological tales in the inner circle relate directly or indirectly to the first or outer story.

Three dialectics such as repetition, inversion and fusion in action parallel the relationship as regards character. Let us say that all key characters in both stories are frustrated in love. Handiong is in a confused state despite having teamed up with Oryol in exterminating the animals that infested the region. These lines from "Ibalon" disclose that teamwork:

ella misma le ayardo
para vencer a los monstrous
que infestabon la region.

(She herself helped him
vanquish the monsters
infesting the region.)

An interesting conversation between Boboy and the Albularyo on page 126 reveals the thoughts of Boboy; that Oryol clung to Handiong because he was strong and dauntless, and so used him to kill her rivals

among the animals. The Albularyo argues: "But what if it was Handiong who used her to clear the land and waters of those ferocious animals? Boboy's answer: "No, they used each other" Could Handiong have suspected a duplicity? This is negated when Bantong comes with the dead Rabot.

Hindi ito naintindihan ni Handiong kung kaya't pagdating ni Rabot, natuklasan niyang hindi pa pala niya natutunan ang kaniyang pakikipag-ugnayan kay Oryol.

Boboy's smart answers could easily mark him as a likely parallel of Handiong. But Yapan himself objects: "Ngunit si Boboy ay hindi si Handiong. Si Handiong ay hindi si Boboy."

It is Nene's story that compares with Handiong's story in that both are active leaders and both are carried away by their emotions. Both work hard for their communities but Nene deserts Sagrada to follow the American. She would have been a good and progressive leader of her people. Yapan says with regret:

Kung may nagpatuloy man sa kapalaran ni Handiong ay si Nene. Si Nene ay si Handiong. Si Handiong ay si Nene. Si Nene ay si Handiong, umalis sa Sagrada nang may pagkatulala sa kanyang mga mata.

And Handiong, instead of saving his people from Rabot, assigns the task to Bantong who succeeds in slaying the monster.

At this point, Yapan recalls the statement of the Albularyo:

"Pagtakhan kong muli kung sa ganito na lamang ba magtatapos ang lahat sa isa na namang pagkamatay at pakikilibing."

This caring statement of the Albularyo challenges Yapan to work out a discourse that would bring hope and life to the Nuevas, all throughout "Makamandag," from descriptions and incidents from "Ibalon" in almost every chapter. For instance, Estrella's corpse shows snakelike scratches around her neck to mean Oryol's doing. The inventions of Handiong and

his men are mentioned. By way of dialogue Boboy and the Albularyo discuss lengthily about Handiong and his relationship with Oryol:

There is, however, one other character in "Ibalon" whose encounter with the boar has not been fully explained. Yapan sees this as a responsibility:

Ang responsibilidad ng isang tagapagsalaysay: kung kailan ibubunyag ang lihim ng bawat kwento... ang responsibilidad ng pagkilala ng kani-kaniyang kakayahan sa pag-intindi ng mga tagapagbasa at tagapakinig.

This refers to Baltog, the first chief in "Ibalon" and who figures in another tale. It is known that folk stories bring forth other folk stories such as that of the nymph Tacay and the violet nymphs who loved mortals but could not marry them.

The legend of Tacay is one of the most beautiful in Bikol lore. She would reveal herself only during earthquakes and lightning and heavy rain, standing atop a white stone. A young man falls in love with Tacay, and much as she loves him too, it is impossible for a union of hearts because she is of another world. On this Tacay story, Yapan recreates Baltog by making him fall for another nymph but she dies, punished by the gods. On her grave a plant grows, which Baltog carefully tends until the boar destroys the plant. We know the story well, as told in the beginning of "Ibalon"--that Baltog killed the boar. That would have ended there but Yapan, wanting to do something better, makes Baltog gather the remaining shoots and transfer his residence from Botavara to Ibalon where he raises the plant called *linsa*, much loved by the people today as *gabi*. We see Baltog now as a man of positive action.

Taking Baltog as model, the Albularyo then changes his course of action. He decides to leave the room where many a haunted spirit dwelt. He leaves behind his papers and stories. He quits being an Albularyo and relinquishes his knowledge of magic. Boboy's death would be his inspiration. He tries to look for Nene, goes back to Sagrada, to Selya whose face is engraved and floating in his mind like the nymphs in the river of Sagrada.

By this, the matrix statement underscored above which spells out the inactivity and passivity, a problem of the Bikol people, finds resolution. Baltog then resolves his problem.

Nilisan ni Baltog ang Botavara dala-dala ang halamang linsa sa paglikas niya sa Ibalong. Itinanim niya ang linsa; binalak paramihin at palaganapin sa pagbabagong-buhay niya...

With that, Albularyo now knows what to do. On leaving his haunted room, he makes a declaration.

Hindi na magiging mahalaga sa akin kung maalis na nga ga talaga ang kamandag ng Kwento ng Ibalon sa pagkakatala sa papel, basta naipagpatuloy ang Kwento... ang mga kwento ay nananatiling buhay magpakailan man sa kanilang pagkakaluwal bilang mga alamat na walang kamatayan.

Albularyo has only one request-- for the story of "Ibalon" to continue to be told by the Bikol people.

Consider the contrast between "Makamandag" or the present, and the "Ibalon" or the past, as Yapan puts it, and we come up with a clear picture of the Bikol in two different periods of time. Of the first, coming up front in the text are signs: *mayaman* (rich), Don, Doña, hacienda and palasyo (palace) all signifiers of the signified wealth. The rich Nuevas are wrapped in themselves, with little or no concern for others. Their son Bino's grand wedding is definitely a show of wealth although it is Bino who minds less social levels. He, in fact, consoles Selya, the housemaid and prospective wife, when the Doña, his mother, claims as hers the fan given to Selya by an American. The signs *katulong* and *mahirap* referring to Selya signify her low status and as one not fit to use a fan, in the Doñas thinking. Unable to sire children due to a Japanese bullet that hit him in the groin during the war. Bino gradually sinks into inactivity and leaves the hacienda to his tenants. The signs *tumba-tumba*, *abaniko* and *sabong* all signify idleness, (cannot think of anything to do), *hindi inaruga si Nene* (did not take care of Nene), all mean inactivity and unconcern. In contrast are "Ibalon's" three stories of three active men picturing a past of heroic adventure. To clear the land for settlement and habitation and to provide for the essentials of life mean hard work.

Clearly, the crisis in the Makamandag story is resolved by the Albularyo's decision to go back to Sagrada and begin a new life with Selya. With this, we now have a whole novel informed by amalgamating the following parts:

Initial situation	The rich Nueva family that has brought them depression, low economic returns and death
Complication	Boboy's illness Nene's disappearance
Crisis	Boboy's death Albularyo's predicament Boboy's, Baltog's example
Resolution	Albularyo goes back to Sagrada

Makamandag is fixed, stable and with secure textuality. It is about a singular event, of how a family responds to the problems and vicissitudes of life.

The original of the free text "Ibalon" was a fragment that Alvin Yapan had to reinvent to make the narrative full and complete. By suggestion Baltog too loved a woman who was of another world, and because she could not reciprocate his love, Baltog called on the heavens for help. But the maiden died and on her burial place a plant grew. The monster Tandayag destroyed the plant and Baltog in anger killed it. Then he left Botavara to go to Ibalon where he brought the plant and where it thrived until today. By adding the Baltog episode the tale of the nymph Tacay was likewise amalgamated.

The novel now uses three free texts—the folk story Ibalon, the Legend of Tacay and the Legend of the Violet Nymphs. These texts are used to enframe the fixed text of "Ang Makamandag na Kwento ng "Ibalon." To enframe means to encompass "a convergence of difference and repetition." The purpose is for the fixed text and free texts to be read continuously and understood in its totality for full effect."

The use of folk stories to complete the action marks a striking technical innovation. Why was this done? This is a way to blend past and present while keeping the narrative moving into the future. Yapan in writing his novel looks through the characters in the folk stories of the past and the Bikol people of the present, uncovers what so long has been concealed about their lives and deaths and changes them into more practical people. Only Baltog is "realized" in the story because only he sees the genuine reality of life and so only he faces his personal horrors with character and intelligence. His counterpart, the Albularyo likewise understands what he must do—action and determination to make his life better and more meaningful. Like the old ways of storytelling, no dates are mentioned in the novel. The reader has to infer from the description of events and situations as Yapan "runs together the time of the epic with contemporary time." Thus, this too is the story of contemporary Bikol.

III. Code, Diachronic/Synchronic, Nucleus/Periphery Culture/Non-Culture

All those signs deconstructed from the texts above are elements of structure in the language system of the texts. Signs are relations of form rather than relations of meaning. Words do not derive their meaning either from the psychological intentions of the individual speakers or from the things the words describe. Rather their meanings arise from the place in a system of signs and their relations of difference or sequence with other terms in the system (Slater 1998,233). As building blocks of meaning, they function as vehicles, interpretants and interpreters of this particular society at a particular time (Slater, 239).

Our task has been to deconstruct the text in relation to the sign system or code in which the meanings are drawn. We now organize the signs that bond together as actual social constructs (the numbers refer to their order of appearance in the text.).

White Turtle

Narrations

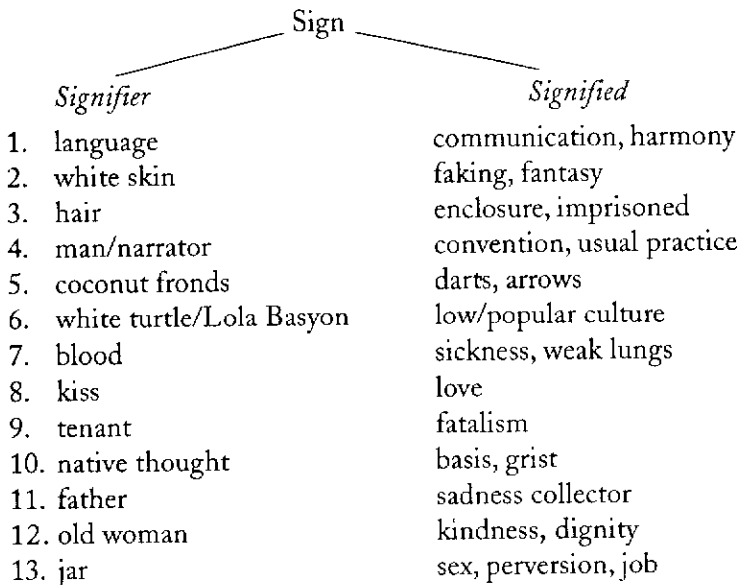
1. An Eastern Parable
2. Fruit Stall
3. Fish-Hair Woman
4. Colours

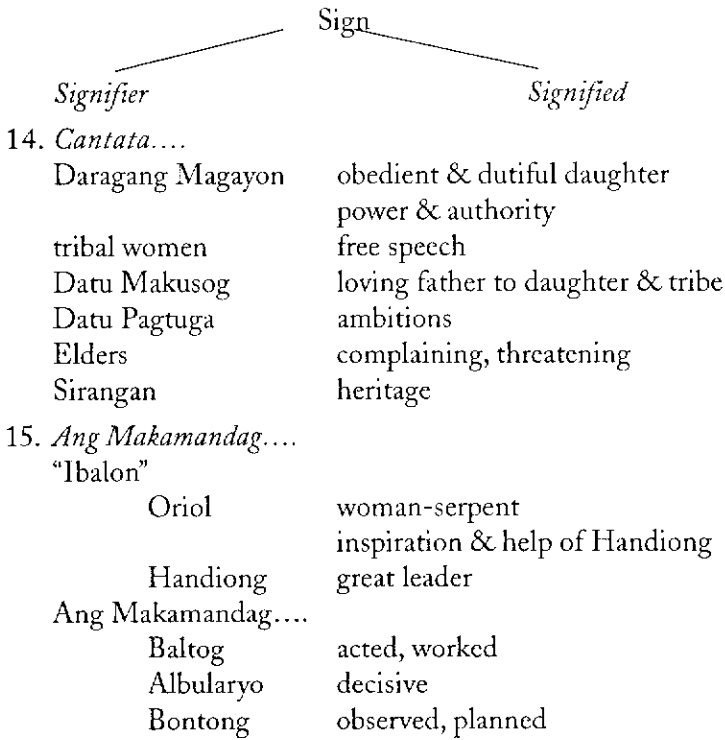
Sign

- tongue
- white skin
- hair
- man/narrator

5. Storm	coconut fronds
6. White Turtle	Lola Basyon/White turtle
7. MacDo	blood
8. The Kissing	kiss
9. Shoes	tenant
10. Border Lover	native thought
11. The Sadness Collector	father
12. Before the Moon Rises	old woman
13. Jar	sex, perversion
14. Cantata of the warrior women	freedom to act and speak
15. Ang Makamandag.....	superstition

Recall that every sign is composed of a signifier (the terms which the sign takes) and a signified (the concept it represents). Signs have multiple meanings. Within a single language one signifier may refer to many signifieds (puns) and one signified may be referred to by many signifiers (synonyms). In Story 1 of *White Turtle* the signifier language may be synonymous to communication, harmony or understanding in that community. Words then derive their meaning from their place in a system of signs and their relations of difference or sequence with other terms in the system (Slater 1995, 233). Let us illustrate:





Binary relationships are important organizing factors predominant in the structure of texts. Always there are two poles positive A and negative B, and between are "spaces" or "areas of neutralization" where the poles do not directly operate. Specified below are the poles and spaces in the texts:

A	↔	Area & Neutralization	↔	B
1. Filipina woman	↔	white skin	↔	Australian husband
2. Estrella	↔	2 meter hair	↔	Filipino Ramon
3. Man	↔	convention	↔	woman
4. Viring	↔	coconut fronds	↔	master
5. Lola Basyon	↔	white turtle	↔	foreign audience
6. sisters	↔	blood	↔	poverty
7. Manolito	↔	kiss	↔	employees
8. tenant	↔	daughter	↔	landlord
9. narrator	↔	native thought	↔	grandma
10. father	↔	daughter	↔	DH wife
11. old woman	↔	kindness & concern	↔	villagers & military
12. salesgirl	↔	jar	↔	boss

Story 1 "An Earnest Parable" is without opposing poles.

The play *Cantata of the Warrior Woman: Daragang Magayon* is similarly organized but here she is the sole protagonist with three antagonists:

A	Area & Neutralization	B
Daragang Magayon	↔ fearless, daring ↔	Datu Pagtuga
Daragang Magayon	↔ authority, powers ↔	Elders
Daragang Magayon	↔ concern, empathy ↔	tribal women

Likewise with *Ang Makamandag na Kwento ng Ibalon* which puts together the Bikol ancient fragment "Ibalon" and a contemporary story:

A	Area & Neutralization	B
Daragang Magayon	↔ fearless, daring ↔	Datu Pagtuga
"Ibalon"		
Baltog	↔ anger ↔	boar
Handiong	↔ put up settlement ↔	animals
	seduction/deception ↔	Oriol
Bantong	↔ Handiong ↔	Rabot
Ang Makamandag.....		
Baltog	↔ Tacay ↔	encouragement
Albularyo	↔ Selya ↔	bad memories, magic & superstition

It is clear the binary poles A and B oppose each other. In Story 2 "Fruit Stall" the Filipina woman is the given. Divorced by the Australian husband, she fend for herself but she has been affected strongly by his harsh treatment and criticisms that she resorts to hiding her nationality by faking her skin color. In Story 3 "Fish-Hair Woman" Estrella struggles for freedom from Sgt. Ramon who orders her to fish for corpses with her hair and who is jealous of the Australian Tony, her lover. The man in "Colours" Story 4 repudiates convention by turning away from the woman who expects him to press his suit but goes home to sleep instead.

Fourteen-year old Viring does not know that she has just been raped by her master. But the coconut trees were like old women continuously

mourning for her to thrust the coconut fronds she used to play with into her master's body. Story 9 "Shoes" will make one want to scream at this young husband who knows his wife is being abused by the landlord but who would not peep a bit because he knows that he would be driven away from the land he tills. The point is this: the given or "that which is cognized in its relationship to B is that which is not." In other words, the text is defined by context. The amalgams A and B are juxtaposed to one another for clarity in relationships.

This exploration of the forms of language shall lead to a set of signs shaped by the language producer and reader called code. Signs refer to codes (Eco 1983) and organized into meaningful systems depending on the code.

But signs in isolation are not meaningful. One has to be familiar with the appropriate sets of conventions and interpretation must be in relation to each other. For instance, in Story 6 white turtle and Lola Basyon relate as they are both old and originate from the same country. The tenant's visit to his landlord (Story 9) is arranged by his brother before the visit that he does not accuse the old man of abusing his wife or else they lose staying in the land. In this case, codes are not simply conventions of communication but rather procedural systems of related conventions which operate in certain domains (Heath 1981,130).

A step towards codification of the text as locus of significance is generated by expansion and conversion. Expansion transforms one sign into several signs; by expansion, each sign extends the model of the sign in order to look at higher orders of meaning.

1. Through respect of each other's language, there is harmony and understanding within the group, and for each loyalty to one's own heritage.
2. With the break-up of the marriage with the Australian husband, she resorts to faking and fantasizing that she has white skin.
3. Feeling confined and shackled by her 12-meter long hair, worsened by a strange military order that she had to comply with, she chooses

relief and freedom with a foreign lover over a rude hometown admirer.

4. He repudiates convention (when he loses interest in the woman) without any qualms of conscience.
5. In rural children's play, coconut fronds are darts, which young Viring uses to strike at her master so the latter would obey the old women's keening, entirely innocent that he has just raped her.
6. The pleasant sharing of information about the white turtle suddenly turns into suspicion until Lola Basyon finds herself alone with the policemen.
7. The blood in her cough confirms that she is sick.
8. A young man falls in love with a girl's portrait and kisses it, but gets dismissed from his employ by the girl's father.
9. Blocked by traditional modes of thought, this tenant simply keeps quiet even if his wife is abused by the landlord.
10. Narrator finally agrees with her grandmother that the "native thought" has advantages.
11. This father will love and care for his young daughter despite the pain of his wife's absence.
12. The villagers and the military are rough and rude to the old woman, but she shows them kindness and concern.
13. The salesgirl flaunts herself to the boss so she can be re-appointed.

Cantata of the Warrior Woman....

14. Daragang Magayon leads the tribe with loyalty & obedience concern & sympathy, bravery and fearlessness to save the tribe and herself, but she is eventually hit by an arrow and dies.

Ang Makamandag...

The ancient Bikols were a determined people during colonial times, but their sense of well-being was influenced by foreign values which led them to bewilderment and confusion; in time, however they learned to act and were determined to change their lives.

Conversion lays down the equivalence by transforming and transforming through the process of reduction several signs into one collective sign or differentiated units as:

(1) Receptivity and adaptability to other languages brings harmony.	}	respect & understanding	inter-personal	}	social code
(7) Small earnings cannot sustain health thus sickness results					
(5) Child labor destroys young girls	}	child labor			
(9) Fatalism and conformity continues oppression					
(10) Native thought has its advantages	}	ideological			
(4) Convention can be repudiated.					
(2) Foreign discrimination influences wrong values.					
(3) Foreign connection is preferred than oppressive local practices. Some foreign peoples tend to look down on us.	}	negotiated	ideo-logical code		
(8) Love is pain.					
(11) Love is caring.	}	love			
(12) Older women are under and more understanding-interpersonal					
(14) Women resist male power and restructure relations.	}	feminism			
(15) Baltog, inspired by Tacay his love, acts again to re-plant his gabi.					
(16) Albularyo threw away his magic and superstition and determined to go back to Sagrada to rebuild their lives.	}	self-reliant work ethic			

None of these is exact; we are more interested in the process. The codes and subcodes on the right margin are tentative. Coding entails the whole community and it is a long process.

But codes are realistic and nonetheless conventional (Belsey 47). Realism is plausible not because it reflects the world, but because it is constructed out of what is discursively familiar (Fiske and Hartley 1). What is being examined is the work performed through them. It is this work or activity which constitutes or transforms the individuals using the codes, performing the work, the individuals who are therefore, the subjects of semiosis. In story 12 the village thinks the old woman is a witch. It turns out she is kind and concerned about them. Things turn out so well that they are ashamed of themselves. There is Story 8 (The Kissing) where a young man falls in love with a beautiful girl's portrait and kisses it, but the dead girl's father who sees him in the act immediately dismisses him from employment. When the young man tries to kiss it again in defiance, the portrait is gone.

Codes are not static, they change over time. It is not always correct that addresses and addressees share an identical code; in fact, in most actual situations, it is usually more accurate to speak of the overlap, rather than the coincidence of code. Take "Border Lover" where the addresser and addressee each talks about different viewpoints until much later the former concedes the advantages that "native thought" brings. We can take the young man in Story 4 "Colours" who goes against the usual practice of courtship as defying convention. Related ways may evolve into new conventions.

But the establishment of a code takes a long process of social interaction among so many individual transactions until reduced to an essence. Those who share the code are members of the same interpretive community (Fish).

The Bobis and Yapan narratives border on social codes. Generally, a social code is how an individual may act in a social environment. Within the social code are subcodes which are in a relation of mutual exclusion. The interpersonal is a subcode, to which the stories of rape (5) ill health (7), rudeness (3); to behavioral subcode belong stories 12 and 11; to bodily subcode is story 2. Ideological code encompasses dominant and negotiated subcodes in stories 2, 5 & 6 respectively.

Feminism in Cantata is cultural with identification in ritual. But Bobis' interpretation is political—to contest male predominance. "Ibalon"

has a female symbol in Oriol, the woman-serpent, who has charge over all the animals. Handiong has to befriend her so she helps him kill them. The relation between Oriol and the animals is one of authority and subjection.

The code is systematic and therefore synchronic. This means that its simultaneous aspect can be isolated from its diachronic and historical aspect. It is likewise possible to reduce it to "a finite number of basic differential units. For instance, a social code as "Friendliness is good salesmanship" in reference to Story 2 "Fruit Stall" (9) may be considered/reduced to bodily code (she thinks she has white skin), behavioral code.

Let me now turn this over to Juri Lotman (1922-1993) the leading figure in the Moscow-Tartu school. We are running into cultural studies and it is in Lotman's works where we find a distinct methodology. His structural semiotics had Roman Jakobson, Vladimir Propp and the works of the Bakhtin circle as members of the group. It was they who laid the first theoretical depiction of culture. According to them, "everything which is in any way associated with meaning in fact belongs to culture and natural language is the central operator of culture" (Zylko, 393).

Lotman agrees with Saussure in favoring a separation of the diachronic from the synchronic. The diachronic aspect is the arrangement of elements in a system at a single point in time; the synchronic is how the meanings of words form over time. It is the diachronic that takes priority. The diachronic is capable of recording change and dynamism while the synchronic is static and brings to attention only the nuclear elements. All these however are essential to the culture as the source of its future development. The separation of the elements in these texts here follows:

<u>Diachronic</u>	<u>Synchronic</u>
White Turtle (book)	
White skin	language
12-meter hair	blood
convention	Grandmother
coconut frond	kiss
blood	father
White turtle }	
Lola Basyon	
tenant	
Native thought	

Jar

Diachronic

Cantata of the Warrior....

Tribal women were at first
critical of Daraga....

Ulap

Elders were at first resistant,
then non-committal.

Ang Makamandag....

"Ibalon"

Baltog remained idle
after killing the boar
Oriol was deceptive
sometimes

Ang Makamandag....

Nene disappeared

Baboy dependent on
the Albularyo.

Synchronic

Daragang Magayon
as brave & fearless
as woman with
power & authority
sympathy & concern
loyal & traditions
obedient to father.

Handiong fearless
fighter, wise leader
and feeling man
Baltog planned his
Moves in killing Rabot

Albularyo threw away
magic & superstition
and decided to go
back to Sagrada

Elements in the diachronic column may change today or the next. Not all women want to change their native Filipina skin appearance to white. Hair, long or short, depends on the person or on fashion which comes and goes. When a man loses interest in a woman, it is his right; nowadays men do not always follow convention for them to court a woman. It is rural children who play with coconut fronds as make-believe darts. Low or popular culture and even native thought may change depending on reactions to Western influence, Will tenancy be forever? The poor are poorer and more fatalistic. But a jar's earthy material and provocative design will be a tease to some or a thing of value to others.

Cantata's tribal women are like women critical of other women, but they change their opinion of Daragang Magayon later. The Elders, a group of older men, are either disagreeable or angry with Daraga especially when she admits a lover Ulap into her room.

In "Ibalon," the first part of *Ang Makamandag*, two characters are problematic—Baltog who isn't heard of after killing the boar, and Oriol, whodeceives sometimes.

The second part features Nene, with entrepreneurial and leadership abilities but disappears, and Boboy who does not know what to do with himself.

The synchronic elements are static: There will always be language in whatever form. Grandmas are usually voices of wisdom. It is a clinical truth--vomiting blood is a sign of weak lungs. A kiss is love unless it is of betrayal or death. Father is at the other end of mother so without the latter, he bears the pain and sadness.

Another way is expressed in spatial terms such as the relationship between nucleus, or that which is structurally organized, and periphery, or that which is fluid, unorganized. The continuous alternation of nucleus and periphery is one of the mechanisms for structural dynamism." (Shukman) Below is a paradigm of structural features.

Nucleus

Periphery

White turtles (book)

That which is described:

- sickness
- unemployment
- rape
- child labor

Considered existing:

- Foreign connection
- Rich exploit poor
- The valuable:
- The 2 sisters
- The Kissing
- Young man
- The border lover
- The father
- The old woman

The valueless

- The seduction scene in "Jar"
- The military ordering
- Estrella to trawl corpses with her hair.

Nucleus

Recognized as important:
In Synchronic approach:
Native thought
Love
Old women have character
and dignity

Cantata of the Warrior....

That which is described:
Darangang Magayon (D.M.)
Tribal women

Worthy of Description
D.M. & father talking
about their disadvantages
as woman and the need
to save tribe.

Well organized
The oracular ritual
D.M.-Wap dialogue

The valuable:
D.M. asserting herself

Recognized as important
in synchronic approach;
Tribal woman free to
assert rights

Ang Makamandag....

"Ibalon"

That which is described
Brave and skillful fighters
Builders
Democratic leaders

Recognized as important
Thinking and sensitives
Handiong

Observant and expert
shooter Bantong

Determined Baltog

Periphery

The forgotten, submerged code:
Baltog

The valueless:
To give D.M. to other datus
so she can produce an heir.

That which is not described:
Baltog, after killing the boar
Why Handiong was shocked
upon seeing the dead Rabot
End or story

Ambivalent
Oriol

We understand that the "Ibalon" folk story is a fragment. But what are not described because they are lost are interesting and key events that could spell its significance. Oriol as a woman-snake is likewise of some importance, especially her relationship with Handiong. The polarity between Handiong and Oriol is first gender and later authority. Oriol's has captivating voice when she is not a fabulous snake. Her duplicity attracts Handiong all the more. He looks for her and ties her up so she won't get away but she does. At a later instance when Oriol tries hard stance, Handiong goes to her and together they work on the animals.

We now move on to the second part of *Ang Makamandag* .

Ang Makamandag

That which is described:

Rich disdain poor
Japs rape Selya, burn
parents & granary

Worthy of description:

Nene's entrepreneurial
and leadership skill
Nene goes to Malacañang

The top:

Baltog goes to Ibalon
to plant "gabi"
Albaryo decides to put
aside his magic and
goes back to Sagrada

That which is not described:

The disappearance of Nene

Not worthy of description:

Agta Agatha nurses Boboy
Lengthy childhood games

Ambivalent:

The bottom, valueless:

Selya's indulgence in
cockfighting

The synchronic approach with its emphasis on the static system tends to bring to attention the nuclear elements, and the diachronic with its attention on the extra-systemic elements is capable of recording change and dynamism. We recall Baltog of the fragment "Ibalon" and the strong man who killed the boar who destroyed his gabi plants. We find his reappearance here in contemporary Makamandag as one who having lost his love Tacay, a nymph, honors her memory by re-planting the gabi which thrives until now. Lotman calls this a forgotten, submerged code and explains its re-appearance:

This state of affairs is possible inasmuch as a culture's memory... preserves not one, but a whole set of metasytems which requests its behavior. These systems may be mutually not connected and have different degrees of actuality. But the significance of the ambivalence as the dynamic mechanism in the light of which the text was forbidden, does not disappear, but is preserved on the periphery... (Shukman 316).

Lotman puts "a forgotten, submerged code" under periphery but we consider Baltog's role in re-planting the gabi as a nuclear act, that which encouraged Alburyo to discard his supersititious beliefs and go back to Sagrada and make things work. The continuing alteration between the elements in the two columns may exchange places, in fact; the more movements assures dynamism.

The ambivalent element here is Nene's disappearance--was she annihilated by the snake as the arrangement of her letters to Boboy seem to indicate? No longer does the Alburyo believe this as he is determined to look for her when he returns to the hometown.

Summary

This is an initial attempt in the study of semiotics on very limited literary data: four texts consisting of two mythic, "which told of what must take place," and two narratives, "which told of that which really happened," which when put together follow a system of signs organized according to codes and subcodes which reflect the peoples values, attitudes and beliefs, assumptions and practices.

The findings, very tentative, still inexplicit (as codes are) follow: generally social and interpersonal codes, explicitly feminist and some ideological ones. The diachronic elements show there is hope for cultural change as the synchronic elements or static ones manifest a culture that will hold. There is an apparent continuous alternation between the organized and unorganized elements and between the mythic and narrative.

Actually there was more to just deconstructing for codes. The binary relationships needed a more methodological handling which Saussure, Jakobson, Barthes and Chambers could only mention but did not specify.

Thus far, the cultural studies have consisted mainly of descriptions of cultural products and activities.

An obscure structural semiotician Jury Lotman showed some precise methods which I adapted. To be able to touch on culture through Lotman was some challenge. This paper also digresses from Saussure's synchronic approach in prioritizing langue over parole to establishing meaning of a sign in the social context of its use.

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