

BOOK REVIEWS

Sarilaya: Women in Arts and Media
Edited by Sr. Mary John Mananzan, OSB,
Ma. Asuncion Azcuna, and Fe Mangahas
The Institute of Women's Studies
St. Scholastica's College, Manila, 1989

"It's one feminist anthology after another," wrote Nick Joaquin on the launching of *Ani*, volume II, in 1988, "and the weird thing is how, in spite of the feeling you're running in the ears with them, the darned testaments continue to be luring, tempting, compulsive reading."

Little did Joaquin suspect that the publications program of the local feminist movement was just trying to get off the ground. Today it is only gathering momentum. The latest effort to make "herstory" is *SARILAYA: Women in Arts and Media*, the third in a women's studies series edited by Sr. Mary John Mananzan, OSB, Ma. Asuncion Azcuna and Fe Mangahas. *SARILAYA* is a catchy acronym for *kasarian-kalayaan*, or gender liberation.

Why the hurry to put out this slapdash collection of essays, fiction, poetry, reviews, interviews, artwork, posters, position papers and letters to the editor? Did Sr. Mary John, et al, fear they might soon become moribund like the women's movement in France?

According to a Paris-based correspondent for *Newsweek*, "Women's-studies programs have lagged at French universities. Publishers have stopped printing feminist literature because of poor sales...Feminists complain that French men remain impossibly chauvinist, and the country's conservative Roman Catholic Church has done little to change its traditional message to women."

But in France they don't have a Sr. Mary John Mananzan storming the Bastille of male chauvinism. St. Scholastica's College (Manila), was one of the first colleges in the Philippines to set up an Institute of Women's Studies which she heads and to publish a series of books on that long-neglected subject. Actually, we've just begun to line the nation's feminist bookshelf, and if we produce quality books, there should be no reason to fear a premature demise. A little more attention to the nitty-gritty of book production would have made *SARILAYA* a worthier tribute to Filipino women.

Take this unforgivable case, among many others, of text mutilation: "The Invincible," the title of a short story by Estrella D. Alfon, is spelled two ways, both wrong -- "The Invisible" and "The Invincible." Alfon must be turning cartwheels in her grave. As for Lena S. Pareja, who wrote a thoughtful analysis of Alfon's story, I dare not ask what curses she uttered when she first laid eyes on the printed version of her manuscript.

This is not to denigrate the intention of the editors, namely, to provide "indigenous materials for women's studies in the Philippines," as Sr. Mary John puts it, with the focus on the arts and media. In their introduction Azcuna and Mangahas admit that the choice of content and format for the book posed a problem. Resisting the temptation to use the approaches of previous anthologies, they opted to begin with "theoretical essays" to provide the reader with "an analytical framework for the present state of Philippine literary arts and mass media from the feminist perspective."

But the framework is too narrow to contain the state-of-the-art presentation envisioned by the editors. The groupings are not rich enough despite the editors' discovery of the "variety-in-sameness" that "weaves through all the works written or visual," all telling "a connected story of Filipino woman in varied colors and degrees of anger, pain, poignance, sadness, joy and triumph--as they destroy stereotype images and roles and construct new, alternative selves and lifestyles; tasks entertained (sic) with the struggle to build a nation that is sovereign, just and free."

This is heavy baggage for a volume of 252 pages.

The socio-cultural papers in Part One do succeed in demolishing the myths and stereotypes of women as imaged in print and broadcast media. The lead essay, Marjorie Evasco's "Threading Our Lives, or The Story of the Open Strand," an appreciative reading of poetry by several Filipino women, seems out of place in this section. It would have looked more at home in the category of Reviews, together with Ophelia A. Dimalanta's critique of Evasco's collection of poems, *Dreamweavers*.

The hodge-podge arrangement is of course no fault of the individual writers, some of whom are prizewinners worthy of any anthology. Marra Pl. Lanot's "Love Song" received compliments from Nick Joaquin in his review of *Ani*, II, although the creator of *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* expressed no objection to Lanot's use of "belly button" twice in the poem:

I cannot love you
Only with my head
Or only with my heart
Or only with my belly button...

Serio-comic female wit marks Grace R. Monte De Ramos' "To Men: A Fond Warning." Here the 32-year-old speaker anticipates signs of aging in her anatomy. Her spouse (?) might then "seek beauty in another's youthful arms..." So she warns him: "Perhaps there too will come a time when I lonesome/For your full head of hair, will wish to sleep/With an ape..."

Definitely female is Ruth Elynia Mabanglo's "Soneto sa Hysterectomy," which traces every bloody step in the surgical extraction of her femaleness. The sonnet culminates in an anguished question:

Obaryo, sipit-sipitan, matris,
Katauhang babae'y dito nakasilid;
Ngayong lahat na'y bihasang naialis,
Ganap pa rin kaya ang kabahaging naligis?

Questions, rhetorical rather than inquiring, also conclude Rosalinda V. Pineda's "Bigas at Sampaguita":

Paano lalanghapin
ang bagong sinaing
sa dahop na palayok?
Paano aalpas ang halimuyak
ng bagong pitas na bulaklak
kung nakukulong
sa nakasusing baul?

No feminist anthology would be complete without political protoest writing, best represented here by Ma. Lorena Barros' vivid "Documentary of a War," and a tribute to Lorena herself, entitled "Lorena and the Women of FQS" by Marcelle Roa. Roa's essay is a reaction to Joy Barrios' reading of Lualhati Bautista's monologue, "Lorena," portraying the late founder of Makibaka not only as an activist but as a devoted daughter and mother, and disillusioned wife of a man who betrayed his comrades.

The only "play" in the anthology is "Leona: Isang Sulyap (Isang Yugtong Monologo)" by poet Ruth Elynia Mabanglo. The author uses the *daloy ng kamalayan*, or stream-of-consciousness technique. In one voice, the speaker narrates the life story of Leona

Florentino (ang "Unang Sappho ng Pilipinas"); in another voice she assumes the role of Leona herself.

Of fiction there are only two specimens, one of them "A Tale of Two Witches" by Mila D. Aguilar. A brew of folktale, modern short story, and allegory, Aguilar's "Tale" chronicles the adventures of two young women living isolated on a hilltop, whom the barrio folk threaten to kill because they are believed to be witches. The story becomes entertaining as it reaches its climax; however, the translation of Tagalog conversation into English makes awkward reading. For the Filipino reader, translation is unnecessary; for the foreigner, Tagalog should be dispensed with. Furthermore, the editor(s) should have stepped in and changed a word in the description of one character as sitting with "one leg at a level with his ass..." (Underscoring supplied)

The same word vulgarizes the message of Jurgette Honculada, "Why Do we Celebrate March 8," delivered at the Pista ng Kababaihan sa Luneta last year. She refers to "girls and boys of seven, eight, ten who should be playing games and playing house instead of fondling the genitals and kissing the ass of some Caucasian or Filipino client..." (Underscoring supplied) The statements in SARILAYA -- "darned testaments," as Nick Joaquin would call them -- sound like so much shrill ammunition.

"Emerging Feminist," the last section, is devoted to uneven reproductions of paintings, sculpture, theatre scenes, posters, comic strips, and the score and lyrics of two songs. Except for one oil, the paintings of Imelda Cajipe Endaya are fairly well reproduced, despite what I imagine was the limited budget of this enterprise. A pleasure to look at is Julie Lluch Dalena's now-famous ochre sculpture of Odette Alcantara in a pensive mood.

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