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The Empire of Memory, by Gamalinda

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Book Reviews



The Empire of Memory. By Eric Gamalinda. Manila: Anvil, 1992. 264 pages.

In a display of sheer power, Ferdinand Marcos sought to perfect "thought control" by seizing newspaper chains and television/radio networks alike from anyone whose properties he coveted and whose oppositionist policies he resented. Not by censorship alone nor by legal harassment, but also by the mounting body count among reporters from a once pre-eminent free press was national security (meaning the presidential person) guaranteed. Rumor-mongering became a capital offense. Yet what alternative was there to a regime's insistence on disinformation? Only silence. Or amnesia, among a people already conditioned for centuries to leave thinking to colonial or social superiors, and to leave the *keeping* of history in the hands of the presumed *makers* of history.

The Empire of Memory is a record of the impossibility of establishing even an approximate truthfulness of events under such circumstances. Its two principals, Jun Hidalgo and Alfonso Diaz, become part of a government "think tank" directed, ironically, to confine their thinking to one task only: supplementing Imelda Marcos' embellishment of her inadequate past by inventing connections between the Leyteño Romualdezes and the Suarez and Zabarte families, also of the Visayas, through Amalia Santiago Romaldes. The fact that Amalia may simply have assigned herself this surname as a literary *nom de plume* might have deterred any honest investigator. But Jun and Al have been paid to persist. The New Society is image-conscious, and facts are expected to be as flexible as the citizenry itself during a decade of martial law. One is reminded of the *Tadhana* project which Marcos pretended to have written during the Seventies. Subtitled *The History of the Filipino People*, still its dedication—*Alay sa lagang bayang Pilipino*—makes clear its whole intent was to offer the Marcos dynasty, through the New Society, as destinate heirs of all previous historic forces. Not each of the four prospective volumes was completed, though; and one, having already been distributed among the elite, was summarily recalled, perhaps out of embarrassment.

On various occasions the novel provides the raw "documentary evidence" available to Jun and Al as public-relations "doctors" under Max Plata. Extracts from Amalia's privately published novella, *Song of the Islands*, provide

an unflattering *roman à clef* surrounding the Suarez family on San Miguel Island in the Visayan Straits. Driven by pestilence (perhaps on Iloilo), Elias Camacho arrives fortuitously on San Miguel, helps build a railroad for the Suarez sugar plantation, and has an (perhaps serious) affair with Joaquin Suarez' wife Consuelo.

This story-within-a-story has some of the dark fulsomeness of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*. But what makes the novella suspect as history is the likelihood that Amalia Santiago's frustrated desire for her brother-in-law Manuel Suarez and her ravenous jealousy toward her sister Isabela has colored all her memories. Dolores Zabarte, Manuel and Isabela's daughter, claims that the work is riddled with lies, even though some parts seem consistent with a separate diary kept by Amalia. Later, it is suggested that not Amalia but someone else entirely wrote the attacks on the Suarez family, either as a rebuke to Joaquin who was sometimes perceived as a traitor to Philippine independence, or as the insidious act of an enemy of progenitor Egidio Zabarte after his son, Jose, married into the Suarez family to solidify their power base. Amalia in her journal is herself unsure of her motives. When the Marcoses finally are forced to flee Malacañang in 1986, the original of Amalia's book is mistakenly packed away among Ferdinand's belongings; or is it only the edited version elaborated by Jun? Or is the aborted text among those shredded by mass intruders into the palace afterwards? No one knows for sure.

The Zabarte chronicle, although seemingly more straightforward than that of the Suarezes, is itself pierced with question marks. Both the Philippine Military Academy and the New People's Army that the brothers Jose and Antonio respectively represent can be brutal at times toward both civilian suspects and military prisoners, or toward their own comrades. Thus, the conflict between them is never reduced by Gamalinda to mere militarist versus idealist. Even when Antonio is ordered to execute Jose and refuses, his is a tangle of motives. Later, he apparently outlives the various intra-rivalries of the Communists and, when near the century's end, he finally surrenders, he speaks only Carolan, a mongrel dialect, and dies incommunicado in prison. Jose leads a coup d'état, but when phantom jets bomb the Ministry of Defense where he has taken cover, his body cannot be found. Similarly, the relationship between Jose's wife Dolores and Antonio, and the possibility that they are the parents of Lalita, the little orphanage girl who drowns, is left unresolved.

Sal X is still another inscrutable figure. Born to an American Marine lost in flight en route from San Miguel to Korea, he is provided by the Pearl Buck Foundation foster parents in the States who must remain anonymous. Therefore, Sal Wallace puts aside his stepfather's name, del Mundo, and becomes Sal X. As a flagellant, he experiences a crucial intermingling of blood and love through ritual crucifixion, and thereafter finds an international following for the jamming evangelical music that he creates: Sal as Salvador,

as Messiah. His marriage to Meg Turner, an American photojournalist, is erratic at best and problematic at worst; and his relation with the Nirvana commune which he founds on San Miguel disintegrates after the Sagrada Corazon de Jesus begins to dismember and eat their victims in unholy communion. He may have become a green-card holder later and finally rejoined Meg in the States.

Many questions remain unanswered. Gamalinda's strategy, so intrinsic with the theme of political disinformation, has narrators bound intentionally to be defective. Jun is too engrossed in the game of king-and-crones to be distracted by truth; Al, as his shadow, cannot mature fast enough to correct readings in the cultural compass. The placement of so much of the action outside Metro Manila—in the Batanes island chain; an undesignated Isneg reservation; an island somewhere between Cebu and Samar (San Miguel, itself bipolarized between a U.S. naval facility and sugar plantations)—further lends *The Empire of Memory* an air of a distant fable. This mingling of realism and borderline fantasy owes nothing to postmodernism as literary perspective and much to the actuality of the Marcos years, whose unstated overriding slogan was: All politics is public relations. The Visayas, in Gamalinda, only *seem* to be a safehouse away from the miasma which too often describes Manila (neither Consuelo nor Dolores can stand to live there); but they are not Eden. *Paraiso, parang ibang bayan.*

For years Jun is too cynical to care about which oligarchic power structure is the dominant one, since neither old society nor new shows any real concern for democracy; so why should *he*? Ghost-writers like himself know the propaganda value of promises as well as the likelihood that, if they involve land reform or protection of natural resources, they won't be kept. His early training is as director of an acting troupe pretending to be atavistic Isnegs so that their "pale god," Mandy Lizares, can covertly mine veins of gold and Col. Jose Zabarte can log indiscriminately under the official guise of protecting minorities. So Jun already has a potential co-conspirator when he is sent to the colonel's home island in the Visayas to construct still another "shadow history" of origins, this time Imelda's. Without qualms, he manages to surf through a series of ragged, mountain-high waves: martial law; the collapse of the MIFF picture palace in 1983; the assassination of Ninoy Aquino the same year; the First Couple's mania for malversations matched only by those of their "crony capitalists," and the revolt at EDSA. Because of his years as a cynical insider, Jun's consistent reaction is to treat these calamities as entertainments inspiring *kalokohan* of his own. Only years later, perhaps concerned that he too, like bureau chief Max Plata, might become a *balimbing*, does he resign in an attempt to recover some inner, truer self.

The "I" narrator, Al, seven years younger than Jun, puts his own wit to work on the projects of his mentor. But although a believer in supernatural forces sometimes influencing the lives of men (Taal, for example, erupts out

of revenge for the Beatles' being molested by government-run mobs in 1966), he accepts his share of personal responsibility, finally quits ghost-writing for the KBL, and survives into the new century far less naive, no longer on any government payroll, and possibly immune to the shifting patterns of the newest corruption. He seems to identify philosophically with his nephew Nico's inarticulate, because too easy, generalization: that life is both beautiful and terrifying. In fact, the Philippines is almost as much of an enigma to these outside-insiders at the end, as it was to the visiting Beatles who, thirty years earlier, having come to Manila to perform but not to have lunch with Imelda and her children, had to admit, "We've got a few things to learn about the Philippines. First of all how to get out."

A few of the novel's characters seem underemployed—many of them, curiously, women: Sal's wife, Meg Turner; Susan Tala, of the National Institute of History; Jun's unnamed first wife, who is gunned down by the government; even Al's sister Delphi.

Yet their very incompleteness (or the even greater obscurity of such non-characters as Papa Isio of Negros) contributes to the crepuscular duskiness that inevitably invades even such vigorous figures as the Zabarte brothers, Dolores Suarez, Amalia and Isabela Santiago, Sal del Mundo, Maria Bernardina . . . After Maling, the worst typhoon in a century, strikes in 1980 and the death toll soars, it is remarked that "This is a land both fact and fiction, where generations leave no trace of themselves and everything is constantly wiped out, punctually, by clockwork destruction: typhoon, tsunami, earthquake, drought. Because of this, we have no memory of ourselves; we remember only the last deluge, the last seismic upheaval" (p. 32). And sometimes not even that much. Centuries of colonialism have left Filipinos with a need for a history of their own, as broad and deep as possible, uncensored, lest all sixty-six million of them become one forever lost tribe. And what did the Marcos apocalypse offer this search for national identity and self-respect? *Après moi, le deluge*. The jackals too that ran with the would-be lions still feast, their whelp along with them, mindlessly complacent even as the tectonic plates dance along the rim of fire.

Who now remembers EDSA as more than an aberrant dream?

Will the memory of empire be on the minds of those writing scripts for each anniversary ceremony? Those spokesmen who dare not be understood because, if they could be, it would be clear that they have nothing to say to the true in heart?

The Empire of Memory is virtually a prehistory of a world that may already have ended before being born. Sal's symphony by the same name must, therefore, be played with horns and strings muted, and with kettle drums undone.

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