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Emergent Voices, by Kintanar et al.

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Book Reviews and Notes



Emergent Voices: Southeast Asian Women Novelists. By Thelma B. Kintanar, Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir, Koh Tai Ann, Toeti Heraty. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1994.

It is interesting to note that even in the area of the world in which women are traditionally extremely "liberated," one can still speak of the *literary* voice of Southeast Asian women as *emerging*. Literature, it seems, is truly one of the last areas of culture through which women do make themselves heard, perhaps because the pen has always been the prerogative of the formally educated, the schooled—and this has nearly always meant the male population. Of course, it is also true that three of the five essays in this intriguing new collection deal with the literatures of Islamic countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei), and Islam generally confines its women to more private spheres. A fourth essay comes from Singapore, a Chinese culture which is also not exactly renowned for the equality of its women.

Dr. Thelma Kintanar, who wrote the introduction, and who, one feels, pulled the book together even though she shares authorship with the other contributors, wrote from a rather privileged position as she considered the novels written by Filipinas. Since neither Islamic nor Confucian ethics weigh heavily on the Filipina, she is surely the freest of the lot. Nevertheless, Kintanar says that the writings of the Filipina have not, with only very recent exceptions, been informed by a feminist perspective. Filipinas have not traditionally, she says, seen themselves as "circumscribed within a patriarchal society" (p. 117), but instead as continuing to enjoy a historical legacy of relative equality. But history blends into myth, of course, and Kintanar says that if our beliefs about the past are based on myth, it is an "enabling myth," one that has contributed to the Filipina's sense of her own equality. That makes her writings distinctive in the region.

There is always the question of the relationship between women's issues and general social issues, and whether women of social commitment should feel obligated to subordinate their own issues to those of the (male-dominated) community. This relationship becomes especially complex and important in Third World settings, in which the problems of poverty and inequality are particularly compelling. In the novels of the Southeast Asian region, these issues are sometimes intertwined and sometimes polarized. Activists

in the Philippines seem to combine them with naturalness: the strong-minded woman often asserts her own independence in the wider political or social arena. Kintanar singles out Lualhati Bautista's *Dekada '70* as an example of a novel in which women's and national interests blend in a "metonymous relation" (p. 112).

But Koh Tai Ann, writing on the novels coming out of Singapore, senses a polarization of the interests of women writers and political nationalists:

Postcolonial academic discourse in Singapore . . . has tended to be dominated by an elite method derived from Eurocentric canon-making preoccupied with creating national canons not only of the "best" works, but also, ironically, of those which could be perceived as important expressions of, and participants in, the nationalist anti-colonial struggle for political and cultural independence. (p. 67)

Thus, the nationalist movement has privileged literature with political themes, silencing women who write on gender issues through the force of the literary canon, in exactly the same way that the colonial culture silenced the voice of the "people." This is why women cannot afford to let their own issues be sidetracked for more "general" ones.

The interests of the Islamic writers discussed in the essays on the literature of Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei are firmly on gender issues: Indonesian writers consider virginity, and the problems of its loss, through either rape or seduction; sexual relations within marriage; problems of widowhood; and the special dilemmas of unmarried "career women." Novels from Singapore and Malaysia deal with education for women, career possibilities, family obligations, and the conflicts these might cause.

But there is a continuum, and in most of the societies concerned, the later novels move away from the very private (i.e., virginity) to the more public—for instance, to women serving society through careers in medicine. Sometimes, they deal explicitly with the development of a woman's consciousness, as in the Malaysian novel *Seroja Masih di Kolam* by Adibah Amin, in which a young woman named Diana, who has been a student of English Language and Literature, slowly moves back to the original Malay values and lifestyles of her country, asserting her own capacity to assign value, and eventually parting from her more firmly westernized boyfriend Rusli. In one prizewinning woman's novel from Brunei, the Islamic woman Siti Nur becomes a national role model as an educated woman turned pediatrician, who is at the same time a concerned wife, mother, and family member. At one time, she is even able to bring back a family member who is in the underground political opposition. Her quiet influence contributes as well to the conversion to Islam of her husband's rather alienated parents. (But this novel, although it was written by a woman and is a story about a woman, is so circumscribed by government and Islamic ideology that it is difficult to see anything "emergent" about it.)

The collection is rich in concrete descriptions of various novels, and is interesting to read for that information as well as for gleanings of feminist and critical theories. It is difficult to make any generalization about the material in the novels which is not belied somewhere else, except perhaps this one: that Asian feminists are much less likely than their Western sisters to deny some of the traditional nurturing aspects of womanhood. The women in these novels do try to realize their own potentials, through education and work, and they fight injustice against and oppression of women, but they rarely reject the gentleness that Asian women are famous for (just see the airline ads!). They do not question their domestic roles but continue nurturing their families. They lack the brashness of the feminists in some places, although Kintanar does on one occasion feel compelled to censure Lualhati Bautista for some of the language she puts in the mouth of her protagonist in the novel *Bata, Bata, Paano Ka Ginawa?* (p. 114).

There are difficulties in putting together collections of critical writings from different cultures. There are perhaps special difficulties here because feminist criticism is just beginning to take shape. These essays, therefore, are a bit uneven, but that, too, is instructive: the Indonesian writer has developed systematized categories for classifying subject matter; the Philippine essay gives most attention to the feminist-social continuum; the Singaporean writer (who, incidentally, considers only literature originally written in English) writes in terms of canon and privileged genres. We might hope that for a future volume, the four women who worked on this collection might be able to work together even more closely, to write a more unified volume. They have given us an excellent beginning.

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The Week of the Whales and Other Stories. By Leoncio P. Deriada. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1994.

In his third collection of short stories, Leoncio Deriada tackles, with uneven success, a variety of subjects. Here are stories of private sorrows, of seemingly quaint, yet persistent and potent, folk manners, of social inequity and exploitation. Here are boys on the brink of manhood, feeling the awakenings that are its heralds, parents reading announcements of their sons' death, idealist teachers helpless in the face of ruthless realities, a Jesuit tremulous before the sight of man-flesh under the shower, an exiled First Lady listening dreamily to the illusionary sounds of a conch. These diverse characters share an experience hinted at in his preface, where Deriada writes that six of the 14 stories were completed while his wife was furiously but fruitlessly fighting cancer. This experience is loss and its child, pain.