

Speaking from the Margin of Margins: Notes on Some Feminist Texts in *Ani, Sarilaya, New Philippine Writing*

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The power to name names has become, of late, a feminist orthodoxy, premised as it is on the popularized axiom that language is a male turf, is androcentric and therefore must be exorcised (the female, after all, is a castrato; women writing as women, and women writing as feminist, can only celebrate their kind, an emergence, a repositioning /reappropriation of language to serve their subordinated interests).

Is language, in form and substance, male? But how would linguistics define this gendering (Volosinov, quoted by Toril Moi, would opt for semiotics as it contextualizes the specificity of meaning in and between speakers¹)? Should feminist language be contrapuntal to masculinist language? Should feminists invent their language, as some fictionists have done? Is the binary opposition tenable?

The same questions, on a parallel plane, are asked by Ma. Luisa Torres "Women, Literature and Criticism,"² who, it appears, would allow herself a more expansive territory, a strategem of free play, because there is no last word on the matter - yet. Theories and systems of meanings are themselves evolving as to preclude a pigeonholing of imagined truth. Her alleged ambivalence, according to Thelma Arambulo, confirms this Derridean elusiveness, a deconstructionist liberalism that is almost akin to Kristeva's anarchist politics of stating that woman is yet to exist, given the heterogeneity of language itself. To wit, Arambulo writes that "Torres moves in and out of a feminist critic's position, seesawing from the academic scholar's register to that of woman speaking plainly, but perhaps more clearly"³ (to which we interject: a scholar obfuscates?), "identifying herself as one of 'us' only to

¹Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), p.157.

²Sr. Mary John Mananzan, Ma. Asuncion Azcuna and Fe Mangahas, eds. *Sarilaya* (Manila: Institute of Women's Studies, 1989), p.15. All subsequent page references are to this edition.

³"*Sarilaya*: Women in Arts and Media: Book Review" in *Kultura* Vol.3 No. 2 (1990), pp.42-47.

distantiate herself later from 'them' (referring to women, and at times, to feminists). Another attentive observer would find feminist polemics almost no longer the heterodoxy that it once was in the 70's, assessing it as somewhat in that uneasy state of dispersal, like our body politic. Some colleagues, on the other hand, are dissatisfied with not so much the theorizing of it as the literary production of it - because probably the very language of its enunciation subverts it, delivers it back to the folds of the empire.

How fare indeed Filipino feminists as writers? Surely, that a number have come up with their publications attests to a vigor, an opening and a closing of doors.

But is there rigor in the gesture?

For instance, Marjorie M. Evasco's "Threading Our Lives or the Story of the Open Strand" (*Sarilaya*, pp. 1-14) (her renaming of herself is already a practice of a credo) acclaimed by her admirers as representative of feminist ideologizing (ideology as defined by Althusser). is mere celebration of the buzz word "sisterhood", her voice allegedly "indubitably feminine". (And I am constrained to clarify: how feminine is feminine? Can language measure up to this value-prescription, considering that the technicality of its use can also be masculine?) And it is largely this canonical doxology - sisters comforting their sisters in ideological harmony - of women witnessing the authenticity of this imagined femininity that lacks proofing of its definition except the authority of common biology, of femaleness, that has infested Philippine feminist criticism. Arambulo has taken note of the quality of Evasco's essay, an award-winning prosework, which she deems as "light-weight, focusing mainly on images of women oppressed, frustrated, protecting, rebelling, asserting,"⁴ all this actually averring that imaging (my reading of her reading), while significant as a method of exposing the other face of hegemony, does not necessarily and convincingly argue for feminism : because granted that the male reader - his equipage of imaginary power intact - is ruptured from tradition, of habit, shocked indeed into the discovery that he is not God but Devil, oppressor not lover, how must justice be textually rendered then? What are the limits of this subversion that permanently also subverts itself? What is the alternative of the alternative?

For Grace Monte de Ramos, her "To Men: A Fond Warning," (*Sarilaya*, p.102-103) although at first glance it subsumes an adversarial tone, is upon closer reading a restatement of the old adage that old age is the greatest leveller ("All grow to resemble me/Look in your own mirror"), which would hardly subvert/undermine/topple phallogocentric discourse: because in its constant reproduction of the dominant thesis - the Father rules

⁴ibid.

for all seasons - it is precisely this elision of aging which the Father has allotted to women that enables male logos to overwhelm, to be immortal, regardless of the factuality that though men also die, the Father as Symbolic Mode is forever. And it is the voyage from the Imaginary to the Symbolic that negates the frail warning, no matter how true, that all die. "If we panic into aging" is a gambit, as advanced by the poet that will be checked because the tactical/strategic offensive against the Symbolic Order has not been mapped out. Besides, that everyone must need suffer, in the final analysis, the fate of women is patriarchy remobilized, womanhood being the pre-determined as well as final arbiter of all things earthly. The metaphysics of Monte de Ramos's text merely douses the fire of her coding. Moreover, its technical preciousness and lyrical formalism, to paraphrase Alice Guillermo, effect a readerly passiveness that masculinist canon has allowed, in the first place. Of course, one is not saying that a strident voice is most suited for an offensive, but the poem's forced conjunction - lover and loved, the gazer and gazed at, locked in ceremonial, almost mystical, embrace - does not, and will not, articulate a feminist contrapositioning. If, thus, the marginalized is no longer at the periphery, if the voiceless has recovered her voice, if the shadows exfoliate in the sun, what then? How will the new ordering be? Will feminism, like the notion of class, be real only if it has dissolved itself?

The poems merely invite us, male readers, to an understanding of a locution and location, a task most arduous because understanding itself demands opening and closure, growth and decay, augmentation and diminution of power, and it is precisely in the equivalence of knowledge and power that understanding becomes determinate/indeterminate. Should the patriarchy allow itself to negate itself, eclipse itself? Should subordination content itself to a wider parameter of axiom, flirting just dangerously enough at the margins to supplement its ascendant authority? (Or, as the song goes, "She's a little bit dangerous").

For feminism cannot, must not, content itself simply with the acknowledgement of its own powers but rather test itself in the arena of struggle, the enforcement of its centrality, lest it reduce itself to mere graphic evocation of its bereavement and loss, a stripteaser that finds her vindication in her objectification. That the poem posits the male as eventually resembling the aged female that is ancestrally subordinate merely follows, again, the logic of inversion where B becomes A, the former having been transposed to the very position that it despises.

Yet, one must in context understand sisterhood. Set against the exclusiveness of male bonding (male homosexuals actually supplement machismo, despite their parody of it), the female collective can only consolidate its amazonic will to disperse the fascist fraternity of Oedipal Kings.

But does the text of our women actualize this?

Merlie Alunan Wenceslao's "My Mother" (*Ani*, p. 106)⁵ and Merlinda C. Bobis's "When Grandmother Undoes her Hair" (*Ani*, p. 107) retrace their personal reality to their female roots, the original kinship realigned by the Father. But radicalizing their "intentions", what exactly would be the feminist strain here? There is only, to my mind, this hermeneutic narrowing to biological affinity, but a son, faking — because truth in language is illusory — a sentiment because the symbolic order decrees its distance from her, could as easily textualize an imagined bondage, using the very same language of filiation and passion. (Textualized subject-positioning could be a key.)

To a certain extent, the poem simply replicates the male genre of bonding, and none is the wiser for it. Maningning Miclat's "Father and I" (*Ani*, p. 132) offers a minor controversy. The relation, seen through Oedipal triangulation, already intimates a feminist provocation (this is only so because they are outsiders in the realm of power): the father as rational, forbidding and pragmatic, the girl (or should I say woman) most silent and obedient. Yet the poetic resolution — "the snowflake (that) came swirling down and I saw it/ the little object was now in my hand" implies a mode of wisdom that is providential, that which fate or nature bestows, that the female, regardless of intellectual interpellation, would eventually commune with the materiality of a fact (the snowflake falling into her hand) whose wisdom escapes the rationality of the male eyes, as though by divine design or investment. This subsequent mystification by feminist text (the struggle for feminist discourse should forge the very notion of woman itself) allows instead a dogmatism of matriarchal essentialism.

"Aborsiyon" by Rosalinda V. Pineda (*Ani*, p. 129) should, by virtue of the title, implicate the femaleness of the theme, yet here, this very biological difference that does not serve a deferral of meaning, remains sheer genetic fact, the longing for motherhood and nothing more. The narrator imagines a child that fails to realize itself — and we are simply anaesthetized by this rendition. Exactly, the point is missed since thematically a life is aborted, guilt lies nowhere (the death of the child was certainly not of patriarchal/ Herodic decree) but in the naturalness of life negating life. Death is a game chance, a genderless case.

Ruth Elynia S. Mabanglo is another celebrated paradigm. Having achieved in her circle popular respectability, she is thus always-already presumed to articulate feminist sensibility/ideology whose valence equals male ecriture. For instance, her "Regla sa Buwan ng Hunyo" (*Philippine*

⁵All page references to *Ani* are to Vol. II, No. 1 (March, 1988)

Studies, Vol. 33/Third Quarter 1985, special issue on *New Writing from the Philippines* edited by Alfredo Navarro Salanga pp. 396-398) takes off from the menstrual flow of the female body and assumes - the allegorical link is obvious enough - a metaphorical/political proposition: "*Pagbigyan ang pwersang ito*", says she, as though there is a logical connection between a biological factuality and a necessary political/ social act. The alleged poetic interphasing has been the recurrent fallacy among poets, as evidenced for example in equating an anthill with human social structure/dynamics. The biological and the social are contradistinctive and it is the undisciplined mind that aspires towards poetry that maligns poetry itself. "*Pagbigyan ang pwersang ito*" is a naive revolutionary plea, a toothless assault at the jugular of the status quo. Besides, "*Kabuuan ng lahat kong pagkatao, kabuuan ng kaibhan ko't pagkakatulad/Sa lahat ng tao*", implicates an essentialist canon that pulls feminism back to square one, for the narrator's geography of oppression/subordination, so to speak, merely delineates what is already given as constitutive of the female body and behaviorist construct. (After all, who denies the reality of menstruation as female truth? That this is not an enigma, nor measure of alienation, is a welcome truism among men as well. Even if the wound is a classic Freudian lack). The tone is unfortunately supplicatory, as though the central authority would allow negating itself to serve some universal sense of justice, an abstract imperative that would accept feminist logic. It is not enough for poets, regardless of gender, to illustrate the typography/topography of their state; they must weave — this is unsolicited advice — that tapestry of counter rebellion — its praxis, its agenda for renewal — without however, in the very naming/ defining of such rebellion, containing itself, for the paradox of feminist discourse is that the language it must appropriate also conversely appropriates her who uses/ wields it to gain ascendancy. That is to say, to define is to limit and to limit is to contain: hence, to name the woman is equally to subvert the potentiality of her powers inasmuch as the woman named is a woman limited/bound.

The feminist text is thus in that perpetual (an absolutist term, I must confess) state of double bind: firstly, it must define its own construction because it must mark the boundaries and thereby put to a stop the aggressive desires of the fascist masculinist machine; but such construction is not without its attendant peril because while presenting its own human face, the humanity of her violation, it likewise constructs its own containment/imprisonment. The Panopticon of the Other seems to infest the terrain of our unconscious.

Feminist language, while denouncing the phallographic sexism of current languages, must also suffer the necessary sexism of its own intention. Can there be a middle ground, fair, neutral, value-free language that speakers can enunciate the while steering clear of gender response, the subconscious power play in the utterance, the flux of power? The inversion of masculinist supremacy is the most evident ploy in the Manilacentric

feminist text I have so far encountered in Philippine literature. The narrative of female marginalization — women writing as women — can be simplified thus: female plot is inversion of androcentric text. To wit, Lilia Quindoza-Santiago's "*Ang Pinakahuling Kuwento ni Huli*" (*Ani*, pp.68-76) may be a paradigm of woman silenced (the hero is denied speech, and therefore lingers in the wings), but it must be noted that this character has its equivalence in the stereotypical village idiot — the poet manqué, the disinherited, even the lonely warrior, the pariah — although the deviation/difference must lie in the promise of its probable feminist twist: the female as member of a subclass, compounded by the tragedy of her being a woman in a society named by men. But the story fails to carry out this narrative thrust, inasmuch as the woman—again your female speculum of the macho deviant—suffers the malevolence of her own subclass (the intersection of class interest allows for the seeming transcendence of the class question because gender analysis proposes to transcend this orthodoxy, although the idealization of Huli's *kalaro*, most surely partisan propagandists, weakens this transcendence precisely because contemporary outlook/practice has exposed the continuing interpellation by gender discourse of Marxist classism that has been claimed to be gender-blind, in the first place); moreover, that *Huli* is physically defective (Byron and his clubfoot?) — her silence is both an organic reality and an aesthetic metaphorization of it — already naturalizes her estrangement, as though her infirmity were in itself a pre-given value of her marginalization (because less than whole, she is shuffled to the edge of the abyss). That, at the end of the story, she resolves to speak out against societal/ecological decay is indeed a fitting ending for a narrative that must effect its optimism (writers as warriors must always think of the bright side, lest they succumb to the darkness of despair), but the possibility remains hypothetical. It is indeed a story that barely challenges the feminist agenda of alienation because its replication of the male plot merely re-creates what the binary opposition theorists find as both an opening and a trap.

Surely, the Gorgon, for Teresa de Lauretis, is a negative imaging of a woman as witch, destroyer, evil spirit, enemy and who, encountering herself in the mirror of a shield, must most pathetically be stunned to immobility/death by her own knowing. That she must turn to stone by virtue of the very powers that make her the mythical destroyer already establishes the cycle of neurosis and suicidal syndrome allegedly constitutive of the female psyche. The myth therefore must be discarded, rewritten, reinvented.

Yet how fares Fatima V. Lim in this regard? Her "From the Forbidden Tree" (*Ani*, p.8) attempts to re-create the Edenic fable. To no avail. Her interpolation of defamiliarization as poeticized in (1) bored(om) with man of the missing rib/ Who was begging to repeat/ Himself, having run out of names/For the rest of the world (his fallibility lies in the failure of language,

she does not revise/renew and thus makes more sacral male power) and (2) the election of wisdom makes her (partaking of the fruit of the tree) "shield/With her less/Than adequate hands/The tremulous expense/Of her nakedness/ (in effect saying that consciousness/knowing overwhelms women), paradoxically invests the poem instead with an anti-feminist strain that is already encapsulated in the very act of ingesting "the marred fruit (that) rolls away from her fingers". Even if it is argued that the so-called primeval split already foregrounds the rise of the female subject, the projection of her rebellion seems to embarrass more She who gains consciousness more than He who consistently reproduces the myriad names of his power/mystique. Consciousness/liberation is still male defined, the Jewish myth retains its own practised conjectures.

The aforementioned critique of writers does not in any way invalidate the feminist discourse which in its mode of seeing relationships truly interrogates the commonsensical ordering of things. The patriarchy of power is too real to be abstracted, nor wished away on the basis of linguistic, or a manner of textual proofing that women writing as women and/or feminists have pursued. Regardless then of my personal critique from the margin of margins, I, the speaker, am reflexively in a bind.

It is a truism that men in feminism, or men engaged in the study of feminism, are themselves held suspect by the practitioners of this subversion, precisely because, having come from the enemy camp, as it were, they must present to all the image of a Trojan who carries a gift of understanding/concord/conjunction, though at heart himself tainted with the dominant logos, the machinations of the Desiring Machine that must, at all costs, perpetuate its power, influence.

For a man therefore to hold aloft the banner of feminism, or even be solicitous of women's cause, is to preempt women's liberative praxiology and/or desires - and it is in this context of adversarial exchange that I persist in the recuperative war of territories. If feminism must construct the image/language of woman in terms of polarities, if the construction of woman could only be realized in its reference to man (lesbianism is, for Cheryl Clarke, a decolonization of the body), if the female text can only define itself in the context of Authority, this contradiscourse can only repeat itself.

It is in this contradiction of opposites that I must temporarily subscribe to Kristeva's (as quoted by Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*) quasi-neutral formulation that would allow men writing as men and women writing as women to engage in a dialectics of construction of themselves: "To believe that one 'is a woman' is almost as absurd and obscurantist as to believe that 'one is a man'."⁶

This in a sense would enable us free play — yet again, how can play (the intertextuality and deferral of meanings) be free if forces are inclusive/exclusive, equal/unequal, personal/impersonal.

The language of sexual politics contradicts itself. Yet women must start on this uncertain landscape.

This is a man speaking.

Even as women have already shattered their silence.

⁶ *Op.cit.*, p. 163.