

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

The Week of the Whales, by Deriada

Review Author: Jonathan Chua

Philippine Studies vol. 43, no. 2 (1995): 270–274

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

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.

Susan Evangelista
Interdisciplinary Studies Program
Ateneo de Manila University

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.

Both "The Hawk" and "The Slaughterhouse" depict a mother's grief over the loss of her sons in "a war she could not understand," a war neither she nor her sons caused or have any use for. The mothers in the stories, each in her own way, bravely confront their grief, the one shooting away the hawk that preys on the chicks of her backyard, obvious symbols of the war and her sons; the other, after a prophetic dream, daring to look at a cow being slaughtered from across her house and to receive the portentous telegram. In contrast, the father in the first story stays silent, "crying in the dark"; the father in the second shields himself from the awful truth of his son's death behind trivial news about visiting "Russian ballerinas" and "RP beauties."

There are other kinds of loss in the collection. Love lost and chance squandered are depicted in "Bus Ride." On a bus ride to the city, the protagonist-teacher meets a man who could have been his father-in-law, Mr. Jaena. Although the past seems to be behind them, it smoulders beneath their surface but nonetheless sincere pleasantries. Neither character is spared from the bitterness of loss—not the protagonist, who was too poor to step beyond "the base of the stairs" to court Mr. Jaena's daughter, nor Mr. Jaena, who now can only admire the protagonist's generosity and regret, in private, his daughter's elopement with a libertine.

If the trip to the city in "Bus Ride" takes the protagonist back to his past, the journey from the city leads Bogey Ascalon in "The Priest" to a harrowing discovery. A model student in college, an idealist eager to join the priesthood, Bogey loses his innocence when Fr. McNeil tries to engage with him sexually. However, the priest is perhaps more than a bugger (a possible pun on "Bogey") for he, too, suffers a loss. Torn between his innate attraction for physical beauty and the austere demands of his vocation, he seems a man more seduced than seducing. Far more painful than the force of Bogey's kick in Fr. McNeil's side is the discovery of his failure to be the spiritual father for which he had sacrificed his dream to become a sculptor.

If the spiritual father fails, the stepfather in "For Death Is Dead In December" succeeds. Set in Christmas, this is Deriada's most optimistic, if also most stylistically contrived, story. Dario, 17, spurned by his crush Nena, resentful of his stepfather, world-weary and morose, wants to die. At the end, however, when Dario's stepfather calls him by his name, he realizes that his stepfather truly loves him. Dario quits his self-induced melancholia and schoolboy agonizing, and decides, "I'm going to midnight Mass."

These stories of private pains are balanced by stories with more sociopolitical content. "Chicks in the Snake's Cage" shows the political initiation of David, a college student, as he witnesses and then takes part in a strike of the workers of Sarmiento Enterprises, a company owned by the parents of his friend Chuck. "Imelda of the Islands" recounts a fictive life of Imelda Marcos before her rise to power and after her exile to Hawaii. Actual events, personalities, and objects are alluded to, such as the building of the CCP, the Aquinos, and the 3,000 pairs of shoes. The title story "The Week of the Whales"

is about the encroachment of Japanese industrialists upon the pristine Punta Sungay and the futile attempts of Mr. Faraon, a bachelor-teacher, to stop it.

While Deriada shows his political leanings in these stories, he does not sacrifice the personal drama altogether. "Chicks" is as much a story of a boy's discovery of the proverbial feet of clay, the cracks on a marble surface, in a seemingly perfect friend, as it is an indictment of injustice. "Imelda," even as it shows what "Imeldific" means, is a study of the mentality of the ambitious but (or because) deprived; and while it does not justify the ways of such people as Imelda, it does call for an understanding of how and why they behave the way they do. Finally, "Whales," with its final image—a doleful Mr. Faraon and Miss Justino walking hand in hand away from Punta Sungay—an image reminiscent of the close of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, affirms the belief in personal consolations in the midst of social defeat, an idea perhaps not too palatable to more radical critics or writers.

Less ambivalently political is "Dam," which recounts, with delicate detail à la Manuel Arguilla, how a native dams a river only to have Christian settlers, "without even asking if their presence was welcome," hoard the fish "wriggling in the fine sand and in between exposed stones." The native's loss, however, is paid for by the settlers' lives.

The other stories in the collection are "Coming Home," "Rabid," and "Of Scissors and Saints." In the first two, a young man returns from the city only to find that he has lost his "primal sympathy" with his boyhood haunts. Ricardo does not come home as much as arrive in what for him has become a prison, and like a character from Joyce, feels frustration and constriction as he realizes "for the hundredth time—that he is the son of a simple barrio folk who would like to share his most profound thoughts but cannot because he has chosen a foreign language to express these thoughts." The narrator of "Rabid," after 14 years in the city, is repelled by the fact that the barrio folk still rely on the witch doctor to cure an illness they do not know is rabies. Deriada is equivocal in this tension between the urban and the rural, and in the end one wonders whether the "enlightenment" the city offers—the poems in a foreign language, the pills and tablets—are of any real value in the country.

"Of Scissors and Saints," about a missing ring and a fortune-teller aptly (or perhaps ironically) named Epifania who plays detective, is an odd piece. The title suggests an essay, and the narrative, full of vivid and comic descriptions of barrio manners and magic, reads like an excerpt from an autobiography. Taking it as such, one is amused; taking it as a mystery story, however, one feels cheated by its facile resolution.

In these stories, Deriada employs a number of styles—but not always with success. In "Bus Ride," the juxtaposition of dialogue with internal monologue underlines the isolation of the characters and the regrets they nurse beneath their happy façade. In "Dam," the absence of dialogue heightens the reader's perception of the tension between native and Christian which the dam

symbolically suppresses, as well as emphasizes the antipathy either party has for each other. The shift in point of view in "The Priest" recalls Sherwood Anderson's adept use of it in *Winesburg, Ohio*.

Where Deriada fails is in his employment of a "litanic" style in "For Death Is Dead in December," probably the worst story in the collection, in a desperate attempt to create a somber atmosphere:

It was December and Dario said, I want to die.
 But his friend Leo said, dream Dario dream. For death is dead in
 December.
 Dead in December.

.....
 For Dario was 17 and did not know what it was to be young. . . .
 For Dario was 17 and Nena said she didn't love him.
 For Dario was 17 and his father was dead. Long ago.

The multiple ellipses in the story effect a mawkishness reminiscent of that made by greeting cards and prosaic verses. Aiming too hard at profundity, Deriada arrives at a puerile parody of Gregorio Brillantes: "Tonight God is born. Death is dead. Dream Dario—." Furthermore, the repeated lines and images, attempts too obvious and artificial at unity, only call attention to themselves.

Deriada disappoints us even more in his symbol-making. The images are cliché-ridden and their meanings obvious. For instance, the strikers of Sarmiento Enterprises are symbolized by the chicks in a serpent's cage which David finds in the laboratory. The chicks are given by, who else, but Chuck Sarmiento. The other symbols in the collection—the cow ("The Slaughterhouse"), the whales ("The Week of the Whales"), the hawk and the chicks ("Hawk"), the "base of the stairs" ("Bus Ride"), the sky which "seems higher now" ("Coming Home"), the sandcastle ("Imelda of the Islands")—have significations as obvious and pat as those in a medieval allegory. If anything, the stories have the merit of being especially teachable.

Deriada's diction is also awkward in several places. In "The Priest," Bogey "was awed by the fact that the mellifluous expanse was the Pacific Ocean itself." In the title story, Mr. Faraon puts his "worldly possessions . . . in the pedicab." Some of his dialogue are too stilted to be read without wincing (or even sniggering):

"I'm angry at something."
 "Are you angry with us? Because we are the owners?"
 "No. I'm angry at the inequality of men."

("Chicks in the Snake's Cage")

One may try to elide the gender insensitivity (not to mention the self-contradiction and triteness) of that exchange, but then there is also plain unidiomatic diction; e.g., Imelda's "well-bodied men."

The Week of the Whales and Other Stories is an uneven collection. While the stories do not completely repel—some like “Coming Home” are almost touching—they are marred by excessive sentimentality and a style commensurately unsubtle. The insights these stories declare fall short of genuine profundity and sound somewhat trite, though not totally untrue. One recognizes echoes of Joyce, Anderson, Brillantes, and Arguilla, masters all of the genre, but perhaps these are too faint and feeble, not too well played, to make one feel their full power. It remains to be seen whether Deriada would write to be a master like them, but like his own Dario, one can dream that he would.

Jonathan Chua
Interdisciplinary Studies Program
Ateneo de Manila University

Mindanao: Land of Unfulfilled Promise. By Mark Turner, Lulu Respall and R.J. May. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1992. 268 pages.

I have the pleasure to greet the publishing of a book on the Southern Philippines after a number of years. By its diversity and quality, this will become one of the most precious reference books on the topic. It is difficult to comment fairly on 17 scholarly articles, since they cover various aspects of contemporary Mindanao, from demography to economy and sociopolitical aspects. The lowland settlers, the indigenous tribes and the Muslims are also considered in this book.

Most of the articles show from very different angles the extreme complexity of the situation in Mindanao. In this land of promise, divergent forces of opposing purposes collide, leading to violence. The struggle for power—in terms of politics, local or national or even international—underscore the various interests. The game of political men, the interest of the military, the assets of the economy (local and international), the agencies of the government (whether plantation, logging, mines . . .), the objectives of the ideologists (Muslim rebels and NPA) all compete for power and resources.

Into this view the various ethnic groups also try to defend themselves, sometimes with the help of NGOs, sometimes even by violence against all those forces. Articles such as those of D. Hyndman, L. Duhaylungsod and M. Turner show precisely the conflict of interest when some groups can gain so much power and money.

Certainly, the article of R. J. May brings a lot of data which until now had not been in the open. Thus, it helps us interpret the present situation of the Muslims in Mindanao.

Professionally, I was much more interested in the articles with an anthropological focus or link to my field of research, Muslim Studies. Some articles dealt with the delicate situation of the Maranaos and Maguindanaons of Mindanao from a structural point of view. G. Carter Bentley studies the