

# What Women Want: Subversion and Desire in Filipino Women's Erotic Writings

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## I. Those Brave Radical Chicks

Let me begin with an anecdote.

At the 2002 UP Writer's Workshop held in Baguio, a rather lengthy and heated debate took place over a short story written by a female fellow, Faye Ilogon entitled "Signs."<sup>1</sup> A fragmented, post-modern tale about one woman's journey from childhood to motherhood, the story generated a great deal of (sometimes furious) interest as much for its style as for its depiction of female sexuality. For each episode of the story talks about one of the men in the narrator's life, from the father to the many lovers to the son. And many of the episodes deal with sex with a strange, unfeminine sort of detachment, and also perhaps a little bit of wicked pleasure. Even her "first time" was for her only little better than a visit to the dentist, devoid of sentimentality or fear or even genuine excitement. After the guy she did it had left, the narrator simply hung out the sheets to dry, to "bleach memory off the linen."

But among the numerous comments fired at the story, what stuck to my mind was that one made by poet Domingo Landicho. Unsure about the author's gender, he said (in Filipino) that if the author of "Signs" was a woman, then he would tip his hat to her. She was articulate and brave, and she would certainly go far in her writing. But if the author was a man, then that man should quit writing stories about sex and just "do it." (This is just a paraphrase, not a transcription, but I think I have captured Mr. Landicho's exact meaning.)

I am sure that Mr. Landicho was trying to be flippant (workshops would be deathly boring if all the fellows and panelists were relentlessly serious); nevertheless, it's difficult to ignore the implications of that joke. Is it true that most women are automatically given credit for daring to write the erotic? Are all—or even most—erotic writings by women radical? Or does the simple formula of woman + erotic, when viewed in the light of women's sexual oppression, always result in some kind of literary revolt, worth at least, as in the case of "Signs," a condescending applause.

These questions matter because they say something about the way the erotic writings by women are being read and analyzed. In my opinion, we are doing women's erotic stories a great disservice by lumping all of them under some neat label like "Feminist Literature" and calling them "radical" without really examining the images of women that they posit. What is it that these erotic writings are really changing, aside from the fact that the women represented in them bristle with, struggle against, and celebrate their desires, instead of just mooning about love? Do they give us a new understanding of the erotic, something that their counterpart in the literature written by men does not offer? What are they doing to and for Philippine society, sexuality, and literature?

In her review of the 1992 anthology *Forbidden Fruit*, Feminist scholar and critic Judy Ick gestures towards the interrogation of the erotic writings of Filipinas. For instance, looking at a number of the stories in the collection, she notes that Filipino women writers seem to be oddly "cold-blooded waist down." Whether they are writing about mermaids or adulterous women or convent-raised girls, the writers in *Forbidden Fruit* refuse to talk about their vaginas, often resorting to sea or flower metaphors when pressed to talk about that part of their body. This refusal is understandable in the writings of men, for whom the vagina might represent the threat of castration. But in the writings of women, especially women whose project is to inscribe the female body and experience, this comes as a shock. "[These women] seem to have internalized,...(a) particular patriarchal fantasy of the female body," (Ick 172) a fantasy where the female body poses no threat of castration because its vagina has been completely obliterated.

Ick's review hints at the many tantalizing possibilities for reading women's erotic writings. Indeed, she even discusses some of the contradictory readings that a single text can generate. Toward the end of

her essay, for example, Ick suggests that it is possible to read women's reticence about their sex organs not as a sign of shame but as an attempt to describe female sexuality as dispersed, diffused all over the female body. Unlike most men for whom sex equals the phallus, women experience sexual pleasure just about everywhere in their bodies. They can get aroused by massaging men, by slicing fruits and vegetables, by riding in cars. What this implies is that those stories by women, which have been branded as "conservative" because they do not talk about the manifold delights of penetrative sex, may in fact be attempting something "radical": they may be moving away from a phallus-centered kind of sex. Which makes stories, like Bing Sitoy's "Weight" and Joy Dayrit's "Mist"—stories in which the sex is more felt than read, stories which remain silent about vaginas—sound, well, pretty rebellious.

I bring this up to show that the question of the radicalism of Filipina erotic writings is never a simple one. Often subversion and complicity are so intimately bound up, that to claim unequivocally that a story is radical may be to miss contradictions inherent in it. Some stories (like Maria Elena Paterno's "Oil") which seem hopelessly "antifeminist" in their depiction of female objectification may in fact offer moments of affirmation. And other stories, which talk about sex explicitly, may only be recuperating old images of women as passive sexual objects. These contradictions are evident in the story "The Other Regina" by Susan Lara, which is arguably one of the bravest and most unconventional story in *Forbidden Fruit*. A passage from the story reveals these contradictions.

What was a woman supposed to do while her man fumbled with his belt, button and zipper? Seven years of marriage to someone who expected her to regard sex as a purely clinical, physiological function had not taught her anything. She learned eventually, with Scott, but that first encounter made her feel so graceless. She was grateful when he began kissing her again, his hand reaching down to remove her panties. His dexterous fingers slid and skated and circled and made figure eights in her moisture until she thought she was losing her mind. And then, at last, he was on top, parting her legs, entering her, exploring her viscera, it seemed. No, there was no truth to the claim that length did not matter. It did. Scott's long enormous rod reached parts of her that a shorter one could

never have reached despite any amount of desperate, pathetic thrusting. (Lara 69)

I showed this story to my Humanities class, from which it drew various reactions. Certainly, most of the students were amazed by the story's candor. They considered it radical that the story's narrator seems oblivious of the moral codes that govern married women. The objectification of the male body, which culminates in the gushing praise for Scott's "enormous rod," is also a powerful overturning of Mulvey's "woman as image, man as bearer of the gaze" dynamic. And, of course, the fact that Scott "strums" Regina down there, an act of female pleasuring, can be interpreted as a denial of the old notion that women are nothing more than "visceral vessels" that men fill, nothing more than bodies to be used for men's pleasure.

But a number of students also criticized the story for its handling of the woman's initiation rite. They were uncomfortable with the idea that Scott was "directing" the whole event, while the untutored Regina merely waited for him to reach down and remove her panties. Of course, they recognized that Regina might have been socially conditioned to think that women should let the men make the move, yet they were still unhappy that her liberator had to be a man. The emphasis on the man's rod also made the story rather phallus-obsessed, as if a woman's ultimate happiness consists in being penetrated by a huge cock.

In short, the unproblematic attachment of such labels as "radical" and "conservative," particularly to erotic literature by women, may fail to recognize the gorgeously complicated workings of *power*. Michel Foucault has already taught us that power, rather than something monolithic that must be acquired or overthrown, is in fact unstable, multiple, and ubiquitous. This is the reason why even in positions of powerlessness, women may experience empowering sensations of pleasure. Thus, the blind masseuse in Elena Paterno's "Oil," symbol of female objectification, is able to seize physical delight in "rearranging muscle and awakening skin."

She was down so close to him now she felt his heat and smelled his skin and she was breathing hard from all the pushing. She felt something come free. Then her hair around her face, the shampoo of this morning's bath and oil on his skin. She breathed it in,

closed her eyes and let her face drop just a little bit closer. (Paterno 36)

In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Ellen Willis discusses this notion of power at length. She claims that power is "a system of overlapping contradictions." Although men enjoy "specific economic and social benefits from male supremacy," this same male supremacy creates situations in which the dominant (male) class becomes dependent upon the subordinate (female) class, thus giving the latter "an opening wedge of power." What does this have to do about female sexuality? Ellen Willis explains:

If sex is simply a function of an all-pervasive male power, then there can be no meaningful female sexuality. Within this closed system a woman who feels desire and pleasure is really experiencing an abnegation of self. There seems to be a fundamental contradiction here. Is there such a thing as pleasure that is purely negative and imposed? I would argue that, despite contexts of powerlessness that are bound up with pleasure, pleasure nonetheless offers something like moments of "se" affirmation or empowerment. This again contradicts the idea of absolute powerlessness. There is a moment of autonomy and empowerment in the demand that one's need be gratified, in directly seizing pleasure. (Cited in McKinnon 118)

This notion of power is particularly useful for the female critic, whether she is reading erotic works or not. In her essay on the autobiographical narratives of Carmen Guerrero Nakpil, Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo talks about the way women use their "power" over men, even as they are aware that this "power" is predicated upon the assumption that women are inferior. Here she cites Nakpil who tells us that as a young girl, she was given certain privileges not given to her brothers.

I was allowed. a handicap of ten points in arithmetic .because it was assumed. that, being a girl, I would be weak in the head. I lied, broke my word, flew into unexplained rages (comforts denied my brothers), because my father, a man of the world, expected that kind of behavior from a woman. (Cited in Hidalgo 86-87)

Also:

During the great pre-war earthquake in Manila, my brothers, grunting and groaning and considerably more frightened than me, were made to carry me down two flights of stairs to safety while I lay in a pretended and lady-like faint. (Hidalgo 87).

This is what some Feminists have elsewhere called "cultural duality," that paradoxical situation of women who manage to subvert the patriarchy even while working within it.

What I hope I have done here so far is to show that the radicalism of erotic works is not indicated (measured by the author's gender). And that a more useful way of reading women's erotic literature may be to examine the various strategies women have devised to empower themselves even though they inhabit positions of marginality. And it is for this reason that I would like to look at the erotic works of several Filipino women and to map the different routes they have taken. How have Filipino women been writing the erotic? What are they doing to seize both pleasure and power?

## **II. Beyond The Missionary**

But first, a little context.

It's inescapable. Whether they like it or not, women authors, the moment they write the erotic, must contend with patriarchal constructions of femininity. And in the Philippines, the most potent form such-construction takes is the Mary myth, which compels women to emulate the ideal woman, the Virgin Mary—pure, maternal, virtuous. So pervasive is this idealization of the pure woman that women themselves punish other women who depart from the ideal. The celebrated case of fictionist Estrella Alfon is a case in point. After publishing an "erotic" story called "Fairy Tale in the City," Estrella Alfon found herself on trial for publishing "pornography." The fact that "Fairy Tale in the City" is, in the words of Dolores Stephens Feria, "an extremely gentle story of sexual initiation with no four-letter words, no explicit crudities, with the sexual encounter not even the central point" (Feria) did not matter at all. Luckily, Alfon was pardoned by President Garcia, but she was never the same writer since. What grates of course is the possibility that Alfon may have been

"penalized" less for her story than for her "unfeminine behavior." After all, she was, as writers like Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo humorously point out, hardly a model of virtuous femininity.

The Mary myth is, of course, not just a product of religion. In the west, this myth drew from medical discourse via psychoanalysis. Using the image of the "passive egg and the active sperm cell swimming to penetrate it," (Makinen 1996: 41) Freud posited a female sexuality that is "naturally" passive—a prey waiting for the male hunter. Women are therefore not expected to act on their sexual desires; rather they must wait for the man to make the first move. (And because the Mary myth in the Philippines also draws from religion, even when the man has already made his move, women must still play coy, refusing his sexual overtures.)

But Freud did not just turn women into passive prey. He also divested them of an independent female sexuality. By describing women's shift into sexuality from the polymorphously perverse as characterized by penis envy, Freud naturalized the cultural centrality of the penis and made women lacking and inferior. That both men and women value the penis also makes it impossible for women to have a sexuality that is not defined by the penis. Therefore, as French feminist Helene Cixous points out, in the Freudian model there is no pleasure, that is intrinsic to the female body. Pleasure for them consists in phallic penetration.

What does all this mean for the Filipino woman writing the erotic? Well, one obvious implication of the Mary myth is that it becomes extremely difficult for a woman to write about sex, especially her sex. In the anthology *Forbidden Fruit*, for instance, Tina Cuyugan talks about the discomfiture some of the writers in the anthology had about publishing poems and story that deal explicitly with desire. Many of the writers, says Cuyugan, "worried about the effect on their husbands, fathers and children [and] were concerned by public reaction and possible misreading of their work." (Cuyugan) And this anxiety probably accounts for the use of a pseudonym by the writer of "Tender Rituals," the lone lesbian story in the collection. Whatever joy the publication of such a book offers women is therefore undercut by fear, the fear of being the author who tellingly knows too much about sex.

Another implication of the Mary myth is that women writers are torn between reticence and candor when describing their sex, or the sex act itself. Judy Ick has pointed out, some of the writers in the anthology "seem to be mermaids; that is, they seem to be cold-blooded waist down." Even when the stories they are writing show women as strong, desiring subjects, as does "The House at the Crossroads" by Fanny Llego, most writers in the anthology "refuse to talk about their vaginas."

Furthermore, the sex acts are often cast in metaphoric terms, with the writers using symbols from nature or myth to describe the sex act. This metaphorical treatment of sex in literature of course has a long, and if you will, distinguished history, going back to the stories of Edith Tiempo, Tina Ayala, and Kerima Polotan.

The funny thing of course is that the stories in *Forbidden Fruit* are already quite liberated compared to earlier stories by Filipino women. In the story "The Dust Monster" for example, the female protagonist does not have sex at all. The quintessential neglected housewife, the female protagonist named Reve dreams up a lover to drive away the loneliness of her afternoons. The lover, made of dust and dirt, turns out to be the perfect romantic figure, "waltzing with her to a sentimental tune around the long and empty sala." (Fernando 1994: 122) But he is also, curiously, without a sex organ, which in any case doesn't matter because neither he nor Reve seems interested in sexual pleasure.

It must be said, however, that this reticence is not a simple result of gender. In her essay "Writing as a Woman...in English,"<sup>2</sup> Cristina Hidalgo talks about the influence of Anglo-American literature on the Filipino woman writer. The indirection and apparent lack of daring of the erotic fiction by Filipinas may be attributed as much to the Mary myth as to the need to comply with Anglo-American aesthetic standards. Indeed, the fiction of both men and women in the Philippines do not exhibit great sexual frankness, which seems to support the idea that the aesthetic laws of New Criticism are partly responsible for the kind of erotic stories women write. This is why if you put *Forbidden Fruit* side by side with, say, the *Herotica* series published in the United States, *Forbidden Fruit* will look hopelessly tame and conservative. There's a whole economy and a great slew of women writers in the US concerned only about generating erotica



for women regardless of literary merit. In the Philippines, the only erotic writings being produced for women are those by writers of literature!

It is probably because of these strictures imposed on her by society and by her craft that women writers have had to develop strategies for writing her desire. Finding it difficult to write explicitly about sex but wanting to encode a female sexuality that departs from the Mary myth, women authors have devised ways of turning the myth on its head. Are these strategies radical? Maybe, maybe not. But they have been developed out of the need to re-imagine Woman, to see her as something other than a pure, nurturing virgin, without desires of her own.

At this point, it should be mentioned that the history of erotic writing in the Philippines is, perhaps surprisingly, a long one, going back to such writers as Edith Tiempo and Kerima Polotan-Tuvera, many of whose works were published in the fifties and sixties. Between that period and now, many things have happened, notably the rise of Feminism and the sexual revolution. Hence, many young writers today like Lakambini Sitoy and Katharina Mendoza are freer to express their sexuality in their writing. Indeed, many of these young women have attended (and one of them even taught) a course in erotic writing, something unthinkable in the time of Estrella Alfon! And this of course will explain the differences between the responses of the younger writers and those of the older women writers to the Mary Myth. The younger generation of women, most of whom are city-bred and independent, can more easily reject the image of the Virgin Mary.

For all that, many of the strategies used by earlier generations of writers continue to be utilized today, as hopefully will be shown by this paper. Thus it is significant to ask why they continue to be employed, what they do for women's writings, and whether they are doing something radical.

Below is a list of the strategies I am talking about. Of course, the list is by no means exhaustive, but it should give us a good idea of what women are doing in their erotic writings. Following this list are explanations of how and why each strategy is used.

1. Use of the metaphor of water to suggest female power.
2. Movement outside and away from the phallus.

3. Eroticization of female friendships.
4. Undermining the image of the prince charming
5. Long narrative "foreplays" and very brief "climaxes"

*Use of the Metaphor of Water to Suggest Female Power*

If you study the erotic writings of women, you will be surprised by the sheer number of stories set on the beach, on a rainy afternoon, or in the pool. Elena Paterno's "A Song in the Wind" is told by a mermaid who falls in love with a human. "The House at the Crossroads" by Fanny HB Llego has a female narrator who makes her move just after the rain, and turns, at the end of the story, into the sea itself. "Bouyancy" takes place in a swimming pool where the female protagonist, an expert swimmer, drowns her two-timing boyfriend. According to Ick, if the stories in *Forbidden Fruit* are any indication, "there seems to be a national predilection for sex on the beach." (Ick 186) I say, not just the beach but any form or body of water.

Of course, female sexuality has traditionally been associated with the sea. It is the seething, mysterious body of water that men must conquer; it is the sea inside the womb; it is the rushing waves that come when a woman reaches orgasm. Ick also makes several other hypotheses regarding this predilection for water.

I wonder about the geography of sex. Could it be that the beach is significant because it too is amorphously defined as the female body? That, if women were territories, the Filipina is specifically archipelagic? That the shifting borders of the beach approximates the marginality of the Filipina writer of the erotic in English? That the beach functions as an amorphous, ambivalent, shifting sign for Filipina sexuality? (Ick 186)

The idea that female sexuality is amorphous and constantly shifting is a significant one in Feminist criticism. French theorists like Helene Cixous for example have argued that female sexuality is unrepresentable, existing as it does in a space prior to language called the Imaginary. For Cixous and other women, including Ick, there is no such thing as an essential female sexuality that can be pinned down and labeled. This perhaps accounts for the association of women with water. For water signifies what is elusive, what is always shifting borders.

What is interesting though is the way Filipino women use the metaphor of water in their stories. More than just a symbol of sexuality, water becomes a source of immeasurable and primordial power. And this' power allows women to defy and defeat the men. In Katharina Mendoza's "Bouyancy," for example, the cocky, self-assured boyfriend who on his motorcycle exudes total arrogance, becomes a chicken the moment he dives into the pool. The woman on the other hand "not so much jumped in but slid, insinuated her body into the water and then dissolved there, to coalesce into her solid, supple form as her head and shoulders broke the surface." To convince him to go swimming, she has to assure him that "This is my pool. Nothing will happen to you here."

In Nerissa Balce's "Hope and Rain," a female copywriter who, according to her boss, is "losing her touch" paces her Quezon City apartment. There is a strong suggestion that she lives alone, one of those independent female yuppies who slave away in the world of advertising. It is also clear that her life has become drab, miserable, unexciting. There was a brown-out, and in her room, "[t]he ceiling fan was a dead flower hung upside down." (Balce 1992: 105) Curiously, she blames her misery on men. The brown-out, for instance, is the fault of the company "run by bastards who never keep their promises even to their mistresses." Feeling enclosed, she opens the window and hopes for *rain*.

And it *does* rain. While recalling the time her boss reprimanded her for writing uninteresting copies, she also for some reason is gripped by the word *burn*. (She told her boss that maybe she was *burned* out.) Suddenly, the story takes a drastic turn, and then she is thinking about burning wood and dancing for rain, just like the American Indians. But her dance which she associates with the dance of headhunters in the Cordilleras and with the fertility dance in Obando) is different. She lies on the bed, taking off first her shirt, then her underwear. Then she stands up and admires her thighs, her breasts, her nipples, "lost in the song that was playing in her mind as she felt the pleasure and the power of the dance." (108) Outside, of course, a drizzle has begun.

In "The House at the Crossroads" by Fanny H.B. Llego, the association of female power with water is even more obvious. In it, an unnamed woman sits "by the seawall and listen[s] to the roar inside [her]." (Llego 1992: 50) After awhile, she goes to a certain house, a house that apparently she has

never been into. Inside is a man with a rifle, but he puts his rifle down and holds out his hand to her. What happens next is a reversal of the active male-passive female binary, as the woman "rolls on top of [the man], yank[s] his shirt up and kiss[es] his navel, tonguing it." (50) And when finally she rips off her own clothes, she becomes "the sea, covering him, drowning him." (51)

*Movement Away from the Phallus*

Another tendency (one can hardly call it a device) of the erotic writings of women 'is to "dephallogentrize" sex, or, to put it another way, to liberate the erotic writings of women from the sexual centrality of the phallus. This tendency is obvious in the fiction of such writers as Katharina Mendoza ("Surface Wounds"), Lakambini Sitoy ("Weight), Joy Dayrit ("Mist"), Faye Ilogon ("Drive"), Noelle de Jesus ("Equivalents") Maria Elena Paterno .("Oil" and "A Song in the Wind"), and so forth.

In Sitoy's "Weight," for instance, no actual sex takes place between the protagonists. Instead there is the long, exhilarating drive to Baguio, which on some level becomes the substitute for the sex act itself. This is strongly suggested by the story's language—the shift in its rhythm, the tone, the imagery—which seems to simulate the experience of orgasm.

"Tell me when to stop," he murmured, but he was teasing her now, saying the words again, and yet again, like his Megalink mantra. She arched her back. The airconditioner exhaled frigid air against her breasts. There would be moonlight, she thought, over limitless fields, and over rocks and the pale lacework of tree branches as the car reached the mountains.

She thought of how sloppily he dressed and how he preferred pictures to words, and how they never fought because they wouldn't speak each other's language. He was all wrong, she thought, all wrong; he smoked joints, he loved comic books, he needled her about her baggage, her weight—but nothing he said would hurt her now. They were going ever so fast and she felt nothing, no guilt, no tiredness, none of that terrible hunger, just a strange light sensation as he took one hand from the wheel and laid his fingers against her cheek. (Sitoy)

And they were only driving!

The same absence of penetrative sex is likewise manifest in the story "Surface Wounds" by Katharina Mendoza, a wonderful, intriguing story whose focus is the human "skin". In this story, the erotic is embodied by the protagonist's act of tracing and retracing the lover's tattoos. Significantly, the gender of the protagonist is never revealed, hence making the story reminiscent of Jeanette Winterson's gorgeous novel *Written on the Body*.

Blind in the darkened bedroom, I let my fingers follow the upraised scabs in their delicate pattern. A stylized sun, I remember, in red and orange and purple; and in the dark I felt rather than saw the sunbursts spikes of color which radiated from her right nipple, the sun's center. My fingers wandered over her small, soft breast, moist with night sweat, following the pattern which had been etched there just that afternoon, the hollow tattoo needle piercing the onionskin of Lee's breast and depositing the ink mere millimeters below the surface.

As I mentioned earlier, this approach to sex is in many ways the only approach available to the Filipina writer who must labor under the double burden of the Mary myth and the aesthetic imperatives of New Criticism. But apparently many women writers think that the absence of penetrative sex in their stories is not always a sign of complicity with or surrender to patriarchal culture. When, for instance, the writers of *Forbidden Fruit* were attacked for coyness and ambivalence by a number of male reviewers, the writers responded by saying that the men obviously didn't know what the erotic meant for women. Which would seem to indicate that, rather than seeing this as a sign of reticence or evasiveness, many women writers consider this approach to sex as an attempt to forge female sexuality.

All of this harks back of course to sociological studies claiming that women experience sex differently from men, with women being more "tactile" and men being more "visual." But it is also, I think, an attempt to reclaim the female body from the shadows to which it has been banished by the patriarchal culture. For it is true that many women are kept in the dark about their body and all the enigmatic pleasures to be derived from it. Indeed, the knowledge that woman can experience orgasm is a recent discovery. By revealing the sensual life of the female body, writers undermine

the importance of the phallus. As French Feminist Luce Irigaray would say:

Woman has sex organs just about everywhere. She experiences pleasure almost everywhere... The geography of her pleasure is much more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is imagined - in an imaginary centered a bit on too much on one and the same. (Cited in Ick 177)

How the phallus pales in comparison!

*Eroticization of Female Friendships*

Without doubt, one of the most important developments in women's writing in the last few decades is the unabashed publication of stories about lesbians. For if stories about women's sexuality were practically invisible not just in the Philippines but in most of the Western world too, stories about lesbian sexuality were even more so. And it's not simply because lesbianism was—still is—considered immoral or abnormal by many people. It is also because in a phallogentric world view, lesbianism is unthinkable. Describing notions of sexuality in pre-modern Europe, Judith Brown says that:

“[C]riminal accusations against women on the grounds of sexual misconduct were rather frequent. Yet in virtually all cases the object of women's sexual desires was said to be men, for Europeans had long found it difficult to accept that women could actually be attracted to other women. Their view of human sexuality was phallogentric—women might be attracted to men and men might be attracted to men, but there was nothing a woman could do that would long satisfy the sexual desires of another woman. (Brown 67)

The fact that lesbianism could be reduced to an impossibility like this is telling of the hold of the Phallus upon the sexual imagination of pre-modern Europeans. For them, as I am sure for many Filipinos up to this day, nothing beats a man with a big dong.

Thus, one of the challenges for many women (not necessarily lesbians) has been the construction of erotic stories without men. Stories in which female desire is not tied to men's pleasure, but rather to certain peculiarly female experiences.

This is precisely the achievement of Jhoanna Lynn Cruz's "Comadrona," which is a woman's sexual encounter in Vigan. The female protagonist, Eva, an advertising executive, goes to Ilocos Sur looking for her father, or rather her father's family. The journey leads her to Vigan, a town famous for its clay jars. The story begins when she meets a *provinciana*, a clay jar vendor who "was not very pretty," but "had lovely eyes, black as wet coal." In spite of herself, she feels a "dreadful desire to know this woman, to probe the brokenness that taught her to value this jar, the way [she] did." At this point, the story picks up its pace, and things happen one after the other. Eva offers to drive Lumen home; Lumen invites her to stay for dinner; Eva watches as Lumen's fingers get moist with okra juices from slicing the vegetables; and, of course, Eva gets to spend the night.

There are several things worth noting in this story. First, neither Eva nor Lumen appears to be your typical butch lesbian. Eva, despite her seemingly Byronic recklessness, usually wears stockings and heels. And Lumen is married to a "good looking man, a tall Chinese mestizo with a charming smile." Thus this story might be said to present another example of the "cultural duality" of women's lives. Although both female characters seem to adhere to society's requirements for "womanhood," both actually subvert those same requirements, when the husband is sleeping. Moreover, both characters deconstruct patriarchy's constructed image of the lesbian as ugly, scary, and masculine.

Second, the sex act, which takes place in the "birthing room," is described in peculiarly female terms.

This was where I first loved her, birthed her pleasure with words. With a torrent of words. I undressed her, kissed the marks on her belly where skin once stretched taut, sucked on the dark nipples which still harbored the faint flavor of milk. I named her body, her beauty, to herself. My two fingers seemed lost inside her, so I put in one more, and still another. I had never done this before and I was drunk with the exploration. I laved her with promises I

had once lost the courage to utter. I plunged deep inside her. Kneeling on the floor, my mouth on her open sex, I called her, "Come, Lumen, come. Come." And thus, she was born, weeping from the shock of being wrenched away from the protective sac, her self-contained world. "Eva. Eva. Eva." I was the comadrona.

The metaphor of giving birth seems to suggest that female sexuality, rather than being anchored on the penis, is actually anchored on the female body. And it takes another woman to bring that out, to bring woman out of herself. Like Adam, women must also seize language and name their own beauty, their own bodies, so they will know pleasure so real it can make them weep.

Larisa Saguisag's "Fever" also has lesbian characters, and like Cruz's protagonists, they are, contrary to the lesbian stereotype, feminine, beautiful, and wonderful dancers!

[E]ven the men who sat beside you were howling for her, they paid you no attention as they howled about her shoulders, her legs, her body beneath the white dress, hemmed at mid-thigh, dipping low at the breasts... it seemed every backward toss of her head was calculated, done not out of laughter but to expose her smooth, cream throat for all to see.

The story cleverly explodes the image of women as objects by allowing the female protagonist, the you of the story, to appropriate the male gaze for herself. Because she is the one looking, she is the subject. Later on however, we discover that there is another bearer of the gaze in the story, and it is the narrator, also a woman. What this does is suggest that we—men and women—are part of an endless chain in which we are both bearers and objects of the gaze. Hence, the power derived from the act of looking becomes fluid, unstable. And because the object of the look may also look back, as did the woman being stared at in the story, it is possible for two people to be locked in an equal relationship. One need not be weaker than the other.

And just like the women of "Comadrona," the female protagonist in "Fever" finds herself strangely liberated and emboldened by her discovery



of her desire. And this boldness leads to a renewed appreciation, indeed to a rediscovery, of her own body, of herself.

And the boldness streaks to you especially at those times when you find yourself drawn to the mirror, to your reflection, you study every inch of your face, at all angles, tracing your lips, stroking your cheek slowly, and it pleases you, to feel that your skin is as soft, as smooth as you hoped it to be.

This renewed appreciation of her body soon leads to self-pleasuring, delicious at first but frightening later, as it escalates into a fever of longing that no man, not one of those howling creatures at the bar, can give her.

#### *Undermining the Image of the Prince Charming*

One of the most memorable scenes in Philippine literature has to be the ending of Kerima Polotan's "The Virgin."

In her secret heart, Miss Mijares' young dreams fluttered faintly to life, seeming monstrous in the rain, near this man-seeming monstrous but sweet and overwhelming. I must get away, she thought wildly, but he had moved and brushed against her, and where his touch had fallen, her flesh leaped, and she recalled how his hands had looked that first day, lain tenderly on the edge of her desk and about the wooden bird (that had looked like a moving, shining dove) and she turned to him; with her ruffles wet and wilted, in the dark she turned to him.

A Palanca winner and one of the most widely anthologized stories by a Filipina, "The Virgin" is remarkable for its frank (for its time) yet lyrical exploration of one woman's sexual awakening. And this ending, which marks Miss Mijares' capitulation to her desire, succeeds in subverting the image of the Filipina as a virgin—pure, maternal, virtuous.

But this story is remarkable for another reason: When she finally gives in to her longing, Miss Mijares, dutiful daughter and repressed spinster, turns to a man, a virile and darkly handsome carpenter who gives the impression of knowing "his body and us[ing] it well." In other words,

the sexual fulfillment of the female protagonist was indistinguishable from her falling in love with and being loved by a man.

It must be noted, of course, that in 1963, the year of the story's publication, such an exploration of female sexuality, however disguised, was radical enough to cause a stir. Just eight years before, after all, Estrella Alfon, another Filipina writer, was charged with obscenity for publishing "Fairy Tale in the City." Indeed, according to Edna Zapanta Manlapaz, the publication of Polotan's *Stories* in 1968 "startled [readers] both by the extent to which the sexual dimension of the stories were brought to the forefront, as well as the female perspective from which these were drawn."

And yet, as radical as "The Virgin" was for its time, it merely trapped Miss Mijares in what Charlotte Perkins Gilman referred to as the ubiquitous "love plot." This love plot tyrannized over every heroine in literature and made her dream of nothing but total fulfillment through a man.

That is what women in literature are supposed to do, Gilman told us in the early 1900s: fall in love. Convention dictates that it's their most promising role. Jong's Isadora, rather than breaking free of convention is, in this sense, completely conventional. Society tells her she is to seek fulfillment through a man. (Fishkin)

Rather than explode patriarchal depictions of female sexuality therefore, "The Virgin," as transgressive as it was, throws us back to the world of fairy tales, where distressed damsels long to escape their humdrum lives through the help of a gorgeous prince.

Western feminism has long been troubled by this ubiquitous love plot, especially where women's erotic fiction is concerned. For this love plot denies women any independent female sexuality. In it, even a strong heroine wishes for nothing but immolation before a stronger, phallic power.

That women should feel bothered by the apparent omnipresence of Gilman's love plot in women's erotic fiction seems to indicate that constructing sexually aggressive female characters isn't enough. It is also necessary that there be alternatives to stories in which women's experience of sexual joy or fulfillment depends solely on men. Women writers have

to re-imagine the experience of sex, if they are to liberate themselves from patriarchal depictions of female sexuality.

The results of this re-imagining are quite fascinating. Bisexuality. Autoeroticism. Zipless Fucks. Women have shown that erotic fiction need not be naughty paeans to patriarchy and that female pleasure is not always about female surrender. And perhaps due to the globalization of sexual politics, this re-imagining has transformed even the stories of many young Filipinas such as Katharina Mendoza, Lakambini Sitoy and Larisa Saguisag, whose heroines are a far cry from the lonely spinster of Polotan.

But what's interesting is how this feminist re-vision of the female sexual experience has affected representations of men in Filipino women's erotic fiction. Do the men simply turn into passive sexual objects, with the women seizing the active role? How can women explore their desire for masculinity without being overwhelmed by masculinity itself? Is it really possible to fashion an erotic heterosexual story that is simply not phallic?

One answer to this is that many of the stories by women now put the female protagonists in a paradoxical relationship with their men—they may like, even love, their men, but they may also hate what their manhood represents.

In Lakambini Sitoy's "Lines," a handsome, married advertising guy narrates the story of his affair with his office partner, a smart, pretty, independent, and highly sexual woman who is his equal in bed. She is also, as the story makes clear, not the domesticated type.

On cat feet, so as not to awaken the neighbors, we found our way to her door. The apartment was a mess, laundry on the couch, crockery in the sink. She was embarrassed, and at the same time defiant—so she was no housekeeper, so she was no one's wife.

Neither does she evince any reluctance to enjoy her body/to enjoy sex.

When, for a change, she touched herself as I watched, she did so with such sublime confidence, proud of her awakened cunt, offering it up to my gaze like a peeled fruit or a vulnerable self-inflicted wound. It was unsettling to hear her calling my name. In orgasm

she sounded like a child that had been whipped. She came so intensely after a while, and so often, that I found myself rising too soon afterwards to stumble to the bathroom, flagellating myself with cold drops of water.

Their affair doesn't remain a secret for long. However, despite their being in it together, only she ends up getting trounced. In no time, she is alienated by the women in the office. Even her girlfriends turn against her. Meanwhile, he basks in everyone's admiring attention, the women flirting with him to spite her, the men "flipping him knowing grins." To top it all, he too betrays her. When asked by their boss about the affair, he tells him, with no compunction at all, that they "are just *friends*," and that he "doesn't know what *her* problem is."

The use of the male narrator is an interesting strategy that renders the story immediately ironic. For while the male protagonist braggingly tells us what happened, hoping, I suppose, for sympathy if not downright admiration, the reader sees through his words and pronounces him wrong. Indeed, the whole story very slyly reveals what a big coward the man is. Rather than standing up for her, and being her savior, he jumps ships right away. He leaves her to suffer the consequences of *their* actions. Thus this "prince charming" proves that sexual satisfaction and romantic fulfillment are not exactly one and the same thing.

This undermining of the idea of the prince charming is present, too, in Susan Lara's "The Other Regina." (Lara 1992) If the prince charming is supposed to represent the fulfillment of the love plot (i.e., marriage) and of the woman's ultimate joy, then Lara's Regina doesn't find him. Instead, he finds Scott, a white man who, like Regina herself, happens to be married.

There are indications in the story that Regina is in love with Scott, or at least feels a kind of bewildered affection for him. When, for example, Scott took Regina to the airport and held her hand before her departure, Regina "felt like an amputee as she walked to the plane," and "she thought the chunk of pain in her throat would never melt." (70) At story's end, many years after their first encounter at the beach, when Regina and Scott make love once again, he says "I love you," and at this "a feeling of . exhilaration wash[es] over her, followed by an overwhelming sensation of

certainty and acceptance." (73) But unlike Tavera's Miss Mijares, Regina doesn't need Scott to "complete" her. When Scott marries another Filipina, Regina "sent a congratulatory card, wished them well, cried briefly but lustily, and got on with her life." And apparently, she "loved and cherished her quiet, predictable life," although "her body and soul would be turned inside out" every time Scott came for a visit. (71-72)

In the end, the story offers us an alternative to the love plot by giving us an image of a woman who is capable of living happily alone and a model for a relationship that is not based upon female dependency on a perfect prince charming.

### *Long Narrative "Foreplays" and Very Brief "Climaxes"*

One difficulty in studying the erotic literature of Filipina women is that the label "erotic literature" itself, aside from being very much contested, has, to use a structuralist term, no clear referent. Indeed, many of the stories being discussed here are probably *chiefly* love stories. And the only reason we include them under the category "erotic literature" is that they contain, however subtly, erotic elements in them—a woman looking at her naked body, a woman fantasizing about a man, a woman deriving pleasure from physical objects that, though not necessarily sexual, awaken her senses.

This blurring of the lines between erotic literature and other types of writing isn't just a Filipino phenomenon. American editors have also sometimes classified "borderline" cases, such as Katherine Mansfield's "Bliss" and many of Anne Rice's "vampire novels," as erotic, although these texts, strictly speaking, are not about sex. I suppose this is partly because many Feminist editors, aware of the history of female sexual repression, assume that some women writers may have used "coded language" to talk about sex. (Hence, a brief but cadenced description of a pear tree may be read as sexual.) Or maybe they think that women, as I have argued earlier, can get turned on even without the sex itself. Notable exceptions, of course, are editors, like Marcy Sheiner of the *Herotica* series, who have tried to go around this problem of classification by making sure that the stories they include in their anthologies contain "explicit sex." For Sheiner, if the story "contain[s] nary a naughty word," (Sheiner 253) it is not for *Herotica*.

Be that as it may, many of the stories we now call erotic in the Philippines may be described as having "long, narrative foreplays, and very brief climaxes." In the story "Bouyancy," for instance, the sexual tension between the man and the woman ends in nothing more than a brief description of a murderous kiss. Carla Pacis's "Lily," which for four long pages talks about an adolescent boy's fevered anticipation of making it with a woman, finally boils down to just one tender-naughty paragraph that ends with the line' "with great patience and tact, Lily gave Paco his first lesson in the art of lovemaking." And Sitoy's "Weight" of course does not end with sex, just the promise of it.

I have already explained that this approach to sex has a lot to do with the fact that these female authors are writers of literature. And having been brought up on New Criticism, many of them can only write with great subtlety and restraint. But I would also like to argue that this approach to sex is rooted in women's need for *context*. As Sheiner herself says:

Judging from the way women write about sex, one of the most important paths to our arousal is the context in which sex occurs. Some might cite this as proof of women's long-alleged inability to enjoy sex outside of a relationship. But context does not equal relationship; context simply means there's a dynamic between the characters that gets expressed sexually. Whether our heroine is sneaking a furtive hump in the ladies room or riding the emotional waves of a long-term relationship, the sexual encounter is but one thread in a tapestry that may incorporate various aspects of her history. As the Parisian lover in "Real Pleasure" puts it to her obtuse American counterpart, "Just because I have emotions doesn't mean I want a relationship. It only means I'm not a machine." (Sheiner XV)

Such a need for context is reflected in the way Filipina writers take pains to develop the setting, to flesh out the characters, to slowly build the sexual tension instead of plunging the characters straight into a wild lovemaking. In "Lily" for example, we get this description of what I suppose is Chinatown.

They crossed the street and entered a noisy crowded alley. On each side; vendors in dark pants and white collar-less kamisetas,

sold fruits and vegetables, herbs for all sorts of ailments, fish that carried the smell of the nearby bay, and roasted ducks that hung from their necks. Many greeted the beautiful Eurasian by her first name. "Good afternoon Lily. Looking for lychees? These just arrived from China." "Not today, thank you," she would answer in fluent Fookienese. No one took a second look at the gangly mestizo trailing behind her.

Later on, we get a description of the room in which Lily and Paco will make love. The warm humid air swirled through her apartment helped by a "fan that hung from the ceiling. It clung to Paco's cheeks and palms. The song of a solitary canary perched in a fancy bamboo cage filled the small apartment. A teakettle sat on a stove, wisps of steam rising from its turned-up spot.

More of this sort of detailed description of the setting turns up in the story. And it has the effect of making the experience of sex very particular, rather than just an anonymous romp. The careful attention to atmosphere and characterization also allows us to "imagine" the sex act, even when we get but a glimpse of it later. Which means, I suppose, that rather than detracting from the eroticism or making the ending anticlimactic, such long descriptions or "narrative foreplays," if you will, actually heighten the feeling of desire in the story. The sensual bombardment gets the reader (and characters) so pumped up that by the time she gets to the actual sex, she needs just a single luscious sentence and she's off!

### III. Conclusion

What, now, do we make of all this?

In her essay on the works of Gilda Cordero Fernando and Joy Dayrit, critic Cristina Hidalgo used the term "cultural duality" to describe the experiences of the female characters in the stories. This cultural duality results from women's participation in a dominant male culture and a female sub-culture at the same time. This paradoxical situation enables women to be both "docile" and "rebellious," to attempt to subvert the patriarchy even while working within it.

The erotic stories of women give us a glimpse of this duality. For many of the female characters in these stories are never absolutely oppressed or absolutely empowered. Most, if not all, of them feel moments of affirmation even as they are trapped by their class, by their race, or by their gender. This does not mean, of course, that these furtive moments of affirmation are enough, and that the female characters in these narratives should be contented. It *does* mean that they are capable of seizing enough power to create alternative worlds. It means that, consciously or not, they are resisting.

Should we therefore accept all erotic writings by women as radical? Definitely not. We still need to look at the politics informing a particular story's representation of desire. This can be done by considering the tone of the narrative, its ending, its choice of words. Whose side does the author seem to be on? Is the story meant to be a palliative, something to make the women happy while keeping the status quo in place?

And finally, we have to continue to be on the look out for the different ways in which women are representing their bodies, desires, sexualities. For sexuality is not a static object, but an evolving thing that changes as women forge new hopes and new identities.



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Some of the stories mentioned here had not yet been published when I began writing this paper. I'd read them in creative writing workshops at the University of the Philippines, where their authors had been my classmates, or at National Writing Workshops, where their authors had been my co-fellows. These stories include "Signs" by Faye Ilogon, and "Bouyancy" and "Surface Wounds" by Katharina Mendoza. Some of them may have already appeared in various literary magazines since.

Other stories, like "Lines" by Lakambini Sitoy, "Lily" by Carla Pacis, and "Comadrona" by Jhoanna Lynn Cruz, I got through Professor April Yap who was then responsible for collecting and filing stories for the annual *Likhaan Anthology*. Lara Saguisag herself gave me a copy of her stories, one of which, "Fever," was discussed here. As far as I know, it was published first in *Philippine Sunday Inquirer*, and later in the *Likhaan Anthology*.

- <sup>2</sup> This is a paper Dr. Hidalgo delivered at the 6th ESEA Conference at the Ateneo de Manila University on 30 November 2001. Her paper helped me shape some of the observations I made here.

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