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## **Merlinda Bobis's *Fish-Hair Woman*: A Magical Rendering of History**

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# **Merlinda Bobis's *Fish-Hair Woman* A Magical Rendering of History**

Filipino writers of historical fiction have employed magical realism to incorporate people's experiences into discussions of the nation's violent history and present a possibility of revolution and hope, particularly with the fall of Ferdinand Marcos's regime. However, Merlinda Bobis uses magical realism to represent the struggles of villagers who were caught between government forces and communist insurgents during the Total War in the late 1980s, thus focusing on preserving personal histories and memories. Bobis's *Fish-Hair Woman* (2012) puts into writing efforts at reconciling with a violent past as she works to actively challenge grander narratives of violence and terror.

**KEYWORDS: MAGICAL REALISM • PHILIPPINE LITERATURE • HISTORICAL FICTION • COUNTERINSURGENCY**

The Spanish colonization of the Philippines from 1565 to 1898 and the American occupation of the country from 1898 to 1946 “created” a Philippines that experienced “a kaleidoscopic colloquy and interpellation of diverse cultures” (San Juan 2000, 2). These diverse cultures and the indigenization of Spanish and Roman Catholicism encouraged the inclusion of magical realism in Philippine literature in the attempt of Filipino authors to discuss, in their historical fiction, the nation’s history and culture and the people’s experiences. According to Rajeev Patke and Philip Holden (2010, 86), Philippine writings in the late 1980s were “frequently influenced by postmodernism, consisting of fragmentary or interwoven and elaborately self-referential narratives”; they drew on “traditions of metafiction and magical realism that have often been associated with South American writers such as Gabriel García Márquez, but which in fact also have roots within a Filipino heritage.” Similarly, Cristina Hidalgo (2000, 333) observes that Philippine literature follows “a tradition of local narratives—oral epics, ballads, tales, and other folk materials—to which were later added other narrative types introduced by the Spaniards, including metrical romances (*corridos*), saints’ lives, fables, parables, and folk epics (*paysons*).” Philippine magical realism is thus born of indigenized Hispanic cultural beliefs and elements of precolonial cultures that have been incorporated into a modernist style of writing.

Philippine authors such as Linda Ty-Casper (1980), Ninotchka Rosca (1992), and Jessica Hagedorn (1996), to name a few, have employed magical realism in their historical fiction written in the 1980s–1990s, commenting particularly on the Philippines’s colonial history and notably the turbulent period of Ferdinand Marcos’s martial law from 1972 to 1981. According to Hidalgo (2000, 334), “history does not merely provide the setting [of contemporary Philippine fiction], but enters into the motivation of the characters, propels the plot. The characters are political beings; their conflicts are engendered by political events.” Similarly, Wendy Faris (1995, 169–70) offers the thought that history serves as an anchor of reality for extraordinary events, that historical fiction often presents history to be unstable and prone to manipulation. Thus, it is unsurprising that Filipino authors actively use magical realism to address issues with an unreliable history. These authors employ magical realism to incorporate the people’s experiences into discussions of the nation’s violent history and aim to present a possibility of revolution and hope, particularly with the fall of the Marcos regime.

Compared with the authors cited earlier, Merlinda Bobis actively focuses on preserving personal histories and memories rather than expounding on revolutionary struggles as seen in earlier Philippine writings, even as she is concerned with representing the struggles of villagers who were caught between government forces and insurgents. In this article I argue that Bobis’s use of magical realism in *Fish-Hair Woman* (2012) is more than a reflection of the nation’s colonial past and an unreliable official history; magical realism is also a means to put into writing efforts at reconciling with a violent (and very recent) past as she works to actively challenge grander narratives of violence and terror.

### Total War, 1987–1989

*Fish-Hair Woman* does not comment extensively on the nation’s colonial past but rather focuses on the period of Corazon Aquino’s presidency, specifically, the “Total War” from 1987 to 1989. The “Total War” is neither a new series of violent killings nor an isolated event in the history of the contemporary Philippines. Rather, it is a continuation of the resistance against corrupted power since the Huk rebellion after the Second World War (*Time* 1950, 18; Weber 1993, 38).<sup>1</sup>

With the fall and subsequent exile of Ferdinand Marcos, Corazon Aquino assumed the presidency and began the task of transitioning the Philippines from martial law to democracy (Porter 1987, 93–94).<sup>2</sup> However, insurgent groups such as the New People’s Army (NPA)—the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP)—continued to clash with government forces, even organizing several (though unsuccessful) attempts to weaken President Aquino’s government (*ibid.*, 97). Eventually, after a sixty-day ceasefire, the president was pressured by her cabinet secretaries and US peers to engage in an offensive counterinsurgency war (*ibid.*, 102). According to Amnesty International (1996, 6),

Following the breakdown in 1987 of peace talks between the government and the National Democratic Front (NDF), which represents the CPP-NPA, the Armed Forces of the Philippines promoted a “Total Approach” counter-insurgency campaign. This strategy included the increased use of official militia, semi-official paramilitary forces and unofficial ‘vigilante’ groups to ‘hold and consolidate’ NPA-influenced areas following military clearance operations.

The “Total Approach” or “Total War” was also known by another name, “Operation Fishnet-Trap.” According to Arnel de Guzman and Tito Craige (1991, 40),

President Aquino and her U.S. military advisers mapped out a strategy dubbed Lambat Bitag (Operation Fishnet-Trap), a Filipino expression that suggests a noose tightening around a victim's neck. Lambat Bitag relies on traditional military offensives bolstered by political and psychological warfare that are supposed to pave the way for peace and development.

De Guzman and Craige further engage the “fishnet” metaphor and describe Operation Lambat Bitag’s impact on innocent people. They point out that “[c]asting such a net risks catching innocent fish,” but in the military’s point of view the collateral damages “would be an acceptable byproduct of war” (ibid.). Amnesty International (1992, 4) noted too that “Military and government authorities have frequently portrayed the victims of human rights violations [committed during the operation] as legitimate targets in their counter-insurgency campaign and have treated political killings as the inevitable by-product of the armed conflict.” According to various reports, “Operation Lambat Bitag” was implemented in phases, during which most of the violent executions and tortures were committed in the “clearing” and “holding” phases (De Guzman and Craige 1991, 40–41).<sup>3</sup>

During the “clearing phase” of the operation, as De Guzman and Craige (ibid., 41) have noted, the Philippine countryside was “completely militarized with free-fire zones, bombing and strafing,” and in some areas civilians were displaced and villagers hamletted on suspicion of being “National Democratic Front sympathizers.” In addition, civilians “suspected of belonging to or sympathizing with guerrilla forces” were at risk of extrajudicial execution (Amnesty International 1992, 22). De Guzman and Craige (1991, 41) go on to note how “[g]overnment-backed vigilante groups have terrorized the population with assassinations, rape, disappearances and torture.” Thus not only were the civilians living in the countryside displaced, they also faced the danger of being made to “disappear” (Amnesty International 1996, 7).<sup>4</sup> Reports indicate that at least 550 people were killed and more than 830 were reported missing during the counterinsurgency war declared during Aquino’s presidency (Amnesty International 1992, 1; 1996, 1). Aside

from government agents or government-backed vigilantes, the NPA was also responsible for executions and disappearances as it worked to strengthen its hold on villages situated close to the guerrilla bases: “Villagers who have refused to assist the NPA, or to join forces with them, have sometimes been dubbed opponents of the [resistance] movement and have been subjected to human rights abuses” (Amnesty International 1992, 15). Government forces and insurgent groups thus blamed each other for the disappearances and killings, each party denying any involvement in the extrajudicial killings. In addition, the questionable credibility of official reports regarding civilians taken into police custody pointed to attempts at covering up the executions and torture carried out during the Total War (ibid., 25).<sup>5</sup>

What makes the study of the Total War and its representations particularly interesting is that the ongoing counterinsurgency war is today referred to as counterterrorism, in line with global trends. The reinforcing of justifications of arrests and killings that occur in the name of counterinsurgency generates what Bobis (2009, 86) calls the “meta-narrative of fear and violence.” To Bobis (ibid., 88), “‘Terrorism,’ ‘the global war on terror,’ and ‘total war’ are now grand narratives that the establishment has inextricably deployed in our collective psyche.” This rebranding of counterinsurgency as counterterrorism means that another challenge has been added to the task of writing about a violent history—the narrative of counterinsurgency being reinforced with every presidency, and moreover providing very little chance for the smaller and more personal stories to surface, let alone to be told alongside the official reports.

### ***Fish-Hair Woman and the Disappeared***

In this climate *Fish-Hair Woman* not merely resists the grander national history, but also reacts to a correlated, although not necessarily comprehensible, narrative of violence and politicized terror that controls and justifies the national narrative. The inclusion of the NPA in the global terror watch list suggests that the government’s effort at curbing insurgents is now rebranded as “counterterrorism.” Thus counterinsurgency is no longer contained within the nation’s domestic jurisdiction since any form of violence or extrajudicial killing done in the name of counterterrorism is quite easily legitimized and in such a way receives international approval and even support (cf. US Bureau of Counterterrorism 2016). Moreover, with counterinsurgency rebranded as antiterrorism and communists now regarded as terrorists, literature related

to the Total War and counterinsurgency continues to be rewritten to fit into grander narratives of Terror, even if Operation Lambat Bitag has lapsed. This ongoing rebranding of counterinsurgency as counterterrorism also means that the Total War narrative has yet to be totalized by the incumbent government. As such, we can turn to historiographic fiction, and particularly magical realist historical fiction, to remember the events that are currently being left unacknowledged in the process of arranging information on the Total War into an official narrative.

The ongoing conflict between the government and insurgent groups, along with the concept of terror, allows for a compelling critical review of Merlinda Bobis's *Fish-Hair Woman*.<sup>6</sup> Two dominant threads run through *Fish-Hair Woman*. In the first thread, set in present-day Philippines, Luke McIntyre is tricked by corrupted politician Dr. Francisco "Kiko" Alvarado into flying to the Philippines to "reunite" with his missing father, Tony. The second thread tells the myth of the Fish-Hair Woman with her twelve-meter-long hair that can be "undone like a net" to trawl dead bodies from the river during the Total War (Bobis 2012, 9). The stories interweave as Luke discovers why and how his father "disappeared" during the Total War, and how his Filipino host's daughter, the enigmatic Stella Alvarado, could be Estrella, the Fish-Hair Woman. More importantly, Luke discovers his role in the retelling of a traumatic history as he becomes a trophy for Kiko to publicly rewrite his involvement in the nation's violent history, and as a reader of Estrella's attempt to write herself into the history of Iraya, a militarized village that is caught between the guerrilla forces and the government armed forces.

The stories told in *Fish-Hair Woman* offer poignant representations of the violence that occur during the Total War as the villagers turn to the extraordinary as they seek to come to terms with this war. Based on Estrella/Stella's recollections of Iraya before 1987, it is clear that the villagers subscribe to various superstitious and animistic practices, particularly in their trust of Pay Inyo's knowledge as a "medicine man" and their cautious attitude toward the spirits (ibid., 61). Take, for example, what Estrella/Stella says about the villagers' respect for their land and traditions: "They [including the government's soldiers] will utter the usual greeting of a stranger to the homes of the seen and unseen. 'Please, may we pass.' We called this out not only to the homes of the living, but also to the haunts of the spirits: a mound of earth, a wooded spot, a river" (ibid., 56). However, the villagers believe in a mythical Fish-Hair Woman only when the disappearances begin to occur

regularly. The villagers of Iraya cross the line that separates myth and the supernatural from superstitions and the natural order when they begin to experience the terror and grief that come with the declaration of Total War. Furthermore, Bobis uses magical realism as a strategy to access the trauma or personal histories of the survivors who are prevented from speaking about their experiences.

In the novel Bobis creatively represents the effects of a recent violent history that is regulated by grand narratives of national history, and even grander narratives of violence and terrorism. In her essay "Storying: Dream and Deployment," Bobis (2009, 87) reveals that her own village in the Bicol region has become "a hotbed of insurgency and militarism" and that the events in *Fish-Hair Woman* are set in a militarized village such as Iraya.<sup>7</sup> In *Fish-Hair Woman*, Bobis transforms her village's experiences into events that her protagonist Estrella/Stella claims to have happened in Iraya in 1987. According to Estrella/Stella, Iraya was thought to be held hostage by NPA members hiding in the hills, and as such the government's armed forces had marked it to be "salvaged." At the same time, NPA members were certain that the villagers needed to be saved from the government's armed forces and would often launch attacks at the soldiers deployed to the villages. Estrella/Stella recalls, "The soldiers and the rebels spoke of this same cause [salvation], even as they remained in opposite camps, and our village festered in between. We were the narrow space that deepened into a groove between the right and the left ventricle" and "[o]ur village was trapped between the military's purge of the insurgency and the insurgents' purge of their own ranks" during the Total War (Bobis 2012, 38, 200). Estrella/Stella's recounting paints a picture of the villagers of Iraya—like many Filipinos living in the countryside—as involuntarily drawn into the counterinsurgency war as they find themselves having to choose sides. Those who choose the "wrong" party to support are made to disappear, which is exactly what Estrella/Stella means when she recalls, "in Iraya, we whispered *salvage* with a weight in the tongue, sinking the word like a body thrown into the river. Liquidated, made liquid, made to disappear. Such was our new definition of the word" (ibid., 38).

The frequency with which these "salvagings" and the telling of tales of arrests and tortures during the Total War leads Rosca (1989, 839) to exclaim, "The amazing thing is that such stories are hardly considered news, so inured to the bizarre has Philippine society become since 1986." In *Fish-Hair Woman* the disappearances occur regularly, and the Fish-Hair Woman's trawling of

dead bodies becomes routine in Iraya as villagers gather around in the evenings to identify the dead. As Michiko Kakutani (1989) observes, magical realist historiographical fiction work at their political agendas by transposing the very violence and disappearances into the marvelous of everyday reality.<sup>8</sup> According to Kakutani (ibid., C30),

The transactions between the extraordinary and the mundane that occur in so much Latin American Fiction are not merely a literary technique, but also a mirror of a reality in which the fantastic is frequently part of everyday life—a reality in which military death squads have effectively turned the word “disappear” into a transitive verb.

Thus, not only has the terror of living in a free-fire zone become an everyday reality, so too do an ever-increasing number of disappearances. This experience of uncertainty and fear thus inspires authors such as Bobis to employ the comingling of the extraordinary and the lived experience of despair in their political fiction.

The myth of the Fish-Hair Woman becomes actualized along with the terror and the disappearances occurring in Iraya. The villagers come to see the Fish-Hair Woman as a figure of salvation as they hope for miracles and a return to normalcy in their lives. According to Giti Chandra (2009, 137),

Tracking down the disappeared—to bring alive again, to resurrect, to give flesh to memory and desire—becomes a way of retaining/regaining sanity after violence has destroyed it. The disappeared become the physical symbols of the loss or destruction of a world, an order, a way of being, thinking and understanding the cosmos. The search for them, in the belief that they exist, physically, and can be brought back, made material again, becomes a quest to bring back a lost world of safety, security and order.<sup>9</sup>

According to Chandra, the disappearances that are unaccounted for disrupt the (nonhierarchical) order of multiple realities in everyday life. Violence inflicted in the context of religious faith and its practices is accepted. Being “so integral a part” of everyday life, the violent events “seem almost ‘natural’ to it” (ibid., 115). Chandra also argues that religion allows violence to remain comprehensible in everyday reality, but the violence inflicted on the people

by the state “destroys existing discourses and demands new ones,” and thus violates a previously accepted world order (ibid.).

Unlike naturalized events of violence associated with religious faiths, these disappearances in *Fish-Hair Woman*, despite being part of a new everyday reality, do not exist in the same level of reality that the villagers previously believed in. To reiterate Kakutani and Chandra, disappearances that occur during periods of civil unrest give rise to the creation of multiple realities in literature. The fate of the disappeared is a common concern in magical realist historiographical fiction, as the disappearances quite easily lend themselves to multiple-reality-oriented explanations, and this is especially so for the survivors who continue to hope for miracles and normalcy in their everyday lives. The same can therefore be said of the events depicted in *Fish-Hair Woman*. What makes the disappearances in Iraya so hard to accept is that the survivors have no means to trace the disappeared, as there are no accessible records of suspects being brought into custody. If no party claims responsibility for the extrajudicial executions and disappearances, there is then no way for those who survive them to find out what happened to the disappeared. To quote Chandra (ibid., 139), “As much marked by the unseen as those who disappear, this process of disappearance intensifies the need for witnessing. The inability to bear witness to the disappeared or even to the process of disappearance prevents the narrativising that is such an important part of the process of healing.” Not knowing the fate of the disappeared hinders the process of remembering and healing for the people. Thus, to enable them to attempt a restoration of a world order prior to the Total War the villagers of Iraya invoke the Fish-Hair Woman to retrieve the dead in order for them to piece together what may have happened.

However, the process of healing is flawed in *Fish-Hair Woman* as Estrella/Stella can only recover the dead but not effectively witness the disappearances so as to heal her village. Even though Pay Inyo is convinced that “each rescue of a corpse from the water was a retrieval of Iraya’s peace” and that there will come a time when the greatest tragedy “would be only an unanswered serenade or a sudden falling from trees,” the characters are acutely aware that their lives will never be the same again (Bobis 2012, 139). Just like the “congenital flowers” (that are really scars from bullet wounds) on Adora’s body, the trauma and grief experienced during the Total War will never go away and will mark the people forever and remind everyone of their own unfortunate involvement in the war (ibid., 95).



The permanence of Adora's scars and the memories they hold are what Bobis refers to when she explains that "Their [the characters in *Fish-Hair Woman*] daily stories, past-present-future, have not only been rearranged into new formations of narrative. They have been shattered and erased, displaced with the meta-narrative of violence and fear" and that the community had to dream of "covert stories of survival" (Bobis 2009, 86). Out of desperation, the myth of the Fish-Hair Woman is exactly what the community conjures in its struggle to survive. As Estrella/Stella explains, "It was the Total War. The military's operation *Lambat Bitag*: Fishnet Trap" and that "[b]etween the right and the left ventricle of this constricted heart of a nation, the village conjured another net" and "I became their Fish-Hair Woman" (Bobis 2012, 200). The fact that Estrella tells her readers that the desperate villagers had "conjured *another* net"—and that it was the 12-meter-long hair of the Fish-Hair Woman—indicates an active resistance to the government's portrayal of the counterinsurgency (ibid., italics added). Therefore, while the government casts its nets to "catch" and eliminate any communist threats, Estrella unties her hair and uses it to recover all those who have been obliterated from the counterinsurgency's narrative. Estrella's task to retrieve the bodies of the disappeared is a manifestation of the villagers' turn to the extraordinary in times of despair. As Inez (Estrella/Stella's childhood friend), explains, "Despair makes you believe in anything. It fuels fervour, it is its own religion" (ibid., 229). Much like how Gabriel García Márquez and Salman Rushdie use magical realism to reflect the everyday reality of countries that experienced numerous revolutions and wars, Bobis uses magical realism to represent the people's experience of terror in yet another counterinsurgency launched by the Philippine government. The disappeared thus become integral to magical realism as it generates multiple realities to speak of what can only be speculated. The mythical Fish-Hair Woman in Iraya is, without a doubt, a product of the violence of the Total War.

### Terror and its Artistic Rendering

Similar to the other magical realist authors mentioned earlier, Bobis chooses to represent violence and the terror experienced by the people via Estrella's artistic transformations. Estrella/Stella frames her story with Tony's favorite line from Rilke's (2009, 3) *Elegy I*: "For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror," a quote which does much to sum up the artistic representation

of terror in the novel as she juxtaposes the beauty of her 12-meter-long hair with the gruesome state of the decomposing bodies (ibid., 6).

Take, for example, how her representation of the recovered bodies of those who disappeared during the initial phase of the Total War differs from most reports and testimonies of torture and executions. Amnesty International (1992, 30) reports that "The bodies of these victims have been found days or weeks later, often in isolated locations and sometimes bearing signs of torture," and goes on to explain that most of the male victims had been castrated while the females had been raped. Bobis (2012, 10), however, has chosen to describe these recovered bodies via an artistic and magical rendering. After one of her trips to the river to trawl a body, Estrella recalls the effect of the mutilated body on her hair:

Perhaps barely sixteen and with hardly any face left, she could have been anyone's daughter. Dark blotches, the size of a fist, covered her pelvis and breasts that had lost their nipples. I refused to think of what happened to her alive, if only to still my heart in this retrieval, but can anyone miss the stories of the body? Later in my hut Tony ranted his shock, lost under my hair. He could not see it growing and how I was remembering for the dead the contours of her lost face. (ibid.)

The shock and trauma of recovering these mutilated bodies are transformed into the extraordinary event of her hair growing longer. Earlier in the story, Estrella/Stella claims, "Every time I remembered anything that unsettled my heart, my hair grew one handspan" (ibid., 3). This precise detail of her hair growth is reminiscent of what García Márquez has claimed to be definitive of magical realism. According to García Márquez (Bermejo 2006, 3–30), it is the details that make an extraordinary story believable, and in *Fish-Hair Woman* it is the length of Estrella/Stella's hair that accurately measures the grief that comes with her retrieval of the tortured body, thus allowing the villagers to continue to believe in the myth of the Fish-Hair Woman.

This use of an artistic yet terrifying aftereffect affirms the thought that "the symbolic, sometimes mythic reverberations of the violent event and the violenced body force the narrative into strategies of representation which depart from the empirically, materially understood sense of realism" (Chandra 2009, 69). The signs of torture on the mutilated body become

more real than if it were to be recovered and described with forensic-like precision. The artistic transformation of the traumatic body recovery and the sight of a mutilated corpse, which not only inspire grief in the survivors but also terror and madness in Tony, is evidence that magical realism captures the effects of violent history better than a realistic representation can.

The use of the extraordinary also allows the author and survivors to work with the silence that continues to surround the country's recent violent history. Just as Anne Whitehead (2004, 5) observes, trauma is often represented as "deferred action" in literary works.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the deferral of these traumatic events in their literary representations is neither new nor uncommon, as we have seen in many historical fiction, most notably in García Márquez's (2007, 309–19) recreation of the Banana Massacre in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. In *Fish-Hair Woman* fear of incarceration and the trauma of witnessing these deaths create an atmosphere of silence as the villagers begin to speak of these killings as deferred events, often calling the latest disappearance as simply an "incident" (Bobis 2012, 197). Estrella/Stella describes the silence surrounding these "incidents": "How we spoke of events like this, sometimes with the air of solemn knowing—that it was wise to look the other way or leave. For some families, especially those who had succoured the revolution or by necessity had assisted the government's insurgency purge, each incident impelled departure" from the village (ibid.).

She goes on to reveal that "The line of people fishing in the river grew shorter and shorter, truncated, just like the tongues of those who were left behind. They spoke only in whispers" (ibid., 200). Not only that, the atmosphere of silence is itself a vicious cycle as the villagers continue to sustain the silence surrounding the disappearances as they struggle with surviving and with expressing what they have experienced. In one of the news articles contained in *Fish-Hair Woman*, we are told that the villagers of Iraya choose to remain silent because "They believe that this campaign [organized by Inez] for an inquiry [into the disappearances] will not come to anything and that it will put their lives at risk" (ibid., 250). As we can see, the victims of the Total War have internalized the terror and silence that had been imposed on them, rendering them incapable of testifying against the perpetrators of the Total War.

The difficulty in sharing what had happened to them also results in the proliferation of gossip and rumor. Even though the villagers are hesitant to seek redress or speak publicly, they are able to share information and personal

opinions in whispers and gossip. As James Morrison (1998, 1) points out, oral sources of history (in this case, appearing in the form of whispers and gossip), tell of "the undocumented and undifferentiated masses of people who are born, live, and die an unrecorded existence." Such are the people of Iraya—especially the disappeared—whose stories need to be told with urgency. Moreover, the whispers of speculation and rumors are reactions to the silence and obscurity of state-sanctioned violence during the Total War.

In *Fish-Hair Woman* the rumors, gossip, and unofficial sources of information are reworked into "winds" that attempt to inform and explain events ranging from personal transgressions to the destruction of the countryside, and the deaths that occurred during the Total War. For example, Estrella/Stella's mother, Carmen, is described as having died after the "wind" was "blowing inside her belly . . . like a storm" at childbirth (Bobis 2012, 30). The wind, initially meant to describe how Kiko had gotten her pregnant, and which represents the shame of her premarital transgressions, turns into the hemorrhage that kills her. As the story progresses, the "wind" changes its nature and becomes a source of information that works around the silence surrounding the Total War. According to Estrella/Stella,

Bad wind drifts in and out of Iraya. Be careful, or you'll catch cold or death.

The strangeness never lifted but played its multiple versions, even when the wind began to change. Years later it blew whispers of apprehension from all directions, constantly debating over the rooftops and the farms. The NPA are growing *adelantado*—arrogant and demanding—the north wind reported. Ay, they're only doing their job, the south gale protested, but they have to eat, of course. And the east wind agreed—of course, they must survive—but with a shudder of doubt. It shut the doors that were once opened to each beloved revolutionary. (ibid., 188)

The conflicting sources of information are neither confirmed nor disputed, and the villagers, along with the readers, are left to discern for themselves which information is more legitimate than the other.

Undoubtedly, the "winds" and whispers of terror make the events in the countryside difficult to comprehend. Estrella/Stella is aware of the difficulty



in rehashing the villagers' traumatic memories. She also recognizes the value of stories when she says, "we [survivors] all have our ways of retrieval" and that way is through stories and the belief in the Fish-Hair Woman because "[s]tories bring them [the disappeared and the dead] back" (ibid., 279). Thus, the violent history of the Total War has to be rendered artistically in order for the event to be comprehended as fully as possible.

These stories allow Estrella/Stella to transform her village's experiences and her personal history aesthetically into events that may be comprehended alongside grander narratives of nation and terror. Since the disappearances and extrajudicial executions are special (in the sense that these go unwitnessed) and are harder to accept and to reconcile, the use of magical realist elements and artistic rendering enables these events to be written into Iraya's history. Death is indicated by the taste of brine in the river water, reminding one of García Márquez's methods of associating "anomalies" to traumatic occurrences or events. In *Love in the Time of Cholera*, for example, readers are introduced to the scent of unrequited love: "It was inevitable: the scent of bitter almonds always reminded him of the fate of unrequited love" as Dr Urbino arrives at Jeremiah's house after Jeremiah has committed suicide via cyanide poisoning (García Márquez 2003, 3).

In *Fish-Hair Woman* brine and later lemon grass and fireflies come to represent those who disappeared or died in the Total War. Pay Inyo, who is also a gravedigger, explains the taste of death in the river saying, "the dead must curse memory . . . so that we can never forget those whom we loved" (Bobis 2012, 9). Later Tony's death changes the taste of the river, and his death is marked by the presence of fireflies as Pay Inyo struggles to describe the terror and the beauty of what he saw:

Lemon grass and fireflies, Estrella, you better believe it. Strange but how beautiful, perhaps a sudden miracle, ay, our chance for salvation, perhaps shards of the light of Damascus, sent to pierce the hearts of the soldiers, truly-truly . . . Ay, we know there's a body when the water tastes of brine, but it's lemon grass this time—ay, what is this beautiful curse—who is this body? (ibid., 15)

While the taste of lemon grass is considered to be unusual (and meant to be so because Tony was an outsider to the war), the presence of fireflies as markers of death is regarded as common knowledge in the village. According

to Estrella/Stella and Pay Inyo, "On nights with no moon, fireflies came to light the dead, so the living can see them, find them," lending the otherwise gruesome deaths an aura of beauty (ibid., 298).

The Fish-Hair Woman's retrieval of the bodies and the swarm of fireflies that lights the way to the bodies are similar to the artistic shock chronotopes discussed in Eugene Arva's *The Traumatic Imagination*. According to Arva (2011, 26), "Shock chronotopes need to be understood as time-spaces marked by events whose violence has rendered them resistant to rationalization and adequate representation." He explains,

Imagination, and especially the traumatic imagination, is an activity by which the human consciousness translates an unspeakable state—pain—into a readable image; it is the process by which shock chronotopes become artistic chronotopes. The traumatic imagination uses the sublimative power of language in order to turn that which resists representation into a new and more tangible reality. (ibid., 84)

Arva's perspective explains how artistic shock chronotopes allow survivors of violent history to reconcile with their traumatic experience. What was previously—and still is—difficult to speak of has now been defamiliarized and rendered artistically.

Mythical figures such as the Fish-Hair Woman and events such as the scent of lemon grass in the water, being products of that violence, not only allow and facilitate the remembrance of these deaths but also offer possibilities of reconciliation. By transforming these undignified deaths into the taste of lemon grass and the presence of fireflies, the disappeared and the executed can be granted significance in a narrative that had previously sought to omit them or deny their existence.

### Telling a Story with Faith

Although Estrella/Stella is acutely aware of the incredible nature of her story, she nevertheless insists on its validity and goes on to claim her version of the truth. In the beginning of her story, Estrella/Stella admits that it may be difficult to believe that the river changes whenever there is a body dumped in it, but assures her readers that the villagers had "mastered the art of faith," to believe that Iraya "was still alive during the purge by the military," asserting

her claims that the myth of the Fish-Hair Woman is real to the villagers of Iraya (Bobis 2012, 3). The myth of the Fish-Hair Woman is likened to the stories of the saints—perhaps, even as a reinterpretation of Maria Magdalena (who at one point the villagers regarded as a sinner)—as the villagers are well aware that Estrella/Stella is the bastard child of her mother (who was thought to resemble Maria Magdalena) and Kiko. She explains that the villagers trusted the Fish-Hair Woman “as much as they trusted undying love, martyrdom and resurrection, even beatific visions” (ibid., 4). The allusion to the saints is evident in Estrella/Stella’s observation of “How little we know or wish to know of the history of our myths, saints or gods. It is enough that we invent for them a present face and believe that they can save us from ourselves,” as the villagers conveniently “forget” their initial labelling of her as a sinner by virtue of her mother’s premarital transgressions when they begin to see her and her 12-meter-long hair as the only way to return normalcy to Iraya (ibid.). This faith in the mythical Fish-Hair Woman and the artistic naturalization of violence into everyday living in the novel reflect the characteristics and features of magical realism employed in Philippine literature.

The villagers’ conjuring of a Fish-Hair Woman also draws our attention to the challenges of writing about events that remain too sensitive to be discussed openly even today. Compared to authors writing about other events such as the Holocaust, Southeast Asian authors and the survivors on whom they base their characters are still living under “democratic” but oppressive regimes that continue to obscure and manipulate remembrance of past events in order to retain political dominance (Harper 1997, 508).<sup>11</sup> As a result, a move away from conventions of realism has perhaps become the most enabling way for Southeast Asian writers to represent the people’s experiences with violent histories and to talk about a recent past that is still very much a sensitive topic in regimes of “soft authoritarianism” (ibid.). Magical realism, with its accommodation of multiple realities, creates an allowance for authors to incorporate “inaccuracies” or creative rendering in stories and testimonies about the violent past. As scholars such as Lois Zamora and Wendy Faris (1995) and Stephen Slemon (1995) have argued, magical realism allows for a critical review of the totality of history as the existence of multiple realities draws attention to the incompleteness of what was regarded as an imperial and complete history (Zamora and Faris 1995, 1–14, 407–26). Any (deliberate) inaccuracies and creative moderation of

events and information in the testimony or historical fiction, therefore, work toward overcoming difficulties with speaking outside the markers of grander national narratives.

The use of magical realism to represent and discuss a highly violent history raises issues about the author’s responsibility to tell the truth. An artistic retelling of the violent history might allow authors to work around the limitations imposed by the regimes mentioned earlier, but it also—and ironically—allows these artistic and magical realist works to remain complicit in the perpetuation of violence. By rendering these violent events as part of a newly invented myth with a nymph-like savior and arranging them into poetic images of lights and fireflies, Bobis does not explicitly assign blame to any party involved in the war. Her characterizations of the NPA guerrillas and the government soldiers are ambiguous, with each army possessing characters who feel the same emotions of anger, fear, and passion, and thus do not provide her readers with an obvious “enemy” who is solely responsible for the murders and tortures committed. While the lack of an obvious “enemy” allows for a perpetuation of the narrative of violence and terror, it also reflects the conundrum that Iraya finds itself in, that is, as mentioned earlier, the village is trapped between two equally violent forces in the war. That being said, Estrella/Stella’s love story with a mythical Fish-Hair Woman is testimony to Iraya’s experiences during the Total War, and so too is Bobis’s novel about Operation Lambat Bitag. By transforming the people’s experiences into an artistic recounting, Bobis allows for not only an attempt at a factual representation of what had happened but also a revelation of “emotional truths” that survivors of violent history find difficult to express (Tuon 2013, 108).<sup>12</sup>

Through her self-reflexive protagonist, Estrella/Stella, Bobis explicates the implications of speaking about history and the inherent responsibilities of those who survived. Indeed, it would later be revealed that Estrella/Stella had written herself into myth when Inez exclaims, “she wasn’t even here [in the Philippines] during our Total War” and that “[s]he has written herself in the place of her sister and in the place of a myth” (Bobis 2012, 228). Inez may have called Estrella/Stella’s bluff by pointing to Estrella/Stella’s absence during the Total War, but Inez also admits that “in 1987, Iraya did believe in a Fish-Hair Woman” (ibid., 229). We also learn that the villagers have no recollection of Estrella/Stella as the Fish-Hair Woman. Instead, their memories of the myth is that of Estrella/Stella’s strong-willed adoptive sister,

Kumander Pilar of the NPA. Estrella/Stella is actually regarded either as the bastard child with a head of long hair similar to her late mother's or as a suspicious alliance of the corrupted Kiko.

The lack of recognition by the other villagers, Inez's accusations of Estrella/Stella's lies, and later on the revelations that Estrella/Stella was compelled to write the story of the Fish-Hair Woman all point to the task of writing as also a means of reconciliation. Luke learns that Estrella began to make up a love story and position herself as a myth in an attempt to gain closure when she reveals that "I wanted to believe his body [Tony's] held some remnant of my history" and "of my heart [a symbol for Pilar]" (ibid., 279). Luke thus begins to understand the cause of Estrella/Stella's earlier hysterical outburst of wanting to "take responsibility for our actions," for her people's violence and corruption, and the need for her to be a part of Iraya's history (ibid., 123). The myth of the Fish-Hair Woman and the extraordinary therein allow Estrella/Stella to assume responsibility for having "escaped" the Total War and for ensuring that Tony and Pilar are not forgotten in the retelling of the war.

Estrella/Stella's obsession with history and the historical context that Bobis provides in her essay bring to the fore the issue of historiography and storytelling in *Fish-Hair Woman*. Her self-consciousness in the telling of what happened to her village during the Total War is similar to what Linda Hutcheon (1989, 68) has identified to be prevalent in postmodern historiographic fiction in that there exists "an intense self-consciousness (both theoretical and textual) about the act of narrating in the present the events of the past." Estrella/Stella muses, "Why is history more present than the present, the old stories more acute, more in the flesh?" (Bobis 2012, 40). Estrella/Stella's conscious obsession with the Total War is reminiscent of Hutcheon's (1988, 110) observation of a critical revisiting of history: "Postmodern fiction suggests that to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological." By writing herself into a history that she is not a part of, Estrella/Stella attempts to reclaim the connection she shares with Iraya and more importantly to hinder her father's efforts at totalizing the Total War narrative. In fact, as Bobis (2009, 87) explains,

Storying is contextual and historical. No one can tell about *now* without *before* or the consequent *after*. History is changed as we tell stories, because the storying act physically determines how we see

and relate to the world now and before—which in turn determines how this world is continuously shaped and named, and narrativised for—and in the future.

This awareness of writing about history as a series of cause and effect is reflected and transformed in Estrella/Stella's self-conscious rewriting of the story of Iraya (which she dedicates to Tony). The manuscript given to Luke is exactly the story the readers are reading, with it being referred to as a "love letter" titled "*FISH-HAIR WOMAN by ESTRELLA CAPILI*" (Bobis 2012, 26).

At one point, Luke notices that the manuscript becomes thicker and the story changes as Estrella/Stella continues to tell her version of what happened in Iraya and the fate of those who disappeared during the Total War. The continuous writing and rewriting of history as a story gestures to the awareness that history is *living* and it changes with every remembrance or change in power. The unnamed third narrator of *Fish-Hair Woman* informs the readers that Estrella/Stella's manuscript is "unfinished because the living can't let go and nor can the dead" (ibid., 287). As the story progresses, Luke questions Estrella/Stella on the validity of her story and her identity as the Fish-Hair Woman, to which Estrella/Stella replies "It's all up to you" (ibid., 279). Estrella/Stella's reply reaffirms the idea that the Fish-Hair Woman is as real (or unreal) as anyone wants her to be because history itself is as authentic as personal stories can be.

In addition, the unfinished manuscript is a reminder that history is never so neatly arranged. Events happen concurrently; the way we remember historical events and the way different Philippine administrations claim and generate narratives of the past are ever changing and are especially fluid when the counterinsurgency war is ongoing. The news clippings in *Fish-Hair Woman* prove the difficulties of arranging events into a neat national narrative. The news articles of disappearances and recovered bodies from the river in Iraya serve as anchors of a truth and reality of which the mythical Fish-Hair Woman is a part. These "objective" reports provide information about the conflicting narratives of the Total War, neither authorizing nor dismissing any of the sources cited in the articles. The personal stories of the search for answers and the fear of being made to disappear are as true as the government's claims that disappearances were uncommon. History is thus shown to be every bit as much an imagined narrative as the personal and "less official" stories are.

The emphasis on the private stories of Iraya also reflects a contestation of narratives and memories. Not only do these individuals' stories struggle to be heard alongside state-sanctioned narratives, but they also compete among themselves as each storyteller claims his or her authority as to what had happened in Iraya. For example, Inez refutes Estrella/Stella's claim to the story of Iraya, and Kiko repeatedly attempts to rewrite his own past and more importantly his actual involvement in the country's violent history. Pay Inyo understands this contestation of personal stories as organic when he reflects, "There are too many stories weaving into each other, only to unweave themselves at each telling, so each story can claim prominence. Stories are such jealous things. The past and the present, ay, what wayward strands" (ibid., 259). In this way Bobis reminds her readers that there remain stories that will never be told because the ambiguity that surrounds the disappearances and the anonymity of some of the recovered dead bodies prevent these violent events from being readily incorporated into the characters' memories, and these events therefore remain very much as gaps in her story. In a rare instance when Estrella/Stella addresses the reader instead of Tony, she calls for caution to regard history as a total whole when she remarks, "So dear reader, when your eyes pass over these stories, consider your capacity to gather all of them, even the gaps in between, those that I dare not tell or do not know of yet or perhaps would never even imagine, but which might be utterly clear to you" (ibid., 142). These untold stories are proof that there is a silence imposed on victims of the Total War; they also remind readers of Estrella/Stella's love story that many private narratives were made to disappear from the official narrative in the name of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism.

The *Fish-Hair Woman*, then, is more than just historical fiction if we are to consider the purpose of myths and personal stories in the representation of a particular aspect of the Total War. Despite her description of the mutilated bodies and forms of torture in her story, Estrella/Stella insists that her history "is not about blood and gore" (ibid., 191), but a story of "those whom we love and hate" (ibid., 269). To quote Caroline Hau (2004, 74), "the investment in the redemptive and restorative power of truth telling conceals the fact that there may not be a direct, necessary correlation between accurate memory and the healing process." Estrella/Stella's explanations allow Luke to come to terms with her story being "a testimony about a militarised village," and in the margins of the story lies the fate of his missing father (Bobis 2012, 125).

The story of the Fish-Hair Woman thus resists totalitarian efforts to write about history; and more so it consciously draws attention to the correlation between conflicting memories and history in the composition of historical narratives.

To be clear, these private stories from individuals made invisible in official history do not serve to replace history, but rather attempt to "expose" what has been omitted from official accounts while also introducing complexities to what was originally thought of as a "total" narrative. Estrella/Stella does not claim to be privy to the truth; what she really claims is the significance of her memories and testimony, not in terms of their accuracy in relation to actual events that occur but in terms of her position as a member of the community in Iraya. Outside of Estrella/Stella's story, Bobis's story does not claim to tell the truth; neither does it offer an alternative to the history of contemporary Philippines. In many aspects, the novel's very argument is that these stories of personal grief and terror need not be historically accurate or complete to be taken seriously. Of utmost importance are an acknowledgment of memories and grief and an understanding that these memories and experiences can only be learned but not subsumed into any version of the Total War. This point is highlighted when Adora sums up for Luke the events in Iraya with a gesture: her drawing "an arc in the air that never comes full circle" (ibid., 302). This resistance to incorporation to another narrative is evident in Luke's initial hesitance to complete Estrella/Stella's story, as he understands that he "can never capture the currents of her river, her village, her history, and most especially not her grief" (ibid.). Not only that, Luke learns to respect Adora's refusal to validate or dispute Estrella/Stella's story and accepts that Iraya's traumatic past and the story of the Fish-Hair Woman will never come full circle.

## Conclusion

As with most Philippine novels written in the 1980s, Bobis's *Fish-Hair Woman* ends on an optimistic note, with Luke and Adora leaving Iraya after the death of Estrella/Stella and the restoration of the river. Luke eventually brings Estrella/Stella's story to its rightful end with the hope that he had "done justice" to her story (ibid., 301). His return to Iraya with Adora and his daughter allows him to reassess Estrella/Stella's tale of the Fish-Hair Woman and Iraya's grief over those who had disappeared and died in the war. His daughter's encounter with the fireflies at the river becomes enchanting rather than terrifying, as the fireflies no longer signify death and bodies

in the river. To Luke, Pay Inyo's incantation to leave the grief behind is realized as he sees that the fireflies signify hope and joy to his daughter, Addie, because she is part of a generation unaffected by the trauma of the Total War and represents a generation of Filipinos determined to embrace the future.

In the same manner with which her female protagonist reclaims and regenerates the Total War's narratives, Bobis attempts to reconcile the people's experiences in the ceaseless wars carried out in the name of counterinsurgency. The ongoing conflict between the Philippine government and the NPA complicates the remembrance of the Total War as the narrative of violence and terror continues to evolve according to the incumbent government's claim on the war against homegrown terrorists and still active communist groups. *Fish-Hair Woman* is an example of a historiographical novel that exhibits "an essentially romantic temperament" that allows "the use of a rich imagination" that renders "more dramatic moments in history on the vaster canvas of the universal human condition" (Dimalanta 2000, 314). We see that the use of magical realism not only allows Bobis to react to and represent the people's lived experience of the Total War, but also allows her to provide her Philippine readers with an attempt at reconciliation. The use of magical realism therefore serves both as a remembrance of the past and as an optimistic hope for a generation of Filipinos who will transcend the nation's traumatic past.

## Notes

- 1 The war against insurgents has been a recurring subject of discussion in Philippine writings. See Kerkvliet 1979/2002; Lachica 1971.
- 2 Pres. Corazon Aquino was insistent on maintaining a peaceful transition to democracy and was noted to have ignored the advice of her cabinet secretaries to take action against the Communist Party.
- 3 According to De Guzman and Craige, the five phases of Operation Lambat Bitag were "Clearing," during which armed forces carried out attacks to remove NPA rebels from the countryside; "Hold and Defend," during which armed forces reclaimed and established territories after the elimination of NPA rebels; followed by "Consolidation," during which government agencies took over the defense of these newly acquired territories; and finally, the "Development" phase during which the government initiated programs to entice rebels and villages to surrender with promises of new infrastructures (1991, 40–41).
- 4 Amnesty International (1996, 7) describes disappearances as incidents in which "people are taken into custody by agents of the state, but their whereabouts and fate are concealed, and their custody is denied," with many of the victims "never seen again."

- 5 It was reported that "[i]n a few cases [of documented arrests] the authorities have acknowledged that an individual died in military or police custody but have claimed that he or she committed suicide or was killed while attempting to escape. In these cases, however, forensic evidence has indicated that the victims were tortured before being killed, or bound at the time of death, thus raising questions about the truth of official accounts" (Amnesty International 1992, 30).
- 6 See AFP 2016a, 2016b. Pres. Rodrigo Duterte has declared "a unilateral ceasefire" to "stop violence on the ground [and] restore peace" on 25 July 2016, only to withdraw his offer five days later when the NPA failed to reciprocate the call for peace talks. Duterte is not the first president to declare ceasefire, and his predecessors have been unsuccessful in negotiating with the NPA. These repeated (and failed) attempts at a peaceful resolution reflect the ever-changing narrative on the counterinsurgency war.
- 7 Caroline Hau (2004, 68) notes that a few significant "anti-informer campaigns" or "purges" that occurred have greatly impacted the civilians; the first being in the Quezon–Bicol border in 1979, the second in Mindanao in 1985, and in Cagayan in 1987, and not to mention the purges that occurred nationwide from 1988 to 1989.
- 8 Kakutani's (1989) argument is with reference to Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*.
- 9 Chandra's (2009) specific reference to the use of magical realism to represent state-sanctioned violence and disappearances is set in a Chilean context in her reading of Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*. Since both *The House of the Spirits* and *Fish-Hair Woman* work with similar subject matters concerning state-sanctioned violence, political crimes, and extraordinary women with magical abilities, Chandra's arguments are helpful in the approach to understanding the myth of the Fish-Hair Woman in Bobis's representation of the Total War.
- 10 Whitehead's (2004) reference is to Cathy Caruth's study of trauma and the latter's modelling of her theory on Freud's conception of the temporality of memory.
- 11 According to Tim Harper (1997, 508), Asian systems and governments are often "defined as an inversion or a corruption of a Western form: 'soft' authoritarianism, as opposed to the 'hard' kind; 'illiberal democracy'; 'semi-democracy'; neither one thing nor the other."
- 12 Bunkong Tuon (2013) refers to the debate between Cambodian scholars over which testimonies (whether accurate and immediate testimonies or reworked testimonial fiction) about the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia have more value. He differentiates "factual truths" as accurate information about the Khmer Rouge while "emotional truths" are trauma experienced by the author and narrator. He argues that a testimonial fiction, in its concern with the "emotional truths," is no less accurate and valid than a factual testimony. His argument is useful in our consideration of which kinds of "truths" Bobis's *Fish-Hair Woman* works with.

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