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The Hand of the Enemy: the Stories of Kerima Polotan

MIGUEL A. BERNAD

THE HAND OF THE ENEMY is a biblical phrase which one finds frequently in the Old Testament and particularly in the Psalms. Kerima Polotan (Mrs. Tuvera) has used the phrase as a title for her novel which was published in 1962 under the imprint of the Philippine Chapter of PEN, an international association of poets, essayists and novelists. But besides being the title of her novel, the biblical phrase may be used to characterize her collected stories as well: for at least in her later stories, there is a preoccupation with the hand of the enemy — the “enemy” being many things, including life itself.

Let us begin with the collected short stories, published in 1968.¹

WOMAN IN HELL

When Miss Kerima Polotan first won the Palanca Award in 1952, she won it with a story which seemed reminiscent of Katherine Mansfield. Reminiscent, not because it was in any way imitative (it was an original story that only a Filipino writer could have written) but because there was a similarity in technique and in point of view. There was the same sympathetic understanding, the same gentle irony, the same attention to external detail, the same inward awareness on the

¹ *Stories* by Kerima Polotan (Manila: Bookmark, 1968), xiii, 193 pp.

part of the main character. All this is found in the stories of Katherine Mansfield, as indeed in those of other writers.

Miss Polotan's story was entitled "The Virgin". It told of the unexpressed desires of a spinster who finally succumbed to the physical presence of the first strong male that she encountered. "Succumbed" is a strong word in this instance, for the story ended before the spinster actually succumbed. We are merely told that in the sidewalk, feeling the nearness of the man, the woman "turned to him". What happened after that is left to the imagination.

That was in 1952. Miss Polotan has since repeatedly won the Palanca and other Philippine literary awards. In the intervening years between those early stories and the publication of her two books, a great alteration has occurred in her style. There is the same acute inward awareness on the part of the main character. There is the same attention to external detail. And there is the same—or perhaps even greater—adroitness in the handling of a story. But the gentle irony is gone. It is replaced by anger and bitterness. The controlled understatement has yielded to volcanic intensity.

The word "terrible" comes to mind. Some of her stories are terrible: not in the sense that they are badly done (for they are extremely well written) but in the sense that they are harrowing and terrifying. The protagonist is usually a woman caught in a dilemma from which there is no escape. It is perhaps not too strong to say that in these stories, the protagonist is a woman in hell.

Consider the story entitled "The Face of Virtue". It is an ironic title. A pregnant woman takes a bus to Cavite and quite bluntly tells the doctor, "I don't want this baby." She is poor and she has had five children: this would be the sixth. She does not want it. Her husband tries to argue against an abortion: "We'll make out," he says; "everything works out in the end, you'll see." But she does not see. "I don't want it." And that's that.

The reason for her repugnance goes beyond this particular occasion. It is not merely this particular baby that she does

not want. It is the state of motherhood itself. The marriage act has lost all meaning: it has become a merely biological action with rather disgusting consequences.

It wasn't as if she had to have the abortion at all, but it was the unspeakable disgust of getting caught again, the nine months' bloatedness, the agony of childbirth and the terrible loss of self. What am I but someone's garbage can? she thought that morning in the kitchen when she knew without a doubt that she was pregnant once more. Five children, Mike's pay, and Mike himself, tired and beaten at 30, groping for her bed at night, seeking the only meaningful thing in a life time of defeat. In the dark his mumbled words, 'Celi, I love you', sounded like the knell of doom, and only Araceli Gomez knew that they brought a grimace to her face as she lay, hating his mouth and his hands and his limbs.

That is a description of a woman in hell. Miss Polotan has described what Katherine Mansfield or any other writer of her class could never have described: the wretchedness of a married woman caught in a situation from which there is no escape, who feels degraded by poverty and monotony and by what she calls "the loss of self".

Perhaps only a Filipino woman could write in this fashion: a woman who on the one hand values family life, and on the other is overwhelmed by the desperate struggle to maintain it. If literature is the mirror of nature, then it is a genuinely Philippine reality that is mirrored in Mrs. Tuvera's stories.

One story (entitled "Cost Price") tells of the predicament of a young woman who works in a children's library — a library so poor that it can not afford to buy any books. The only books it can acquire are those discarded by other government bureaus. The library is housed in a very poor room, equipped only with books and bookshelves and with one cot and one bathroom as extra luxuries. In this library room the young woman keeps an assignation after hours with her boy friend who wants to marry her but is too poor to do so. Before their hunger for each other is satisfied, the young woman gets scruples of conscience. She repels the young man's advances. The evening is spoiled. The man leaves. The woman has not lost her physical virginity but she has lost much else:

Tearless and still, Isabel stood there knowing that in a little while he was going to leave her, and she would be alone to search for the anguished pieces of their selves that lay shattered about the tiny room.

A SENSE OF BETRAYAL

What the women in these stories find hardest to bear is a sense of betrayal. These women feel betrayed. It is not the usual kind of betrayal where a woman is seduced by a man she trusts. There is hardly any case of seduction in these stories, though there are plenty of cases of fornication and adultery which the women enter into with open eyes. Such betrayals do not seem to bother the women in these stories. What they resent is a more subtle betrayal. A woman feels betrayed because her former boy friend, who in school was a naive defender of lost causes, has become a successful businessman who no longer believes in lost causes. A woman is bitterly resentful because her husband, tired of their continual poverty, has finally agreed to take part in corruption. The loss of chastity does not embitter these women. What embitters them is the loss of another kind of personal integrity on their part or on the part of others. Hence their dilemma: on the one hand they resent a life of grinding poverty; on the other, they resent the usual means to which men resort in order to end their poverty.

They are, in short, angry women: angry at their husbands at their friends, at their condition, at the world, at themselves.

ANGRY STORIES

One of the angry stories in this book is called "The Giants", later incorporated in the novel. A young woman named Carmen Reyes writes feature articles for a magazine. As a person she is often snubbed by those who consider themselves important. But as a writer she is courted and flattered because her articles can enhance their prestige. She finds herself writing flattering stories about persons who are in fact contemptible: for instance, an army general who keeps two establishments—a wife and a mistress—and whose nomination as general has been

confirmed by the Commission on Appointments through a little bit of blackmail practiced by his wife.

Carmen Reyes also finds herself flattered and cultivated by the Alberto Cosios. He is an obscure major in the army who rises to sudden power by working for the election of "the Man" (Magsaysay?) as President. With power comes opulence, and Alberto Cosio takes full advantage of his important position in the Cabinet. He is ambitious: but his wife is not merely ambitious; she is vulgar, ostentatious, selfish, vindictive. The two are hateful people, and they are described with terrifying bitterness. These are "the giants"; against them, what can a woman do who has no weapons but her ability to write? We shall meet the Cosios again in *The Hand of the Enemy*.

One of the most complex and best written of Kerima Polotan's stories (also later incorporated into her novel) is entitled "The Sounds of Sunday". The story goes back and forth between Tayug and Manila, and moves from present to past, producing its effects by contrast and juxtaposition and reminiscence. It is the story of a marriage that is breaking up. From an impoverished situation the husband rises to opulence as a highly paid public relations officer. In this capacity his "duties" include covering up for the president's amorous activities and buying out those who have any claim against the company or its top officials. The wife, Emma Gorres, can not stand this corruption. There is a quarrel and she leaves her husband to go back to their obscure hometown in Pangasinan, where she resumes her former job as a teacher in a private high school. She also resumes an old friendship with the high school principal. He is a lonely man. So is she. In their loneliness they turn to each other for comfort, knowing finally that it means disaster.

This particular story, which won the Palanca Award in 1961, was subsequently included in an anthology of Asian short stories.² In reviewing that book for the *Saturday Review of New York*, an American critic said that Kerima Polotan's

² *Asian PEN Anthology*, Vol. I, ed. F. Sionil Jose (Solidaridad Publishing House, Manila, 1966) xli, 350 pp.

"The Sounds of Sunday" was "unquestionably" the best in the entire anthology. "Miss Polotan," he says, "writes subtly, ironically, sometimes tenderly, about contemporary life in the Philippines." It is "well-wrought, brilliantly modulated story—which is as adroit as the best short fiction of Boll and Sartre."

That is high praise and well deserved. But one can not entirely agree with his summary of the theme: "Explicit in this . . . story is the theme of pastoral virtue versus urban corruption." It is not as simple as that. There is certainly an implied contrast between the relative simplicity of provincial life and the complicated, corrupt life in the city. But provincial life is not depicted as entirely simple or entirely virtuous. Norma Rividad, wife of the school principal in Tayug, goes to Dagupan by bus every Saturday to meet other men. She is not a happy woman. The husband, Rene Rividad, brooding over history and his own cuckoldry, is not a happy man. And it is in the obscure provincial town of Tayug that Emma Gorres, who has left her husband in Manila, finds comfort in another man not her husband:

They sat in silence, the cups between them. Perhaps I could love him, she thought. The jukebox in the corner began to sing softly. Perhaps I love him already, she thought. Over the edge, ah! down the precipice, and sweet disaster.

That is the point. Running away from her husband's corruption in Manila, she falls into another kind of corruption in the province: "over the edge, down the precipice." Her surrender is no less a disaster because it is "sweet". Her situation is ironic:

She had run away from violence only to meet it here in this quiet, empty restaurant, with the electric fan whirring overhead, and Mrs. Puray dozing near her cashbox.

This is not "pastoral virtue versus urban corruption". This story, as later expanded into the novel, was retitled "The Hand of the Enemy", where the "enemy" embraces more than merely urban corruption.

If one must mention defects in the stories (responsible criticism can not afford to omit mention of them) one might

point to an occasional lapse in idiom which an alert editor might easily have corrected. "*Araceli Gomez was the prettiest wife on the block*": a bit of editorial first-aid could have saved the poor lady.

But such defects are trivial. Kerima Polotan's stories are fascinating, but they are not happy tales. It is never a joyous thing to see—with the clear illumination that Miss Polotan gives us—the agony of a woman (or of any human being) in hell.

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

As previously mentioned, *The Hand of the Enemy* was published in 1962³. It had previously won for its author the Stonehill Fellowship: the second (and the last) novel to win that coveted but now defunct Award—the first being Nick Joaquin's *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*, published in 1961.

Kerima Polotan's novel is a tale of two cities: the Big City—Manila—and the remote provincial town of Tayug in Pangasinan. It is also the tale of two couples: the Rividads and the Gorrezes. The Rividads are destroyed by themselves. The Gorrezes are destroyed, partly by themselves and partly by other things—in short, by "the hand of the enemy."

Rene Rividad is the principal of the high school in Tayug. He has lived in that town most of his life, brought up by relatives there. He has a peculiar link to that town's history. For his father and mother had led a peasants' revolt against the municipal government and the landowners. It was a bloody rebellion in which (as presented in the novel) the mayor and some of the residents and all of the rebels were killed. Rene Rividad's connection with that rebellion, however, is not revealed to us until the story is well advanced.

Rene Rividad's wife, Norma is native to Tayug, the illegitimate daughter of the late vice-mayor by one of his

³ Kerima Polotan, *The Hand of the Enemy* (Published by Regal Publishing Company, for the Philippine Center of International PEN, Manila, 1962) 115 pp.

many mistresses. Brought up in a hovel, unwanted and unloved, the girl grows up and marries the high school principal, to whom she proves flagrantly unfaithful. As in the case of her husband, the facts about Norma—her pathetic childhood, her nymphomania—come out little by little as the story unfolds. This device of gradual revelation is one of the interesting aspects of Mrs. Tuvera's narrative technique.

THE MAIN PROTAGONISTS

The main protagonist in the novel is Emma Gorrez, nee Emma Mercene, and it is from her point of view that much of the action is seen. She also has grown up as an unwanted child, though in a different way from Norma Rividad: Norma grew up in poverty; Emma was reared on an 800-hectare farm. But after her mother's death and her father's remarriage she had left home to work in Manila. Jilted by a former suitor, disinherited in her father's lifetime and penniless after his death, Emma tries first one job, then another, keeping her integrity amid morally squalid surroundings in the city which disgust her. An advertisement in the papers catches her eye, and she goes—in answer to the advertisement—to Tayug to become a teacher in Mr. Rividad's high school.

Among her duties is that of adviser to two student organizations: the History Club and the School Newspaper. The History Club becomes the occasion for her researches into the "colorum" uprising of Tayug in which so many people had been killed. The school paper, on the other hand, brings her on one occasion to Dagupan to see the printers. There, at the printing press, she meets Domingo Gorrez whom she eventually marries.

Domingo Gorrez is also a native of Tayug, the surviving son of a once powerful politician who at one time was governor of the province. Having inherited the old house in Tayug and a small farm in the country and little else, Domingo seeks his fortune first in Manila (where he fails) and later in Pangasinan as editor of a local newspaper (where he again fails). He eventually finds uncongenial employment in a local construction company. But it is while Domingo Gorrez

is still the idealistic but impecunious editor of the *Pangasinan Clarion* that he marries Emma Mercene. He has failed in Manila and so has she: but they start life with youthful optimism, and for a few years they and their two children live quietly in frugal comfort in the secure surroundings of Tayug.

But this peace is shattered by the advent of Nora Cosio. She is the wife of an army major, and both she and her husband have hitched their wagon to the rising star of a Big Man who gets elected President in the national elections of 1953. During the electoral campaign Nora Cosio is an indefatigable worker, and she arrives in Tayug with a truckload of shirts and rice for distribution among the populace. She invites herself to the Gorrez house, uses it as her base of operations, and with her charm she wins the support of Domingo Gorrez who himself becomes an effective campaigner among his tenant. But Nora Cosio's charm appears synthetic to Emma Gorrez, to whom the mode of campaigning—the kissing of babies, the giving away of gifts, the promise of a better world—seems somehow dishonest. With intuitive instinct Emma recognizes Nora Cosio as a menace to her home and her family.

Nora Cosio is a menace not in the usual and predictable way of the "love triangle", but in a wholly unexpected manner: by enslaving the Gorrezes and casting them off when their usefulness is over.

Nora Cosio's candidate becomes President. Her husband, the ex-army major, becomes a powerful member of the Cabinet. Living as they do in ever increasing affluence in Manila the Cosios think of repaying the Gorrezes' hospitality by suggesting that they abandon their shabby obscurity in Tayug and move into the city where they could enter into a business partnership. Domingo Gorrez accepts, over the protests of his wife Emma who has misgivings about the Cosios. Emma is content to spend the rest of her life in the modest but stable security of Tayug. But not her husband. He has failed once in the city: he would make another try.

They move to Manila, into the shabby discomfort of Sampaloc. They are patronized by the Cosios. A printing press is established: financed by the Cosios, operated by the Gorrezes—but operated at great personal sacrifice; for Nora Cosio, enthusiastic at first, soon loses interest. The money is no longer forthcoming. The price of paper goes up. The Gorrezes have to borrow money to meet the weekly payroll. The workers, poorly paid, do shabby work. The customers complain. The Gorrez children are underfed. Domingo Gorrez, plodding the streets in search of more customers, becomes sickly. Emma Gorrez tries desperately to make ends meet, but she finally comes to the end of her rope. Treated as a menial by Nora Cosio, Emma demands a confrontation. In a violent quarrel, Nora calls Emma a thief. Emma knocks Nora down, rips open her dress, seizes her hand and pins it under the electric cutter as the blade descends. So ends Part One.

Part Two opens on a quiet note, with Emma Gorrez back in Tayug. But she is alone with the children. Her husband is not with her. Gradually, the reader finds out what has happened: Nora Cosio's hand had not been amputated; after all; one of the employees had kicked the electric plug off the socket and had pushed the women away from the descending blade. The business partnership was of course broken up, and the Cosios could have sued the Gorrezes for assault: but since both sides wanted to avoid a public scandal, nothing further was done in the matter. But Domingo Gorrez, thus left without a job, lands a more promising one in the public relations department of a firm called Quality Products.

Tired of his former failures, he decides this time to play the game well. He earns one promotion after another until he becomes a trusted subordinate with a large monthly salary. "Playing the game" involves other things besides the routine work of the office. He is expected, for instance, to cover up for the top executive's amorous activities. Gorrez's office is used as a "resting place" for the office girls in whom the boss is interested. ("Pimping", his wife Emma calls it.) Gorrez

also has to buy off an old man whose granddaughter has been violated by the company's vice president. It is Gorrez's action in a crucial moment that prevents the workers' union from obtaining their just demands for better wages and better working terms.

To Emma, her husband's activities seem both dishonest and destructive. He has become a destroyer of men's lives. What does a man live for? she asks. Isn't it enough to have a roof and a moment to be comfortable in? Unable to stand this new corruption, Emma leaves her husband and brings her two children back to Tayug to resume her job as a teacher in Mr. Rividad's high school. And there—a lonely woman—she falls in love with Mr. Rividad, himself a lonely man. But the affair has an unexpected denouement, which must be read to be appreciated.

NARRATIVE DEVICES

Such is the story. The telling of it is extremely well done, for Mrs. Tuvera, besides her mastery of the English language and its nuances, is expert at handling three narrative devices: the flashback, the piecemeal discovery, and the vivid but seemingly irrelevant detail that anchors an incident to a definite time and place.

An example of this last-mentioned point is the passage in which Emma Mercene learns from her landlady about Norma Rividad's wayward ways.

"What made a man bear it?" cried Mrs. Pintoy, shelling beans, while Emma washed her hair at the sink.

The shelling of the beans and the washing of the hair at the sink are irrelevant to the story that Mrs. Pintoy is telling, namely, Norma Rividad's unfaithfulness to her husband. But these details serve to anchor the incident to time and place: we know where they are—in the kitchen; and we know what they are doing as they talk—the one shelling beans, the other washing her hair at the sink.

Sometimes the casual introduction of a vivid detail not only objectifies the incident but serves to define the emotional

atmosphere. For instance, in the same passage Mrs. Pintoy wonders how Mr. Rividad must feel about his wife's infidelity:

It wasn't merely the humiliation of having it known abroad that one's wife prowled the streets like an alleycat, but the waiting up for her to come back from other men's arms, what did a man think of then? Murder or suicide? Mrs. Pintoy crushed the beans fiercely in her fingers.

The crushing of the beans in her fingers indicates Mrs. Pintoy's indignation.

Emma on the other hand reacts differently.

Emma put her head beneath the faucet and watched the grime flow away—sometimes, a man thought of penance.

Emma knows what Mrs. Pintoy does not: Mr. Rividad is trying to atone for what his parents—the leaders of the “colorum” rebellion—had done to Tayug. Emma's reaction therefore has a symbolic touch. The washing of the hair and the flowing away of the dirt leaves the hair clean: symbolic of the purification effected by penance.

Sometimes a casual detail brought in to objectify a scene, serves also to render ironic judgment on it. For instance, a bitter quarrel takes place between Domingo Gorrez and his wife Emma. They are in their bedroom overlooking a quiet street and an *estero* in Manila.

They had had a wearying fight and he cut short their argument with one vicious blow of his fist against the bedroom wall.

Emma went to the window,

pushed the curtain aside and looked out upon a scene of peace: the pavements empty; the stores across the street boarded up; the moon shattering in a million pieces on the canal waters that were clear for once.

Outside, peace; inside, hatred and bitterness. The juxtaposition heightens the contrast.

THE TAYUG REVOLT

The “colorum” revolt which is repeatedly mentioned in the novel was an actual historical event which took place in

1931, but Mrs. Tuvera has altered the details (as a novelist is entitled to do) to suit her narrative.

The term "Colorum" originates from the liturgy: many of the prayers end with the phrase *in saecula saeculorum* (forever and ever). In the mumbo jumbo of superstition, the term *saeculorum* became truncated. The rebels who practiced the superstition became known as "colorum"—a term which has come to mean anything unlicensed or extralegal.

Historically, the "colorum" revolt was an uprising of disgruntled peasants directed against the government and the landlords. It started on a Saturday night. The peasants burned down the houses of two policemen in the town of San Nicolas, Pangasinan. While the houses were ablaze, the peasants—some in commandeered buses, others on horseback, others on foot—converged upon the town of Tayug, ten kilometers distant. There were some seventy of them, of whom fourteen were women. Arriving in Tayug an hour after midnight and armed mostly with bolos, they attacked the Constabulary Camp, killing some of the soldiers and seizing their guns. They then set fire to the town hall, looted the houses and set them also on fire. By this time it was sunrise of Sunday, and with amazing (and amusing) inconsistency the rebels trooped into the church, awakened the priest, and demanded Mass and breakfast. (Whatever they were rebelling against, it was apparently not against God or the Church.) Mass was offered and breakfast served. The rebels were still in the church or in the adjoining rectory when Constabulary reinforcements arrived, first from Dagupan, and later from Manila. Protected by the massive walls of the church or the ample embrasures of the *convento*, the rebels put up a stiff resistance for ten hours until the soldiers, greatly reenforced, stormed the buildings and captured the rebels. The casualties were not many. Some died, others escaped, most were captured. They stood trial but were mildly treated. The women were all discharged "for lack of evidence"; the men were given short prison terms, except the leader—Pedro Calosa—who

was sentenced to life imprisonment but paroled after eight years.⁴

Such was the historical event. In the novel the details are altered: All the peasant rebels are killed. The leader of the revolt (Pedro Calosa in real life) is called Amang in the novel. He has his head blown off. And he is later revealed to have been Rene Rividad's father.

One weird incident in the revolt appears also in the novel, but slightly altered. Historically, during a lull in the fighting on Sunday afternoon, while the rebels were holding out in the *convento*, the doors suddenly opened and a woman appeared, carrying a Philippine flag. With martial step she walked out into the plaza towards the Rizal monument. In a stupid moment the Constabulary fired on her and she fell at the foot of the monument. In the novel, she is represented as climbing to the top of the monument waving her flag; she topples to the ground when she is shot. The woman—in the novel—is Rene Rividad's mother.

In the novel, all this is revealed only gradually to Emma (and the reader). When the colorum revolt is first mentioned there is no indication that it has any connection with any of the characters of the story. It is a past event whose only relevance appears to be the fact that it happened in the very town where Emma proposes to teach. The speaker is the school principal, and he speaks of the episode in disinvolved terms:

Nineteen years ago, a group of men and women captured Tayug. They were aggrieved tenants. They burned the *municipio* and ran up a crazy flag in the town square. Perhaps it was true they were fighting for more land. Perhaps again they were fighting because Christmas was over, the cockpits were closed, and they had nothing else to do. But they were fighting. They did it with bolos and rifles that they had seen for the first time in their lives only that morning. But it was a furious, bloody fight—they were trying to get something deep and fundamental out of their systems. They died in the church *patio*, crouching behind the low walls. They jumped up to shoot and

⁴ An interesting interview with Pedro Calosa held in Pangasinan in 1966 (one year before his death) has been reported by David R. Sturtevant, "Epilog for an Old Colorum", *Solidarity*, III, 8 (August 1968) 10-18.

dropped, hugging the ground. One man's head was blown off and his left eye flew and was plastered against the wall. They buried him without his head, while his eye stared back at those who would scrape it off the wall. For a long time, it stayed there, until the sun shrivelled it and the rain washed it away. But people say, if you stand before that particular spot and look, you might see it yet. It's something we don't show to strangers.

Precisely. It is something to be ashamed of. A skeleton in the closet. But dead, like any skeleton.

But this assumption is contradicted by the next person who mentions the episode to Emma, namely, the town judge. He happens to meet her on the corridor of the school building as she comes out from a session with her History Club. He suggests that the History Club might do well to study the "colorum" revolt.

"But why that?" asks Emma.

"And why not?" his voice rose. "This town has not been the same since the insurrection..."

So the "colorum" insurrection does not belong simply to the past. It has a present relevance: the town has not been the same since. The judge explains: prior to the uprising, Tayug was a carefree town, interested in fiestas and beauty contests and the like. Then the peasant uprising occurred. "When it was over, many things were gone. Not just relatives dead and houses burned and important papers missing from the *municipio*, but something else again: a certain innocence, a graciousness, gone from the town." Presumably like the "graciousness" of the American South which after the Civil War was "gone with the wind".

Having promised the judge to get her History Club interested in the colorum revolt, Emma dutifully digs up the details of the uprising. She makes two trips by bus to the Dagupan public library, looks up old newspapers, writes to the historical section of the Army.

From these researches, Emma begins to see that the colorum revolt was not merely an abstract historical event. It was a human event, involving flesh and blood. Those who fought and those who died were men and women.

An item had read: An official said, "*We were caught by surprise. There had been no signs.*" No signs? Harvests delayed, because men had met in bamboo groves. Bolos unsheathed, planted in the ground. Incantations murmured, and then husbands returned home to suppers they would not eat and wives to whom they said nothing. Signs? For weeks in the barrios there had been a feverish search for a white horse, a steed fit for Amang to ride—Amang, God's only begotten son, who would lead them out of the darkness into light;—Amang, who gathered charcoal when there was nothing to plant, suddenly touched by the Holy Ghost, donning white shirt, white pants, and a little piece of red cloth pinned carefully over the heart, clutching bolo in hand and raising it to the skies and proclaiming wildly, *Let me free you, children, God ordains!* And the children: simple-hearted men and women, losing their gentle sweet ways overnight, turned into savages. Some rode on horses to Tayug, others commandeered a *Pantran*, sent the frightened conductor scurrying away, forced the driver to take them to town. And in town? First the barracks, surprising the guards at the gate. Then the armory. Then the sleeping quarters—leaving a trail of blood and guts and wounds wider and deeper than the mouths of men. The woman who had herself polished the steps of her home before bidding the *alcalde* up her humble abode herself picked up a rifle and aimed it at His Honor and pulled the trigger and laughed at the noisy way His Honor died; and screaming, picked up a red flag, and ran across the plaza, clambering up Rizal's statue, and waved and waved and waved the flag, while the hero in concrete looked away, carrying his eternal books, untouched by her fury, until a bullet from the young lieutenant, roused from sleep beside his wife in Dagupan, felled the flag and the woman who waved it, and she plummeted earthward where she lay clawing at the grass.

It is a vividly human event as Emma sees it, but she still does not see any particular connection with the present.

But, while telling the story to the students, mentioning all the gory details and finding the students bored, Emma suddenly realizes that the peasant uprising is after all not merely a thing of the past: it has a definite and an urgent relevance to their lives. *Emma Mercene told the story slowly, anxious because the students seemed bored. It suddenly mattered that they should know the story.* There was something to be learned from the revolt. But the students don't see what there is to learn. "Why ma'am?" they ask. "Why should we, ma'am?" someone asked. *She looked at the questioning face, unrelenting in its youth and its insolence, its ignorance and good looks.*

"Someday," Emma said, "another Amang may come along, offering to free you. If you know this story, you may remember to ask him how he will do it. If he says—blood it is, and fire, and the entrails of men, what should you do? You might ask him what's the other side of the bargain. For drawing blood, for eating fire, for spilling your intestines, what do you get? You must ask questions. It is the only way to keep from dying for foolish things."

Emma has become a cynic, and her cynical comments have been overheard by two people. The judge overhears it and applauds. The principal overhears it and approaches Emma with blazing eyes. He orders Emma to dismiss the students and then orders her to follow him. She follows him half-running to the church patio where he points to a spot on the wall. She can only see stone and lichen and moss: but it was the spot where Amang's eye had been splashed when his head had been blown off. "Amang was my father," says the principal.

The revelation is melodramatic, but the melodrama has some justification. The revolt that had appeared at first as a purely historical incident has turned out to be not only relevant but deeply personal.

MYTHIC SIGNIFICANCE

The abortive rebellion in Tayug has captured the imagination of other novelists besides Mrs. Tuvera. The event forms part of the historical background of Sionil Jose's *The Pretenders*, published in 1962 and reprinted in 1966. In this latter novel, however, the "colorum" uprising serves a somewhat different purpose. It is portrayed as part (or as an illustration) of the Ilocano experience. Driven from their homeland in the Ilocos by want or by oppression or by the desire to better their fortunes, the Ilocano peasantry migrated elsewhere. In Pangasinan they cleared the forests and cultivated the land, establishing new communities—only to have their lands taken away from them by the moneyed and educated elite: the "ilustrados". In such a situation, an explosion like that of the "colorums" is almost inevitable: it is the natural—if misguided—result of social injustice.

In Mrs. Tuvera's novel the Tayug revolt is used differently. She is not interested in its causes (which are hardly mentioned) nor precisely in its effects (though these are adverted to). Mrs. Tuvera is rather interested in its mythic significance. The Tayug revolt is an allegory—or (if the term is preferred) a symbol—of something that occurs quite commonly in human life. The peasants, with their pitiful weapons and their pathetic belief in a non-existent invincibility, were trying to fight a battle which they could not possibly win; but they were fighting for a cause which was in itself presumably just. In their fanaticism by fighting their crusade, they did more harm than good. Hence Emma's cynicism against "dying for foolish things".

This raises certain interesting questions with regard to the novel's intent. On one level, there is a perceptible parallel between the peasant leader Amang, a self-proclaimed Messiah, and the presidential candidate portrayed by Nora Cosio and her fellow-campaigners as the savior of the country. The peasants, by entrusting their lives to Amang, met only death. The country, by entrusting its fate to a political "savior", is bound to be disillusioned. The parallel is perceptible.

But the novel seems to probe into the question at a deeper level of analogy. Is it really possible or desirable (the novel seems to say) to fight a crusade at all? Can a person ever win such a crusade? And if a person can not win, is it worth fighting?

What should Rene Rividad have done in the face of his wife's habitual infidelity? Or what should Emma Gorrez have done in the face of Nora Cosio's tyranny or her own husband's surrender to the ways of the business world? Was there anything she could do?

Despite her cynicism, was not Emma herself, in a manner, "dying for foolish things"?

To put it in other terms, is not Emma, in her constant seeking for honesty and integrity, betrayed into a position

where she herself finally gives up her own integrity? Who is the betrayer in this case? The novel is entitled *The Hand of the Enemy*. Who is the Enemy?

THE ENEMY

In some cases, of course, the "enemy" is external and perceptible. In the case of Emma Gorrez, the enemy is Nora Cosio. In the case of Domingo Gorrez, the enemy is partly the corrupt world outside and partly Domingo Gorrez himself. In the case of the Rividads, the enemy is Norma Rividad and her uncontrolled desires.

Those are the visible—or at least identifiable—enemies, as identifiable as the country's enemy during the Japanese invasion of 1941: "He wore funny looking shoes with the big toe away from the rest of his feet, and a cloth-hat with flags, and he was a Jap."

But there are also invisible enemies, hardly identifiable. Mr. Rividad, married to an unfaithful woman but in love with another whom he can not marry, is made to say: "Life is the enemy. A man has wounds it can not heal, a woman has wants it can not give, and everyone burns with a fatal fever." That seems to echo an observation made by Emma herself: "It seemed to her as if she had to break her heart first before life allowed her a grace or two." Are these merely passing observations of Rene Rividad and Emma Gorrez, and applicable only to their own cases? Or do they state a principle of wider—even universal — application? Is Life the "Enemy" to which the novel's title refers?

This question can not be answered satisfactorily merely from the data given in the novel, for there are aspects of life which are not fully treated. The theological dimension of life is hinted at but not explored.

But the fact that such questions as these can be raised is an indication of the novel's seriousness. This is not a mere tale. It is a work of creative art that raises serious questions and invites serious thought.

There are flaws in this novel for even Homer nods. There are flaws in rhetoric and flaws in technique: shifts in point of view and violations of artistic distance.

But whatever defects there are, dullness is not one of them. Mrs. Tavera's writing is not dull. It is absorbingly interesting. And it is dreadfully in earnest.