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Leonard Casper

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# Desire and Doom in Kerima Polotan

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LEONARD CASPER

THE periodic essays of Kerima Polotan, which take intense pleasure in exposing popular hypocrisies, contribute to the literature of protest's century-old tradition in the Philippines. Her fiction, also, to the extent that it depicts poverty as victimization and assaults the pretensions of both the established conspiracies of power and the new entrepreneurs, may seem class-conscious. Yet as social criticism it has been found inferior to her essays. On the assumption that her principal motive, in *The Hand of the Enemy* (1962), was to record abuses of privilege by the economic elite, Bienvenido Lumbera has complained of her presenting only a "hazy portrait of the milieu" and "a mere collection" of sophisticated types.<sup>1</sup> Edward M. Potoker, in the *Saturday Review*, intending to praise "The Sound of Sunday" (core segment of her novel), has spoken of its "theme of pastoral virtue versus urban corruption"—a formula too ancient to be acclaimed as ruthless contemporary insight. For all her prizes, then, as a writer of fiction, is not Kerima Polotan fundamentally a journalist, at her best when blunt?

That such a judgment represents a misreading of the author's intention is now clarified by *Stories* (1968), a conscientious selection made from twenty years' work. The abiding

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<sup>1</sup> Bienvenido Lumbera, "Tagalog Literature Since World War II," in *Brown Heritage: Essays on Philippine Cultural Traditions and Literature*, ed. Antonio Manuud (Ateneo de Manila University: Quezon City, 1967), p. 33.

interest in Kerima Polotan's fiction, in fact, has focused on hypocrisy: but chiefly on the Philippines' double standard of morality. It has concerned itself, in fact, with the distribution of power in society: but chiefly as this affects the rights of women. The persistent subject matter from story to story, as well as the thematic rather than chronological arrangement of those selected stories, describes the unhappy position of the Filipina. Because Filipinos are used to feminism only in the urbane, inoffensive style of Carmen Guerrero Nakpil<sup>2</sup> or in the Tadtarin goddess of Nick Joaquin, so stunning that it is read as mythic rather than realistic figure; and because there is enough equality of the sexes under local law to forestall any militant feminist movement: it is natural that Kerima Polotan's outrage should be interpreted as an indictment of poverty and the Establishment; or even as colonial rapine, destruction of folkways by industrialization, or the degradation of minorities. For Polotan such extrapolations are, conversely, symbols for sex discrimination and the frustration of female self-fulfillment.

The typical Polotan story is bitter with the experience of loss and betrayal. But only superficially does this bitterness utilize fables of "pastoral virtue" and "urban corruption"—images of a kind of paradise lost. In *The Hand of the Enemy*, Domingo Gorrez may exchange his ideals of service for the opportunism of Organization Man in the city; but Norma Rividad is the more pitiable victim, and her oppressor is the village and that tradition which views illegitimacy as a flaw in the offspring, not in the father. Of the two, Norma comes closer to representing the constant figure in Polotan: the woman without identity; of negligible status—"someone's garbage can," as Araceli Gomez thinks of it in "The Face of Virtue." It is also Araceli, mother of five, who, disgusted with the discovery that she is pregnant again and filled "with the terrible loss of self," goes to Cavite for an abortion. It is this essential selfhood, and not any collective identity from nation or kin, which bares itself in the outcries and subsequent

<sup>2</sup> See especially the first four essays in *Woman Enough and Other Essays* (Vibal: Quezon City, 1963).

*colorum* behavior of her women. The outcast might as well be outlaw.

The *ultimate* frustration, however, comes with realization that rebellion as angry reflex can involve one in dilemmas of independence and equality which lacerate, rather than liberate, the inner self. If individual stories do not always make this discovery, the structure of her collection most dramatically does. *Stories* is arranged to project a movement from pubescent virginity ("This Door"; "The Trap"), to the involuntary virginity of spinsterhood ("The Virgin"; "Cost Price"; "Gate"), to promiscuity ("The Sounds of Sunday"; "The Face of Virtue"; "A Various Season"), and finally to self-seduction ("The Giants"). Without the final story, the volume and its vision might appear to describe two polarities. The principal function of "The Giants" is to recover all the earlier images which, taken collectively, reveal that for Polotan's characters chastity and adultery can be states of identical loneliness, of equal isolation. It is emptiness that Kerima Polotan best describes; and it is the ego's contribution to the self's emptiness that she has come, occasionally, to discover.

In "The Giants," reporter Carmen Reyes finds herself more and more attracted to the trappings of power and the personalities of the Cosios, intimates of the President. She justifies this attraction by assuring herself that beneath Cosio's glib elegance is the sensitivity of a young poet—until his youthful lines prove to be plagiarized (in addition, they are mawkish, sophomoric). But if the Cosio's are all facade, Carmen Reyes is far less. The details of Cosio's splendor give to "The Giants" whatever substance it has. Carmen Reyes herself provides no real content; she has no significant life outside the Cosios and the class of conditioners and manipulators whom they typify. Carmen is revealed finally as a kind of parasite living off leeches. Unfortunately, but perhaps realistically, self-incrimination in Carmen rapidly converts to self-pity; and "The Giants" ends on a plaintive note: "I don't know when I can begin to cry."

The fiction of Kerima Polotan is, fundamentally, an angry elegy for the lost dream of self. The image of woman remains

consistently a concavity, whether as sacred receptacle and inner sanctum, or hollow husk. *Stories* starts with all the tremulous glory of puberty as promise. But the experience is internalized; the adolescents are only embarrassed by any visible signs of their womanhood; it is impossible to communicate what they feel. Their first menstruation seems like "the first death"; and their first confessed love and rejection, their second death. As the titles indicate, "This Door" is rapidly transformed into "The Trap." Even as Elisa in the second story yearns to be as free and splendid as "a white, long-legged bird skimming the rice fields," she crawls under the school building in recoil. Yet the pain of fertility is such a joy of anticipation that only the "final death"—menopause—is really, though secretly, feared.

When the early promise of a glorified self is postponed, the image of woman becomes associated no longer with an enclosed garden but with the dark interior of a jeep off its scheduled run ("The Virgin"); or of a quonset hut corner improvised as a dark rendezvous ("Cost Price"); or the "friendly safety" of one's "unlighted room" ("Gate"), an uneasy convent for an unwilling recluse.

In turn, promiscuity which one might expect to find presented as fulfillment with a vengeance, functions largely as fulfillment of a vengeance. Men are pictured as women's rivals rather than as partners. Not love so much as self-gratification, not sexual necessity so much as psychological need, drives Araceli Gomez ("The Face of Virtue") into adultery. Not equality of the sexes but interchangeability or replacement seems their unconscious goal. They would repeal the double standard not by permitting promiscuity to no one, but by allowing it to all. Child bearing is disastrous to their sense of fruitfulness; fecundity, a most deadly trap. Soon obscure desperation drives them to recover privacy, the high splendor of self-possession. This is the security for which, instinctually and sometimes intellectually, they long; not the illusory protection afforded by wealth.

The unforeseen result is a narcissism of varying intensities which provides imprisonment far more painful than puberty

or involuntary virginity. Surely the ending of "The Face of Virtue" is an ironic image of just such self-defeat masked as victory. In anticipation of her lover's return, Araceli locks her husband from her room: "The thought crossed her mind that if she entered her bedroom now, this minute, and turned the key, out of the evening mist might beckon a familiar hand, and lovely Araceli Gomez, heeding the gesture, could step quickly over the threshold into another world." She is fatally trapped in her own mirror. In that travesty of the adolescent's dream of womanhood lies Polotan's approximate view of tragedy. Araceli, Lourdes, Emma: they become the ravished waters described in "The Tourists": seas without fish, infertile.

The narcissism of her typical female characters, who serve also as her principal narrators, results in the shadowy presentation of husbands and lovers and—even more significantly—in the virtual absence of details about children even where they are known to be abundant. Perhaps covert renunciation of marriage and its inequities accounts for the fact that children are more often enumerated than described. For example, not a single feature of Araceli Gomez' five children is offered. Similarly, Carmen Reyes' husband is so superfluous in "The Giants" that it comes as a complete surprise when she includes her son among those betrayed by her naive infatuation with Cosio.

Part of the strategy of retaliation requires that the infidelity of wives be blamed on their having been taken for granted: as evidenced by serial pregnancies (having become "someone's garbage can") or by the alleged existence of *queridas* (in "A Various Season" and *The Hand of the Enemy*: only in Doming's case, however, is documentation provided). Reversing the role of victim, these same wives are largely responsible for the seduction of their loves, and for whatever infidelities ensue later between the adulterers themselves. (That Polotan does not necessarily condone these practices is suggested by Redentor Garcia's complaint, in "A Various Season," that he does not want merely to be used by someone's unhappy wife. Nevertheless, however sadly extramarital affairs may end, wives rejoin their husbands in appearance

only.) It becomes a largely female prerogative, also, to prosecute and condemn those men who betray their youthful ideals—possibly as scapegoats for the recurring failure of the exaggerated dream of womanhood. Sexual equality is reduced to “getting even.”

It is true that, in the midst of wholesale corruption, the only figures of integrity offered are male: Testa, the union leader; Tomas Agana, editor of *World* magazine; the Rividad of the abortive Tayug uprising. But because these figures are presented sketchily, withheld from the pressures of daily circumstance, they seem more static than steadfast. Life is not allowed to put them to trial—although it is already hinted that *World* excels other newspapers because it features those who by “push, palaver, patriotism”, and “pedigree” capture public attention. It is not inconceivable that Polotan could demolish these heroic types simply by detailing their lives in some future fiction. Time and again, *Stories* records her distrust of Messianic figures. Models of virtue, servants of the people, they crumble under direct examination. Could Christus have agonized more perfectly as a woman? The question is impertinent only because the concept of self-sacrifice itself is also rejected.

Leonidas Benesa has described *The Hand of the Enemy* as a quest for love.<sup>3</sup> In the now enlarged context provided by Polotan's stories, her concern can be identified rather as a quest for selfhood which constantly involves her characters in fatal love-hate relationships. Such a pattern of course is inevitable, once female personality is defined exclusively by the period between menstruation and menopause, particularly if motherhood and monogamy come to be considered exploitations of the Self Glorified. Since virginity (and its dreamlike privacy) cannot be recovered in actuality, it has to be sought irrationally: that is, through promiscuity which betrays not so much an irresistible nymphomania as a desire for self-possession satisfied by the very impermanence, the various

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<sup>3</sup> Leonidas V. Benesa, “The Filipino Novel from 1941-1962,” in *Literature at the Crossroads* (Florentino: Manila, 1965), pp. 52-64; originally in *Comment* (Last Quarter, 1962, pp. 62-70).

seasons, of the adulterous relationships. There is further satisfaction in the female's using the male principally for her own gratification and thus reversing roles of passivity which she earlier found oppressive. Much of the tension in Polotan's writing comes from her characters' autism and perhaps even latent onanism, concealed as profound passion. Desire and death—as well as doom—are inextricably linked, given such attitudes and conduct, in a way that the adolescent in "The Door" can hardly foresee and the average adult hardly admit. The pathos of this subtle form of self-destruction in the name of self-fulfillment is probably unmatched in Philippine fiction.

The best evidence of this dilemma, as already noted, is the absence of any real "sounds of Sunday" in Polotan's fiction: the homely qualities, the comforts and sustenance of family living which Rene Rividad envies in Emma, although she apparently is incapable of them (and is not simply robbed of them by her husband or by circumstance). The harmonious family hardly exists in these narratives. True, Nora and Bert Cosio are reasonably well-matched: but is it love that holds them together, or their preying instincts and conspiratorial practices? It is equally true that "The Visit" depends principally on an antagonism between two women. However, the only relationship provided between the narrator and her husband is through her (unsuccessful) attempts to have him, along with her reluctant brother, hate her stepmother as much as she does. Furthermore, one of the few recollections she has of her father is of his whipping the children. Why is he so shadowy a character? Is her real hate directed towards him—for the whippings and for remarrying; but since he may represent too much the authority figure to be disputed and, anyway, he is dead, that hate has to find a scapegoat in the stepmother? In any case, the reconciliation of the two women at the end of "The Visit" marks less the discovery of love than the relaxation of hate.

However, a literature of negation cannot long be sustained without becoming the antithesis of creativity. The writer, at some point, will realize what Carmen Reyes does: "I can't go through old age with my mouth this way, snicker, snicker."



Indications that Polotan has arrived at this insight somewhat unwillingly or at least not effortlessly only make it more valuable because candid.

Polotan has already perfected certain techniques of "confinement" to the point where they threaten to become as stylized as the routine of a caged bear—manneristic rather than illuminating. For example, she has structured her fiction along "time loops" ("Cost Price"; "The Tourists"; "The Face of Virtue"; "The Giants"; *The Hand of the Enemy*) which function not as sudden flashbacks but as snares whose knots are abruptly jerked tight. The propriety of the device as a representation of female entrapment or uterine rejection is unquestionable. But the initial shock of recognition wears off as the symbol is repeated excessively. Eventually, in association with her preference for short fiction (even *The Hand of the Enemy* is a novelette), episodic composition, narrowness of subject matter, and an occasional static story in which no development in character occurs ("The Face of Virtue"), reliance on "time loops" may be interpreted as representing not the character's but the writer's resistance of fecundity.

Similarly, when one reads in conjunction with *The Hand of the Enemy* the three stories which, he is told, "were actually her novel in the process of growing," he wonders if Polotan is to be praised for control or accused of repression. The novel has left even its chief admirers somewhat disappointed because of its too easy manipulation of (or disregard for) motives and for its iconoclastic attack on Doming's corporate image-makers while allowing equally false romantic/melodramatic gestures from Rene and Emma. Although the nature of the author's life at the time of the Stonehill award may have permitted her only novelette, the material itself with all its implications begs for a longer, larger form. Yet the incidents in the novel corresponding to "The Sounds of Sunday" are only briefly, and trivially, expanded. The novel grew not by interpolation but by prefixing the overlapping adulteries with the story of how the Cosios managed a Presidential election and, later, the Gorrez' printing press. Benesa has objected that "the whole episode concerning the Cosio family is overdrawn and even

irrelevant.”<sup>4</sup> Although a rough parallel can be drawn between the abuse of people by those who have vowed to love and those who have promised to serve them, the placement of the Cosio affair makes it curiously subordinate to and detachable from its counterpart. Had the personal seductions been arranged within, instead of after, the socio political seductions, a larger and less opaque vision would have emerged.

By releasing her novel prematurely, Polotan compromised insights already reached: this is made clear when one considers “The Giants” and “The Tourists.” Although described as preliminaries to *The Hand of the Enemy* and although pertinent to the fuller understanding of Ernesto Bello and Alberto Cosio (experts in “public relations,” commercial and political, respectively), these narratives were excluded from the novel. Yet, in part and certainly in potential, they come closest to suggesting how the author’s perceptions can be extended and enriched, before they rigidify into formula and self-parody.<sup>5</sup> What is most interesting in “The Tourists” is the narrator’s semi-admission that she has betrayed both her visionary father and the idealist whom she almost married, by “having come to terms, so easily and so early, with the world.” She has courted a sufficiency of wealth and social status, out of self-concern. This time it is the man—Bello—who has his (self-destructive) revenge after being rejected, by trading his youthful principles for an opportunism compared with which hers seems pale. Even more significant than this tentative reversal of roles is Carmen Reyes’ realization, in “The Giants,” that she has been deceived by the Cosios largely through her own willing consent.

The promising, because surprising, aspect of these two stories is that their chief characters move close to self knowledge, the sort required to modify the image of woman-as-pure-victim-and-pathetic-avenger which otherwise has been emerging. Even more distressing, therefore, than the omission of “The Tourists” and “The Giants” from Polotan’s first novel is the

<sup>4</sup> Benesa, p. 62.

<sup>5</sup> Compare Emigdio Enriquez’ *The Devil Flower* (1959) which, contemptuous of the Maria Clara myth of female virtue, constructed characters incredibly sex-obsessed.

announcement that she expects to construct her second not out of these but out of "A Various Season," whose central character Lourdes may prove to be a Visayan Moll Flanders only. Carmen Reyes, on the other hand, experiences a certain hollowness after her disenchantment which might represent the classic catharsis preliminary to regeneration and transpersonal growth.

The motives of Rene and Emma, in *The Hand of the Enemy*, were obscured by a kind of romantic fatalism which cased them from responsibility for their acts but at the same time robbed them of tragic dignity. Desire is always doomed, as long as it is only self-indulgence. That same fatalistic tendency reappears in "The Tourists" ("... a beauty that carried its own corruption...") and in "A Various Season" ("Love carried its own decay, was in fact its own decay..."; "The weather or the soil, one or the other, or both, got a woman...") That Polotan herself is aware of this problem of character-erosion is indicated by her having Paz, in "The Tourists," assert that "Life does not mold people—it reveals them." In those words one can hear the conscience of the craftsman-artist: characters are credible only to the extent that the author respects their right to self-determination. Almost as often as Polotan has been praised for the tightness of control in her fiction, she has been accused of over-management. The fault that Miguel Bernad finds in "The Virgin"—that "Character is described, rather than revealed in incident"—is rediscovered by Petronilo N. Daroy in various additional stories.<sup>6</sup> By omission, by disproportionate emphasis, a writer can be guilty of the same dehumanization denounced in double standards.

The fifteen-year-old protagonist in "This Door" believes that, if only she could express in words the joyous, strange pain in her loins, that experience would become "simple and clear and real." It is only human to want to communicate with one's self and with others and thus find formal order for the wrenching motions of daily living. But the impulse

<sup>6</sup> Miguel Bernad, S.J., "Philippine Short Stories 1952," *Philippine Studies*, 1 (June 1952), 9; Petronilo N. Daroy, "Miss Mijares and Mrs. Bilbao," *Against the National Grain* (Rem: Manila, 1966), pp. 7-9.

towards articulation has its own agonies and treacheries. Both Carmen Reyes, feature writer for *World*, and Paz, PRO for several women's clubs, know the temptation to abuse the word for purposes of expediency. Essentially their moral crisis is identical with that of such public relations men as Doming Gorrez, Ernesto Bello, and Alberto Cosio; indeed, with the culture at large, epitomized by them.

The undue attention which Filipinos give to ostentatious display and their public image may be modern and Western in reinforcement but hardly in origin. According to ethnohistorians, the importance of keeping up appearances is pre-Hispanic and is appropriate to a society based on strong kinship lines (including a complex *compadrazco*) and all the protocols of conformity. Dissension becomes shameful, because it disrupts the very forms of authority which maintain collective security and assure survival. Dissent, should it occur, is expected to be concealed (and eventually purged) by an abundance of familial and interpersonal ceremonies. Under such circumstances, how is truth discovered, sustained, and conveyed—especially the truth of individuated self? The difficulty of distinguishing between appearance and reality is rooted in a universal human condition (and central to much of the world's great literature). It is aggravated wherever custom circumvents the fullest possible human inquiry into error.

Consequently, there is genuine passion in the longing of Kerima Polotan's characters for certitude ("The Door"); for hard, fixed truth ("A Various Season"); for unimpeachable integrity ("The Virgin"; "The Tourists"; *The Hand of the Enemy*, etc.); as well as in the "necessary anger" ("The Giants") turned against pretensions. The betrayal of principles and ideals is constantly excoriated: because they represent universal axioms? or lost youth and diminishing vitality? On what grounds can the reader be asked to condemn Nora Cosio's lust for power, one moment, and to envy the sensuality of Lourdes (in "A Various Season") the next? What basis is offered for distinguishing between naive fantasy and informed faith? These are practical metaphysical and moral questions,

whose answer is unlikely to be found in female instinct alone, or whose suspension is unlikely to be justified by passion alone. The feminine mystique can provide only a certain poignancy, as the quest for finality is played off against the seasonal fluctuation and short duration of the body in its prime. It cannot safely authorize the fervid, righteous, holy indignation—the pure hate—which Polotan invokes through Carmen Reyes at the climax of “The Giants.”

That her characters tend to collapse at the center under close scrutiny may owe something to Kerima Polotan's attitude towards life and literature indicated in her preface. There she warns that “Life scars the writer but he is not without weapons of vengeance”; and she uses Katherine Anne Porter's statement that the arts “represent the substance of faith and the only reality” to place the writer apart as seer and, presumably, as legitimate scourge. But no one could feel more uncomfortable in a self-righteous role than Katherine Anne Porter, who also once wrote that she has been “passionately involved” with the common persons “who populate all these enormous migrations, calamities; who fight wars and furnish life for the future; these beings without which, one by one, all the ‘broad movements of history’ could never take place”; whose most famous story, “Flowering Judas,” begins with Laura's castigating Braggioni's betrayal of a Mexican revolution and ends on her confessing her personal inadequacies; who moderates even so bleak a portrait of humanity as *Ship of Fools* with the appeal of Mrs. Treadwell, “Whether or not I love you, whether I am fit to love, whether you are able to love, even if there is no such thing as love, love me!” Roughly one-third of her stories center on the same character, Miranda: who manages to be feminine while free of self-pity, pure hate, or the need for vindication. After a long career, Katherine Anne Porter is honored for not only her dedicated craftsmanship but also for the scope and continuity and candor and encompassing charity of her vision.

Kerima Polotan could find no better model. The most promising aspect of her writing lies in her yearning for larger configurations, now, after years of confined fiction.