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Joseph A. Galdon, S.J.

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## Review Article

### Nostalgia and the Filipina Writer

JOSEPH A. GALDON, S.J.

NOBODY GATHERS SEASHELLS AND GUN SHELLS ANYMORE. By E. Vallado DaRoy. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1981. 202 pages.

THE DRUMBEATER AND OTHER STORIES. By E. Vallado DaRoy. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1982. vii, 137 pages.

HEART OF THE LOTUS. By Lina Espina-Moore. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1982. 136 pages.

Women writers have played a significant role in the development of Philippine writing in English. Paz Marquez Benitez was one of the earliest influences on the writers before the war and "Dead Stars," in many ways, marks the beginning of Philippine writing in English. Among her compatriots were Paz Latorena, Loreto Paras Sulit, Estrella Alfon, Ligaya Victoria Fruto, Maria Kalaw Katigbak, Felicidad Ocampo, Maria Luna Lopez, Angela Manalang Gloria and Trinidad Tarrosa Subido. The women writers after the war were more numerous and even more widely read—Edith Tiempo, Kerima Polotan Tuvera, Gilda Cordero Fernando, Aida Rivera Ford, Tita Lacamba Ayala, Nina Estrada, Virginia Moreno, Lilia Pablo Amansec, Ninotchka Rosca, Melanie Talag, Rita Gadi Baltazar, Marra Pl. Lanot, Linda Ty Casper, and Rowena Tiempo Torrevillas, among many others. Their contribution to Philippine writing in English has been significant; for a handful of them it has been substantial. Two women writers in recent years—E. Vallado DaRoy and Lina Espina-Moore—deserve special attention for their skill and gentle insights into Philippine society and their perceptive treatment of the theme of nostalgia.

Nostalgia, that melancholy longing for home, or the wistful and often sentimental yearning for a real or romanticized past that cannot be regained, is one of the more frequent themes for contemporary Philippine writers in English. One thinks, for example, of N.V.M. Gonzalez in *Mindoro and Be-*

yond. *The Bamboo Dancers* and *A Season of Grace*; of Bienvenido Santos' *Scent of Apples* and his "lovely people" in an alien land; of Manuel Arguilla and Carlos Bulosan, even of Nick Joaquin and F. Sionil Jose, among others. There is often in the Philippine writing the idyllic nostalgia of longing for a home in the provinces, Moore's Cebu or DaRoy's Corregidor, its innocence often contrasted with the disillusionment and illusions of urban life. But there is also the nostalgia for a past often characterized (in Sionil Jose, for example) by what Leonard Casper calls "a hovering sense of dispossession, and not just of loss." (*Pacific Affairs*, Summer 1983, p. 305). The nostalgia is often characterized by innocence, like the innocence of DaRoy's Lolet; even by naivete in ironic conjunction with manipulative cleverness, authentic simplicity and a quality of frustrated aspiration which characterizes dreamland (N.V.M. Gonzalez, Foreword to *The Drumbeater* p.v.). The nostalgia may be used as genuine praise of the past (and of home), or as a contrastive condemnation of the present (which is far from home). It may be gentle, as in *Seashells* or *Heart of the Lotus*, or it may be bitterly satiric as in *A Lion In The House* and some of the stories of *The Drumbeater*.

#### SEASHELLS AND GUN SHELLS

The nostalgia in E. Vallado DaRoy's *Nobody Gathers Seashells and Gun Shells Anymore* is evident in the title as well as in the contents. The book is a collection of fifteen sketches of Corregidor, from the early thirties up to 1941 and imminent war, strung together quite artlessly, and without apparent form or conflict beyond the maturing of the central character. The island fortress and its people, the fishermen of San Jose, the American soldiers of Topside and Malinta, as well as the contrast of war and peace, of Filipino and American, are seen through the eyes of Dolores Escobar, who is six years old in the first sketch and in her late teens in the final one. Mrs. DaRoy hangs her perceptions of Corregidor on the innocent (and almost certainly autobiographical) memories and the growing awareness of Lolet. What results is the ironic contrast of the child as narrator and the harshness of Corregidor (and of life itself), as the past becomes inevitable present, and as peace becomes war in the idyllic setting along San Jose beach, "a kilometer-long strip of white sandy beach which was forever playing tug-of-war with the sea" (p. 1). The nostalgia is made explicit in the final pages of the book:

This corner . . . was her own sandy expanse of a world that was hemmed in on one side by the world she found bewildering, to which she'd turn her back. She faced the seaside and felt the warm dry sand and then the warm wet sand under her unshod feet. She wanted very much to romp around again and perhaps count the orange rays of the setting sun, the pebbles on the shore, and her own man-made stars that sink into the horizon. Alas, San Jose beach was now blocked off by double rows of

barbed wire . . . . Nobody gathers seashells and gun shells anymore, Dolores Escobar thought, not anymore. (pp. 199-200)

And yet Lolet “. . . wanted to go back where the lines and shadows between one color and another were clear and simple” (p. 138).

The narrative form, with Lolet as the single focus of the often disconnected episodes, allows Mrs. DaRoy to make social comments on the adult world that surrounds Lolet. These comments are muted and gentle, for they are made through the wondering eyes of the as yet uncritical child. The early sketches are much concerned with the differences between Americans and Filipinos. Lolet's father wants to sail to the United States to see whether Americans act the same way in their own country as they do in a land not their own. “Gun Shell Five” is a study of death in rural Philippine society, so unlike the American way of death. “Gun Shell Fourteen” relates the incongruities of the religion of the American Sisters and the Irish priest with the native superstitions and the miracles of the Santo Niño. “It's all one big superstition, (Lolet) heard the echo again” (p. 187).

When Filipinos put on all the trappings of their religion, whose high priest was in faraway Rome and whose underpinnings were really those of the centuries-old *anitos* and *diwatas*, the ‘Canos came out of their enclaves in Middleside and Topside to come down to San Jose barrio in Bottomside and watched the silent procession of the entombed Christ on Good Friday, or the merry procession of storybook characters from Queen Helena and her little boy escort Constantino down to the Aetas in May. (p. 183)

There are sharp little portraits of Major Ladao, an Ilocano, who is the U.S. Army's Provost Marshall; Lolet's father who was called Eugenio, Eugene, then Sergeant Eugene, and finally Sargene; of Oscar, the student rebel looking for a lost coin (and perhaps a cause) in the sand; of Kikoy who wanted to be called Frankie; of Mr. Arguelles, the High School principal who preached Quezon and nationalism (it is ironic that Lolet compares him to Ichabod Crane while her class studies the Acadians); and of Lolet's cousin Garet who rebels against an arranged marriage and wants to live her own life.

The middle three sections of the book recount a journey home again as Sargene takes his family back to their ancestral roots in Pangasinan. The final sections chronicle the beginnings of student activism in San Jose High School, and foreshadow the bigger conflict that is soon to engulf the island. Mrs. DaRoy (or Lolet) has a sharp eye for the incongruities and the stupidities in the world around her, but her tone in *Seashells and Gun Shells* is ever gentle and compassionate, much like that of the wise mother who knows that her children will slowly grow up to wisdom themselves, and need not be reprimanded too strongly now as children.

Some of the sketches were written as early as 1951, and they often betray

the uncertain hand of the novice writer. Mrs. DaRoy's grasp of idiomatic English falters at times. She insists on calling waves "beachcombers," and has trouble with the idiomatic collectives and the indefinite article. There is the (now almost inevitable in Philippine writing) confusion of tenses, numbers and prepositions. (One cannot be sure, of course, whether the faults are the author's or the proofreader's.) Lolet's imaginary encounter with a long dead Mang Paco and her father's dream are overly contrived. The reader often confuses Lolet's imagination with reality and cannot always follow when she wanders off into fantasy.

But such lapses are unimportant against the breadth of Mrs. DaRoy's accomplishment in *Seashells and Gun Shells*. She has captured a period and a place, and put them both on paper for all to think about, as well as delightful vignettes about abaca rope-making (pp. 11-12), the origins of Ternate in Cavite (pp. 9-10), the mysterious cycle of children's games ("Seashell Four"), All Saints Day, the *velasion* and the fluvial procession in San Jose Bay. Perhaps, best of all, in these fifteen sketches, Mrs. DaRoy has caught the seashells of a child's mind and cast them in subtle irony against the minds of the adults around her and things like American PX cheese, an RCA radio and 30 mm. machine gun shells.

#### THE DRUM BEATER

There is less nostalgia, more sophistication, and a sharper pen in Mrs. DaRoy's second collection, *The Drum Beater and Other Stories*. The thirteen stories in this collection, all published between 1949 and 1971, are full of shadows—the shadows that lengthen between cultures ("Mountain Trail" and "Tales From a Cocktail Hour"), between social classes ("Two Fishermen," "Build Me a Wall," and "Whose Revenge"), between children and parents ("Mountain Trail"), and between pretence and reality ("The Drumbeater" and "The Candlelighters"). Saddest of all are the shadows that grow between husband and wife in "Rehearsal Through the Back Door," "Go Cast Square Shadows," and "Go Pluck a Butterfly." "The Green Hills" talks of the shadows that mark off life and death, memory and reality. Even in the two opening stories, perhaps the most idyllic of them all, there is the foreboding shadow of "The Storm," and the subtle interplay of the shadows between childhood and adolescence in "The Emerging Cocoon." The landscape of this second collection of Mrs. DaRoy, quite different from that of *Seashells and Gun Shells*, is the land of the shadows: "Tall and square and gray and indifferent were shadows falling full length across moving shadows" (p. 85).

Much like the stories of Manuel Arguilla, with whom Mrs. DaRoy has many affinities, *The Drumbeater* stories can be divided into three groups—pastoral stories, urban satire and social criticism. The first five of these stories (all published between 1949 and 1959) are pastoral idylls. They are cut

from the same bolt of cloth as *Seashells and Gun Shells*, and there is a young girl (a different girl in each story, but one who grows older in each much like the Lolet of *Seashells and Gun Shells*) at the heart of each of them. In these pastoral stories, the shadows, as well as the author's hand, are gentle. "The Storm" (1949) is the simplest of them, almost archetypal in its presentation of a fisherman, a wife and a child (Maria), a home, and the storm. "Two Fishermen" (1950) has echoes of Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, and attempts to show the futility and meaninglessness of social differences. The story could have been as simple and mythic as "The Storm," but Mrs. DaRoy spoiled it with a jarring shift in point of view and the dominance of Nenita who takes over the story and spoils it. It should have been Lacay's story, not Nenita's. "The Unfolding Cocoon" (1954) is a beautifully perceptive little story of a fisherman's daughter's romantic dreams shattered by the cackle of her father's fighting cocks. It belongs with "Seashell Ten," the equally beautiful little sketch of adolescence in *Seashells and Gunshells*. "Mountain Trail" (1959) is the last of these pastoral stories and puts a fitting end to the pastoral group as it speaks of death and war. But its essential charm is its reminiscence of Sinai Hamada underlining the clash of cultures in the clash of generations, "The Green Hills" because of both its date (1949) and its theme (the death of youthful dreams and the death of youth), belongs in this group of pastoral stories, although its setting is halfway between rural and urban.

Six of the stories, originally published between 1964 and 1971, are what may be called urban stories. Their setting is the city or the suburbs, and the tone of the stories is more sharply critical. The shadows, to Mrs. DaRoy, loom much larger in the urban setting than they do in the simpler land of the farmer or the fisherman of the pastoral idyll stories.

In three stories, Mrs. DaRoy paints a scathing portrait of contemporary social institutions. In the title story, "The Drumbeater," Marcelina Vergara, a year away from college, goes to work in a public relations office and quickly loses her soul to the mammon of modern advertising. At first she resists the seduction of the trade and its emptiness:

It's the age of p.r. Lina found the idea huge, encompassing, all-embracing, like the arch made by two cupped hands tracing the bloatedness of a huge balloon. Now it was a sound, loud and brazen, the urging of the voice for today's rice and tomorrow's fish. Now it was a sound, tinkling with the sophistication of cocktail long-stemmed glasses. Now it was a gesture, the studied exuberance of a buss on one's cheek, careful not to flake off the facial cosmetics and show the damning crow's feet. (p. 56)

But Salud, her college friend and co-worker tells her: "The trouble with you, Lina . . . is that you confuse your life with your work" (p. 54). And soon enough, Lina changes her name to Lynn, wears a padded bra and has a desk and a telephone all her own.

In "The Candlelighters," Mrs. DaRoy's target is the hypocrisy and hollowness of education. The symbol of this pretense is captured by the new construction on the front of the private school where Rita Nestor goes to work after years of teaching in a dilapidated schoolhouse in the province:

Mrs. Nestor stopped by a west window and looked down at the construction crew at work on a facade of tall Ionic pillars. She noted that the pillars were a raised sculptured part of the massive wall, not really pillars supporting any dome. Quite a clever piece of illusion, she mused. (p. 126)

She quickly becomes aware of "the insidious bureaucracy of the school's system, the petty rivalries of deans, the sanctimonious pleas of the president for 'academic freedom'" (p. 130), is tempted to go back to the simplicity and the genuineness of the province, but stays on if only to see her faceless students "getting less faceless" (p. 137).

Finally, "Tales From a Cocktail Hour" is a picture of the shallowness of the cocktail hour, that modern ritual to nothingness. In this last story, Mrs. DaRoy has several penetrating snapshots of Americans trying to be Filipinos and Filipinos trying to be Americans. In fact, the reader wonders whether the satire here is not the cocktail hour itself, but really the empty yearning of Filipinos to be what they are not, in which Filipinos in coat and tie at a cocktail hour, that most American of institutions, is the ultimate irony of them all.

Three of the better and more touching stories in this category of urban satire are all concerned with marriage and the chasms that rear themselves between husband and wife. The simplest of the three is the prize winning "Go Cast Square Shadows" which contrasts two husbands on their way home from work. N.V.M. Gonzalez writes of this story: "Mrs. DaRoy utilizes a subject so common that the story could have been banal had not the author 'seen' it the way she did" (p. v). "Rehearsals Through the Back Door" is a sobering story of a husband trying to reach a wife who has already slipped away into a 'career' and locked the doors behind her on a stage where there is applause and acceptance, but no room for husband or child. "As father and son leave, Marcia the dancer, Marcia who belongs to the Arts, just stands there, staring at the suitcase" (p. 102). Most tragic of these marriage stories is "Go Pluck a Butterfly" where the young wife lapses into catatonic withdrawal and the husband wonders whether he has been the cause. "He was now trying to reach her urgently, as he had never done before. What have I done? What have I done?" (p. 124).

Less typical of the collection as a whole (and of *Seashells and Gun Shells*) are two stories that might be classed as social criticism. "Build Me A Wall" is the bitter contrast of a middle class subdivision and the landless poor who begin to move into the subdivision as squatters. The story repeats a number of themes in the other stories—the emptiness of cocktail chatter

and upper class pretensions, the longing for acceptance that often demands a compromise with principles, and the hypocrisy of superficial religion. But these themes are used to preach a starker, harsher message: "It could be the next night, or some nights later, or it could be years later . . . the invasion comes . . ." (pp. 114-15). "Whose Revenge" is a parable of the corruption of power and of social inequity in a barrio near Arayat which, deliberately or not, asks the question whether "the men from the hills" are perhaps better than the injustice we have at the moment. The answer has certainly not become any clearer in the fifteen years since Mrs. DaRoy wrote this story.

The *Drumbeater* stories, like those of *Seashells and Gun Shells*, are youthful stories for the most part, and they reveal the same unsureness in language, in theme and in technique. Mrs. DaRoy has an Igorot boy wearing "a weathered leathered jacket and one of those indispensable G-strings" (p. 38). Another of her characters is "sidestepped by her fiance" (p. 21). Melanio in "Mountain Trail" wanted to tell Cora that he did not mean to hurt her, that she was the whole world to him, "but his thoughts refused to precipitate into words; they remained in a gaseous state effused from out his confused eyes" (p. 42). And Cora understood. In fact, she "understood immensely" (p. 4). In "Two Fishermen" Nenita "shook her head and as she did so she felt the gentle swoshing (sic) of her hanging curls. She blinked many times. The rounded unstrained face was still there in the mirror, although it looked a bit unclear now for her glasses, whose upswept, piquant top was banded with gold, lay on top of the dresser" (p. 33).

Mrs. DaRoy's characters, however, are sharply drawn, especially her women characters. She knows what goes on inside a woman's head and heart. But she sometimes flogs an image to death (e.g., the drum in the title story) and tries too hard for clever effects (e.g., "The Green Hills"). Gonzalez was right, I think. "With a bit more edge and a bit more time to keep the knife-scalpel clean, Mrs. DaRoy should be giving us more elaborate and weightier material than she has so far produced" (*The Drumbeater*, p. vi).

#### HEART OF THE LOTUS

This second edition of *Heart of the Lotus* (the first was by Solidaridad Publishing House, 1970) affords the opportunity to examine a book which Isagani Cruz calls Mrs. Moore's "masterpiece" (*Asiaweek*, 27 January 1984), but which was not much noticed when it first appeared. The harried days of activism and pre-martial law would have allowed little time or inclination to notice a pastoral and nostalgic novel like *Heart of the Lotus*. Mrs. Moore is a Cebuano writer of some note, but in *Heart of the Lotus* and in her other novel, *A Lion in the House* (New Day Publishers, 1980), she has established herself as a writer in English as well.

The nostalgia in Mrs. Moore's *A Lion in the House*, (*Philippine Studies* 30 [1982]:434-37) is more sharply satirical than that of Mrs. DaRoy. Its sharp and biting picture of contemporary Manila life is in contrast to the simpler innocence of Tondo where Josie, the protagonist of the novel, was once a simple school teacher. Change has swept the De Leon family along with it and entangled it in the hypocrisy of Manila society. A New York psychiatrist advises that Jake, the son of the family, should have an environment that preserves "the Filipino sense of family." Nostalgia in *A Lion in the House* is a bitter longing for home, for a past that cannot be recovered, for innocence that will never be recaptured. The nostalgia in *Heart of the Lotus*, the earlier novel, is less bitter, more gentle, and much like that of Mrs. DaRoy's two collections.

*Heart of the Lotus* is the story of the Almena family, presided over by the matriarch Doña Filomena Almena in the family compound in Cebu in the twenties and thirties. There are five houses in the compound for various branches of the family, and in the center of the compound is the lotus pool from which the novel derives its title. ". . . the lotus petals were firmly—crisply pushing toward the sun . . . . The flowers opened during the different hours of the day, a relay of tribute to time . . . Touch the heart and feel how firm and cool it is . . ." (p. 92). At one end of the pool is a granite statue of the Goddess Kwan Yin (Filomena's now dead husband was Ignacio Almena y Kah Ban) and at the other end of the pool is a marble statue of the Virgen del Carmen—symbols of the Chinese and Spanish Catholic roots of the family.

The novel is the story of concentric circles of this family—Doña Filomena and her cousins Candida (Didang) who lost a lover in the revolution at sixteen and never married, and Victoria (Toria) who was widowed at twenty-two, and Tio Pepe (the brother of Filomena) who is married to Pilar Mercedes Chiong (Señora Nene). They represent the older generation now passing away. There are the five children of Filomena and Ignacio—Vicente, Alejandro, Lorenzo, Concha and Floro. Lorenzo (Insong), a middle-aged bachelor, is the center of the novel and all the scenes, directly or indirectly, are seen through his eyes. He is the intellectual cynic, the uninvolved spectator who reflects and analyzes the Almena clan with affection, pity and a gentle realism. Vicente (Teng) is the family nationalist and rebel. He went into exile in Hong Kong when he "wrote a daring pen for 'complete and absolute independence' and against everything else. He was advised to leave the country until all the revolutionary assertions had blown over" (p. 8). He now works for a bank in Hong Kong and has married Helen, a British citizen and a Muslim. Alejandro had been a seminarian at seventeen, but is now married to Yrenea Teresa (Niyang) and has seven of his own children and two adopted children (one of them an illegitimate child of Padre Manuel and Emiliana, the first soloist of the parish choir, and the other an illegitimate daughter

of his brother Lorenzo). Concha is married to Gonzalo Jimenez and runs the family hacienda, and Floro is the businessman of the family who "has everything." Then there are the thirteen grandchildren of Filomena (and the one adopted child of Padre Manuel). On the outer fringes of the clan are family servants—Apolonia, the maid, Nicolas, the houseboy, Iyo Anas the cochero, Yaya Isang, and the others. Outside the compound are the family friends—the priests, the neighbors, the American friends—Dr. James Smith and Arthur Mahler. In many ways, this extended family is the main character in the novel as much as any individual.

Mrs. Moore juxtaposes the solidity and the stability of the Almena clan and the Almena compound against the problems of change. There is a satirical edge to the Almena name—for in many ways it is a fortress under siege. "Lorenzo surveyed the scene before him and thought . . . how safe and solid everything was" (p. 6). But Lorenzo was also aware "of the creeping changes and innovations around — young men questioning the age-old practices of the church and not getting shot or led to the *garrote* for it; young women yearning for the vote; requirements of immunization; the tribal sweetness given to standard American songs by Filipino serenaders . . ." (p. 47). "Did it ever occur to you, Señores, that for them (Filomena and Didang and Toria) it stands for the end of their era? It is like the beginning of death, you know" (p. 75).

The chief catalyst and symbol of that change in the Cebu of the twenties and thirties is the threat and actuality of Americanization—sanitation and vaccinations, American automobiles instead of carriages, adding machines and American magazines (the Campbell soup Kewpie and the yawning boy with a candle in one hand and an automobile tire draped over a shoulder). But the change is also visible in the newer approaches to education and to religion, Padre Manalo's new church that will replace the old Spanish building, and the endless discussions of politics, and Commonwealth and Independence. This theme of tradition and change is rather beautifully captured in Mrs. Moore's account of Lorenzo's attempts to reverse the plot of the traditional Moro-Moro and produce a play in which the Moros win and the Christians are converted (pp. 39 ff.).

The theme is epic, but like *Lion in the House*, Mrs. Moore has given us only the skeleton of what could have been a magnificent family saga. One can only regret that the novel is so short. I would have wanted more about each of the Almenas, for each of them deserves a book of his own. I would also have wanted more about each of the Spanish and Filipino priests—such a powerful cross section of the Philippine Church in the period between the wars—and I would have wanted to know more about the servants—especially Isang and Nicolas—for, like Faulkner's slaves in *The Sound and the Fury*, "they survive."

There are three magnificent subplots that emerge only in outline. There is

the touching irony of Señora Nene's lover who emerges from obscurity only after her death. There is the deeply tragic story of Concha and Gonzalo, and the melancholy chronicle of Mano Sisoy and the angels. Each of them deserves more depth and more space. This is an infinitely rich novel—rich in theme, in characters and in customs and local color. But sadly, Mrs. Moore has only scratched the surface of the gold that lies hidden here just below the surface.

I have commented elsewhere (*Philippine Studies* 30 [1982]: 434-37) on Mrs. Moore's skill with language. That same skill manifests itself here in innumerable gems: "Concha is running the hacienda and doing very well, as we all know. Gonzalo is like the big ancient cannon at the gate of Fort San Pedro, the sole function of which is to look formidable and nothing more" (p. 16); "The thing was for *la hermosa* Nene to be around. That was the velvet fringe to the bunting of welcome" (p. 21); and "Summer was not yet at its peak, for it was only March. Cebu, where it comes sooner and with more intensity than a nymphet impatient with virginity, still had these mild mornings—the sun coming up soft, slow, gentle" (p. 107).

Mrs. Moore is equally perceptive and adept with character. The members of the Almena family really live—Lorenzo, for example: "Alejandro watched his brother with admiration and envy. Lorenzo could do it. Could make crying women laugh and laughing women cry. He plucks a word, a gesture, a vibration in the atmosphere, kneads them the way he wants to and the situation is his. He walks up to a group of men, tilts his hat or bows just ever so slightly, flashes a smile, says a few words, and is in a position to pilot" (pp. 17-18).

Mrs. Moore has given us two English novels of outstanding promise—*Heart of the Lotus* and *A Lion in the House*. The theme of both of them is a family under siege, one in Cebu in the years before World War II, and the other in Manila in the postwar period. Each of them, however, is only an outline that cries out for more. I wonder if the two novels might be the same story, might be saying the same thing? I wonder what the result would be if Mrs. Moore were to carry the Almena grandchildren and great grandchildren over into *A Lion in the House* and give us one magnificent family epic of four generations? We might just have "The Great Filipino Novel in English."

Both Mrs. DaRoy and Mrs. Moore are extremely capable writers. Their language is precise and controlled. Their feminine insight gives their characters an unusual depth and a human dimension that makes them particularly appealing. Both of them need a larger canvas and a broader vision to display their considerable talents to the fullest.