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Sarilaysay, by Torres-Yu

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Book Reviews

Sarilaysay: Tinig ng 20 Babae sa Sariling Danas Bilang Manunulat. By Rosario Torres-Yu. Pasig City: Anvil, 2000.

Philippine literature has for some time been unproblematically understood as that body of writings created by a few great men: iconographically, Balagtas, Rizal, and Joaquin. However, the emergence in recent decades of marginal voices—women's, workers', gays', transnationals', non-Manila, non-Tagalog—have challenged traditional literary history. They ask: Whose literature? Whose history? *What* literature? For whom?

In this re-mapping of the literary terrain, the collection of primary data, as much as the deployment of alternative methods of analysis, is paramount. What shape the literary landscape would take depends on what formations are there and on what formations one chooses to recognize. It is in this context that Rosario Torres-Yu's *Sarilaysay: Tinig ng 20 Babae sa Sariling Danas bilang Manunulat* should be considered.

The book is the result of a series of *kuwentuhan* or sharing/storytelling sessions between Yu and the twenty writers in 1998 for an exploratory study on the woman writer's consciousness. It calls to mind Edilberto N. Alegre and Doreen G. Fernandez's two-volume *Writers and Their Milieu* (De La Salle, 1984, 1987), a collection of interviews with Filipino writers in English. As such, it shares the merits of that earlier work of oral history.

First is the invaluable data the book supplies us about the life and times of the Filipino women writers of not one, but three generations. Each interview covers the writer's personal life, creative process, comments about her works, views on feminism and gender relations, among many other subjects. The details in themselves are interesting, but considered alongside the writers' works, are illuminating. We learn, for example, about why Amelia Lapeña Bonifacio shifted from English to Filipino, how Rosario Cruz Lucero got the germ for her story "Demonyo," and how Lualhati Bautista got started in writing (by drawing cartoons).

For sheer first-hand information, the book is a veritable treasure chest. Literary scholars trained in the tradition of Richard Altick and Chauncey Sanders will find much in *Sarilaysay* to mine. The more avant-garde scholar will find ammunition in the interviews to bolster alternative readings of Philippine literature—or at the least, detect quaint, “incorrect” notions to refute. The book will be quoted, as often as Alegre and Fernandez’s is by scholars of Philippine Literature in English, including those skeptical about such allegedly “naïve,” because empiricist, projects.

Second, the book allows us to hear the writers speak for themselves and in their own voices—a move that is of more than symbolic significance in the light of feminist theory. Because the book breaks away from the conventional Q-and-A format, what one reads is less a transcript of an interrogation than a confession heard (or overheard), including the elisions, equivocations, and exclamations that go along with it. In effect, the book gives us monologues—twenty personalities verbalized.

There is, for instance, an indefatigable Liwayway Arceo, who declares, in her case at least, that “kung paano, na laging may babae sa likuran ng isang matagumpay na lalaki, dalawang lalaki naman ang nasa likuran ko.” There is also an effervescent Joi Barrios, for whom “*automatic* sa akin na kapag meron akong lalaking kasama sa bahay o sa buhay, tumatayo ako at nagsisilbi, *feeling* tweetums, nalilibang ako sa *cross-stitch*, sa *baking*.” Then, there is Lilia Quindoza Santiago who admonishes writers, “Tumigil na tayo sa pagko-complain. Stop grumbling.”

The effect can be jaunty, disjointed, and even cliquish—imagine yourself a latecomer at a party where all the guests told stories on a first-name basis—but it can also be immediate, vivid, certainly impressive. We are tempted to add “sincere,” but then we risk being clobbered by the avant-garde critic—because a *sarilaysay*, after all, is a *narrative* of self and a *self-fashioning*.

However one sees it, these two facts alone should ensure *Sarilaysay* a place in the canon (another bad word there) of literary scholarship. But what sets it apart from other oral histories—and what makes it most interesting from a literary critic’s viewpoint—is that it professes to be informed by a feminist perspective. It is interesting, then, that some of what the writers say may, in fact, sound non-feminist or even anti-feminist. For instance, a few of them remark that they do not consciously write with a feminist agenda, because that, they claim, would be putting the proverbial cart before the horse—as though the aesthetic is not also ideological.

The writers also speak from different and sometimes conflicting notions of what feminism is or what it does. Is it combative or celebratory? Is it personal or social? Is it emancipating or confining? Some of the writers subscribe to a kind of feminism that is grounded on a nationalist framework. Others understand feminism to be personal liberation or a breaking away from traditional expectations. A few see it as the recognition of woman’s genius even, or especially, by men. Still others avoid the label altogether.

The differences among these writers can be so stark that the book runs the risk of becoming another Tower of Babel—and proof that women, indeed, are idle tattlers. But that should not be the case. Rather, the point seems to be that feminism, to be truly liberating, must be specific—to personal history, class position, artistic conventions, and national history. If we are to be feminist writers and critics in the Philippines—and this seems to be the conclusion towards which the interviews taken together are heading—we must cease to parrot platitudes about patriarchy, no matter how correct these may sound. For to do so would be to ignore the specificities of oppression (and consequently the spaces of resistance)—and wouldn't that be triumph of patriarchy?

If only for issuing that challenge, the book deserves reading (and its many typos can be easily overlooked). But as should be obvious by now, *Sarilaysay* has much to recommend itself—including cover art by the late Maningning Miilat—and should find a space in bibliographies of future, more comprehensive (re)readings of Philippine Literature.

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Jose Rizal: Philippine Nationalist as Political Scientist. By Howard A. De Witt. Second edition. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1998. 314 pages.

This is not a new scholarly biography of Rizal, as the author himself acknowledges. Nor does it, except in one chapter, consider Rizal as a political scientist, in spite of its title. In chapter 1 a series of political science concepts are defined, and Rizal is indicated in a few sentences to have written some ideas which could be so categorized. Of course, Rizal himself never categorized his political philosophy, which he no doubt had, under such categories, and therefore cannot be called a political scientist in any meaningful sense of the term.

As may be gathered from the books previously published by Dr. De Witt, his principal scholarly interest has been the history of California (though he also has seven books to his credit on rock music, on which he is said to be a "recognized authority," and is a regular contributor to various such periodicals). Among his California books were two directed toward Filipino farm labor and trade unionists in California, which led him to his hobby on Rizal. From the fact that he acknowledges the criticisms of his first edition by his students in History 125 and Political Science 102 at Ohlone College in Fremont, California, one may surmise that this book is primarily intended as a textbook for such courses, no doubt attended by some young Filipino-Americans in search of their roots in the motherland. This inference is confirmed by the fourteen "worksheets" on Philippine history and on Rizal's life which follow the text—typical quizzes for undergraduates.