

GENDER AND CURRICULUM: IS THERE A WOMAN IN THIS CLASS?

Priscelina Patajo-Legasto

Introduction

This semester, I had the good fortune of being assigned by the Chancellor to contribute to a reevaluation of the Women and Development Programs of the College of Social Work and Community Development as a member of their External Review Committee. This experience gave me a chance to reflect on how gender-conscious Filipino academics could develop this emergent body of knowledge known as Women's Studies and make it a valid object of inquiry especially in our university which is still a bastion of Male Studies. For the U.P., I have identified two items for a women studies agenda which I am now submitting for your consideration:

1) the need for crossborrowings across disciplines with the goal of helping us acquire a wholistic view of the terrain/"wilderness" that we have to map and re-map or re-territorialize; and

2) the equally pressing need for us to establish identifiable sub-areas in women's studies that will help us clarify which domains belong to which disciplines so that the women's impact in this university can be more fully felt at the most crucial level--at the level of departments and disciplines.

With respect to number one (i.e., the need for us to traverse disciplines that will hopefully result in better understanding of the "lay of the land." This is something that we have started to do by listening to each other---development people and cultural critics, lawyers and social scientists, nurses and doctor, women from public administration.

From the very beginning, Women's Studies as a field of knowledge has always been transgressive, not only of well-entrenched male-oriented social structures and bodies of knowledge but also in a more particular sense. Women's Studies has been transgressive of traditional academic boundaries since, for instance, it is very difficult to explain with depth the exclusion of women's literary texts and cultural artifacts by women from the canon and from the lists of masterpieces unless the researcher/teacher demonstrates how power relations in a particular social formation impact on supposedly apolitical standards of taste and aesthetic judgements; or how

cultural texts are not innocent but are actively involved in the reproduction of hegemonic ideologies (including patriarchal systems of thought) and the construction of subjectivities/ identities. Here, the disciplines traditionally grouped as the Humanities utilize paradigms and their attendant analytical categories, data/information from what have traditionally also been grouped as the Social Sciences.

We come to number two --i.e., the need for each of us to identify which sub-areas/domains each one of us can concentrate on developing given the specificities of our academic training, previous researches, experiences and kinds of expertise/training.

For purposes of today's discussion, let me attempt to delineate what I think can be the contribution of the Humanities disciplines (of art, language and literary studies) to the further academic development of women's studies in the Philippines by zeroing in on what I do in my own Comparative Literature classes at the Department of English and Comparative Literature.

Two years ago, prior to the institutionalization of Comparative Literature 182, 282 and 382 (FEMINIST THEORIES AND CRITICAL PRACTICES), I had already been teaching a similarly titled courses as C.L. 198 (SELECTED TOPICS), C.L. 298 (DIRECTED READINGS) and/or as part of our theory and methodology courses (C.L. 121, C.L. 202, C.L. 302, C.L. 299). This semester, I am teaching C.L. 182 (FEMINIST THEORIES AND CRITICAL PRACTICES) which has as its course objectives:

1) to introduce students to the various modes of feminist cultural criticism (I had to widen it to cultural not only literary because of the presence of students from the Social Sciences, Philippine Studies and Mass Communication) as well as the theories of society, culture, language, literature, subjectivity that inform these modes; and

2) to encourage students to engage in feminist criticism by exposing them to a panoply of critical texts by American humanist, British materialist, French, Post-structuralist, Post-colonial and Filipino feminists.

What are my course assumptions/conceptual framework? I submit that language, literature and art teachers/researchers/ critics/practitioners or faculties of the College of Arts and Letters as well as those in the applied arts like Colleges of Fine Arts and Architecture can focus on signifying practices like literature, fine arts, popular culture, mass media, theater, visual communication, architecture, etc. We can zero in on how these signifying systems are able to construct and convey social meanings. When one says that a sign system has a social meaning, it is analogous to saying that in the society where it is located it has some collective significance. And the social scientist will tell us that a social practice acquires meaning/significance when it is important to the perpetuation of the interest of those in power. To translate this assertion in terms of cultural studies: **certain**

cultural practices have social meaning/significance when they are canonized by those powerful culture brokers. These "cultural brokers" determine what is Art and not Art, Literature and not Literature; the rest are sometimes derogatorily labelled minor arts/writings, folk/popular culture, worse still, dismissed as mass media and/or crafts. As Terry Eagleton says, Literature/Art is what a particular people value at a particular time in a particular social formation. Of course, those responsible for the formation and the perpetuation of the canon do not bother to ask what the majority think when the former make their aesthetic pronouncements. Thus what is considered Literature/Art in the Philippines (i.e., the body of cultural texts that are taught in schools; are published/ anthologized, sold at galleries, produced on establishment stages; in short-- get canonized) are either the western so-called masterpieces as well as, for instance, the "minor" writings of Nick Joaquin and NVM Gonzalez. They are "minor" from the point of view of western culture which is up to today (inspite of the gains of the anti-bases/ treaty ratification people) is the hegemonic culture in the Philippines. It matters little if the majority of Filipinos are ignorant of those authors.

Cultural texts are products of a network of social practices that are set in place because of cultural elites who consciously or unconsciously enforce their will on the majority. And usually, the cultural dominant connect with the politically powerful and the propertied class so that the power bloc in a particular social formation are constituted by those found in the intersections of these groups. Hence, to study literature and art from a wholistic perspective is also to see how power relations impact on these texts.

And since we want to be gender conscious individuals, we can inquire into how the patriarchal/sexist values of those in the power bloc are worked into and operate through these signifying systems or various forms of discourses/media/codes in order to constitute the subjectivities of both male and female individuals, from the ruling and the ruled classes or class fractions, sectors, groups. To use an Althusserian term, how we are interpellated to accept certain minority positions as "natural" or "given."

What makes a woman accept a position subordinate to man? One way of answering this is to study the representations of women found in poems like "To His Coy Mistress" by Andrew Marvell, novels like the *Cien Anos de Soledad* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, movies like "Una Kang Naging Akin" or folk texts like *Pasyon Pilapil* to discover how both negative as well as positive stereotypes of women and men are able to influence male/female readers/viewers/listeners to accept the supposed "verities" or "realities" of these cultural texts and to see these as part of the "natural order of things." *Kuhang-kuha. Nagpapatotoo*. Multiply these types of interactions that happen at home, in church, in school and one can get an inkling of how patriarchal ideologies, daily and insidiously, are able to construct and reinforce gendered identities (masculine or feminine) whose manifestations

are the entrenched temperaments, roles, statuses, life goal/aspirations ascribed to men and to women. *Eh kasi lalaki!*, they say when they read about Colonel Aureliano Buendia, his countless mistresses and his 17 first-born sons in *Cien Anos* or listen to Julio Iglesia croon, "To all the girls I've loved before..." "Nakakahiya!" They might say when they read about Petra and her nightly contortions with first one Buendia, then the other Buendia brother. "Naku mga babae!" When they watch Sharon Cuneta and Dawn Zulueta fight claw to claw for Gabby Concepcion in "*Una Kang Naging Akin*." How many women protagonists are magnates or glorified bandits in Philippine movies and pulp literature? How many male protagonists are prostitutes or the fatherland/"*amang bayan*" (!) in our cultural texts? There are conventional representations for each gender, also for gays and lesbians. But are representations that powerful, one may ask. Yes.

Coppelia Kahn's analysis of Shakespeare's play, *Taming of the Shrew*¹, talks about the long tradition of female shrews (the foul mouth bitches or the go-getters who alienate men and generally end up spinsters or declass'e women) in English literature. They are sisters of the female monsters and madwomen from Lilith, to Eve, to Circe, to Medea, to Clytemnestra, Delilah, Bertha Mason (in *Jane Eyre*) or Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea* or our Valentina (local Medusa). Folk literature/culture is replete with *aswangs* and Valentinas, old hags, cruel stepmothers or beautiful and wily women capable of entrapping men and leading males to their destruction.

Their binary opposites are represented by the "angel of the house"² or the paragons of womanly/wifely virtues-- Sita in the Hindu epic *Ramayana*, Ester of the *Bible*, Penelope of the *Odyssey*, the muses and *diyosas* that protect the sacred mountains Banahaw and Makiling. And of course, there is the positive archetype of woman in Catholic discourse---the Virgin Mary herself--- whose permutations are found in images of *si Nanay na nagdudusa* and *bayang naghihirap*. How many of these self-sacrificing mothers, models of hearth and home, virginal barrio lasses are found in our own *Liwayway* serialized novels (see the studies on the Tagalog novel of Soledad Reyes), our Amorsolo paintings, portraits of ilustrado families by the Philippine miniaturists, our Tagalog movies?

Not only can people in the Humanities point to these images but they should I think also explain the nature of representations as ideological

¹"*The Taming of the Shrew*: Shakespeare's Mirror for Marriage" in Arlyn Diamond and Lee R. Edwards, eds., *The Authority of Experience: Essays in Feminist Criticism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988) pp. 84-100.

²See Virginia Woolf, "Professions for Women" in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Grubar, eds. *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1985), pp. 1383-1388.

constructs and thus go into discussions on the nature of language, literature and art. What are **representations**? According to Cris Weedon, these are "not merely reflections or expressions of 'natural' or 'given' referents but ideological constructs through which ideology **misrepresents** its own actuality as a signifying system that refers only to its own signification."³ **Representations** are not "false" in that they inaccurately reflect what is "true." They are distortions because they hide the fact that they are constructed for particular purposes. **Representations** are "real" though because they have very material effects on how we feel, think and act, write, respond to art and literature; how our selves are formed as well as how our conceptual universes are shaped. Michele Barrett lists how women can be made accomplices in the formation of sexist mental and emotional frames-- through through the use of stereotypes, collusion, recuperation⁴. I have already discussed the use of stereotype. The other one is **collusion** in which representations attempt to parade women's consent to their subordination. In exchange for a sheltered and comfortable life, the romance heroine gives up her career. See romance novels like Harlequin and Mills and Boon. Note the naked portraits made by men of women looking at themselves. The male artists make the women figure seem guilty of vanity, also voyeurism. The other strategy is **recuperation** where at the end of the movie, an independent-minded, go-getting Makati executive played by Vilma Santos becomes malleable putty in the hands of financial tycoons played by Edu Manzano or Christopher de Leon types.

Hence, through analyses like those above, we can connect feminism with literature or art without making a class session seem like a dg/sharing of feminists rather than a literature/humanities/theater class which it properly should be. We can teach something basic to the students, for instance, deconstruct the mimetic function of literature/arts which is taught via this canonical formulation: "Literature/Art is a reflection of life. The more accurate/truthful the depiction, the more valuable the work of literature/art." As if "reality" was on one side and literature or the arts, on the other. But there are mediations between the two. Language/the media of art are very important mediating factors that intervene in this supposed one-to-one correspondence between **art/literature** and **life** to perpetuate an ideology, like patriarchal ideology. By studying these forms of mediation, one discovers ideology and the modes of its functioning. Why this repertoire of images (nagging wives, luscious nymphets, self-abnegating mothers) and not others? Why these words with these associations/connotations and not others? Why this play of light and colors, not another configuration? Note

³*Feminist practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (London: Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Inc., 1987), pp. 12-42.

⁴"Ideology and Cultural Production of Gender" in Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt, eds. *Feminist Criticism and Social Change* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 65-85.

Amorsolo's play of earth colors and soft light to give his barrio lass a mood of desirable innocence. Why are nationalist murals depicting the various sectors peopled mostly by men? These are results not only of the authors' or artists' conscious choices but also the products of their unconscious or what they have been interpellated to receive as "natural."

Mediating factors in literature and art include the biographical, aesthetic, political, historical, sociological, economic elements and how these are articulated in particular configurations of words, images, lines, colors, shapes; of set designs, costumes, modes of acting, lighting effects in cultural texts.

Hence in our classes, in the papers we write, we can say something about how a particular cultural text/a body of texts or a particular cultural practice is able to form men and women's thoughts and sensibilities. Then from there, we can problematize the nature of language, literature and art. The next step would really be to question all kinds of aesthetic /critical judgements to show that there is nothing innocent about them. Why is the male gaze the predominant perspective in Philippine painting. How has the male gaze emasculated for instance the radical figure that is Urduja found in so many paintings and writings of her by males? How has the gender of our Philippine critics (most of whom are males) influenced the canon of Philippine Literature and Arts?

Cultural texts are purveyors of prevailing aesthetic ideologies which connect with political, economic ideologies that maintain the status quo in any society. And the male orientation of these ideologies are everywhere dominant. There are various examples that we can take up in our classes to show how the patriarchal, capitalist, neocolonial ideology that obtains in the Philippines is either maintained or fought against in our literature and art. For an example of a fighting poem, may I refer you to "*Awit ni Apolinaria*" of Elynia Ruth Mabanglo.

One may ask and I think one should really try to get to this point in our classes (otherwise we leave with a gender-enlightened but pessimistic students). If ideology seems so pervasive and seems to operate so quietly in our literature and our art, why is it that there are those texts that speak of or present an alternative consciousness or life situation?

Here we can talk about discursive fields, about dialogic relations between and among discourses, about asymmetrical arrangement of discourses.

Take for instance the discursive field--family or the set of discourses on the family. Catholic discourse prescribes many things re: the family-- the sanctity of the marriage bond, the sinfulness of the use of non-natural birth control devices, the duties of spouses and siblings, parents and children. Catholic discourse on the family is the dominant discourse on the family in

the Philippines and is part of the hegemonic male-oriented ideology. Capitalist discourse has some effects on the family today too. It entices women to get out of the homes to form part of the labor force for altruistic (to free them from their domestic prisons, to make them independent) and not too altruistic reasons. In terms of the latter, such discourse may entice the women to leave home and work overseas as domestics and entertainers. Unfortunately, this has become the role assigned to Filipinos in the international division of labor. These women and many of our Filipino men too bring valuable dollars into the economy and will naturally, the state asserts, propel national development. How is a woman affected by these differing discourses from religion, economics and politics? Having been subjected since birth to a catalogue of what her wifely and motherly duties are, she feels guilt, probably also resentment at her husband who cannot adequately provide for the family. At the same time, she may also feel liberated once she realizes that conditions have changed and two working people in a household is the norm today and not the aberration. If she is an entertainer or prostitute she may feel "dirty" at the kind of "profession" she has been made to enter but then, at the same time, she might use the government propaganda that this is the way to development rather than demand from the state alternative ways of providing the basic needs of its citizens so that they may not have to leave their country. We are all interpellated by discourses (like literature) and art that are in conflictual relations with each other. And precisely because of this, there is the possibility of questioning the "given."

The task of teachers/ critics is precisely I think to show how the cultural forms and representations that these discourses take, purvey not just one myth or system of beliefs. Nor do they prescribe one mode of action. Oftentimes literary/art texts contain contradictory myths, belief systems, modes of action. Hopefully, once enlightened as to the way ideology operates and the fact that our confusion, our inability to consistently adopt one frame, one belief or/and one mode of existence is not our fault but the effects of these contradictory discourses even only in one field (e.g., the family), we can begin to more intelligently address our problems. The primary effect of a heightened awareness of our gender problems is one of fragmentation, the sundering of the self. Thus, the agenda for all gender-conscious individuals, inside and outside the Humanities classrooms, should include making our students/ourselves look for the humanizing and liberating potentials that are also imbedded in these sexist canonical texts. At the same time, we can start discovering/re-discovering/producing the alternative texts which we as teachers may fight to include in course syllabi, anthologies, collections..

The first involves re-readings or revisionary readings of canonical or/and sexist texts. The second involves the recovery of occluded texts that have been subjected to institutional forgetting as well as the production of

Our goal in the Humanities disciplines/College of Arts and Letters has traditionally been the **whole** man, which should now read: the whole **person**. The goal is still valid but the way to reach it should obviously change. I assert that the basic recognition of the fragmentation of the self that results not only from being economically, politically but also ideologically/culturally "minoritized" is the necessary precondition for the emergence of new Filipino humanism that is not fed by Eurocentric and phallic/phallogocentric epistemologies metaphysics and aesthetics.