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Marriage in Philippine-American Fiction

Dolores de Manuel



What does marriage signify in Philippine-American fiction? A number of stories and novels, spanning several decades, can be read as addressing the question both directly and indirectly. The answers constitute a discourse on the economy of marriage, an attempt to determine whether the institution is by nature productive or destructive, fertile or sterile. In working out the equation of value, the fiction of Jessica Hagedorn, Bienvenido Santos and Linda Ty-Casper quickly brings many factors to the surface. The meaning of marriage depends on where the protagonists have located themselves, and whether this act of self-positioning is conceived in terms that are geographical, racial, cultural or emotional. It depends on the type of redefinition of social and gender roles that takes place in the act of marriage and union, and whether that redefinition is seen as positive or negative. The movement of this relocation can be situated within a larger process in Asian-American literature that Shirley-Geok-Lin Lim has noted: "the paradigm of conflict and ambivalence reflected . . . which finds expression in internalized alienations and in external racial discrimination and violence, will be transformed into a productive multivalence" (1992, 28). In the process of revaluation and transformation charted in Philippine-American fiction, as male and female, east and west collide and redefine each other, both casualties and survivors emerge.

In reading the work of Philippine-American fictionists as a running commentary on the economy and imperatives of marriage in the trans-oceanic, cross-cultural setting, a quick definition of traditional Philippine marriage is in order; the easy formulation of "love, honor and obey" should be supplemented. In addition to noting the high value ascribed to marriage, one should posit a code of unspoken, unwritten cultural rules that exist over and above the legal and religious restrictions, including

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family stability, loyalty, and female subordination. In each work of fiction examined in this paper, one finds that the meanings ascribed to marriage at home in the Philippines shift their ground as their characters move into new territory and come to redefinition.

Hagedorn's *Dogeaters*

This shift is most simply and graphically illustrated in Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters*. Rio Gonzaga, the narrator, grows up in the Philippines as an observer of a procession of failed or bizarrely dysfunctional marriages. Her mother, after being humiliated by her husband's flagrant infidelities, attacking him with a pair of spike heels and seeking refuge in the company of homosexual friends, finally moves to America to escape her marriage; Rio comes with her. Her last comment on her own progress to maturity is "I never marry" (1990, 247). For both mother and daughter, the effects of a bad marriage are lasting. Geography is their escape; the ocean between insulates them from the cultural norms of home and enables them to devalue marriage. The novel leaves one wondering whether codes of behavior, gender roles and social conditions within a macho culture have made marriage in the Philippines an impossibly destructive institution for women, and whether failure is actually an inescapable precondition of its existence. Although the question is never addressed directly, the novel's conclusion seems to imply that since the rules of marriage are too complicated, it is easier to just get out of the game. Placing oneself outside of the confines of marriage is facilitated by the literal crossing; in this novel America is the escape hatch, the place where the rules need not be obeyed. The physical movement allows Rio to step away from the system of value. But the simplicity of this unbinding and redefinition is deceptive, since decentering and relocation also carry the price of personal destabilization. Rio's description of herself implies a sense of disorientation: "I am anxious and restless, at home only in airports. I travel whenever I can" (p. 247). The act of relocation outside the domain of marriage may imply a permanent dislocation.

Bienvenido Santos

However, not everyone can step so far out of these bounds, nor does everyone want to. Avoidance is not always a viable way of dealing with the question of marriage, especially when the institution is regarded as

practically a categorical imperative, a social construction of inherent value. Unlike in Hagedorn's novel, where America is an escape, in Bienvenido Santos' work the American experience adds another layer to the mandates of marriage. To the Philippine frame of reference is added another set of codes that need to be confronted, and when the complications of interracial factors enter the equation of value, the possibility of a complete and clean repositioning is minimized. This is demonstrated in two of Bienvenido Santos' early stories. The first, "Scent of Apples," set in the 1940s, is very widely anthologized in the Philippines. One probable reason for its popularity there is its reversal of race relations in its portrayal of Ruth, an American woman, heroically risking her life and working like a slave for Fabia, her Filipino husband, who in praise compares her to the tradition of "our own Filipino women" (1979, 28). However, the positive reception of the story by the Filipino audience does not fully take into account the fact that this Filipino has placed himself in a position where his personal roots are of marginal value, both socially and economically. In fact his Filipino origins actually devalue him; his wife knows nothing of his background, saying with disbelief "there's no such thing as first class Filipino" (p. 24). While he sees in her a support and kinship with his roots, his isolation and distance from his Filipino identity is more striking. Fabia hopes that his young son will be better than him, taller—in other words, more American than Filipino (p. 24). As "just a Filipino farmer out in the country" (p. 22), he is pathetically lost in the Midwest, and when asked about making contact with his hometown, recognizes his distance from his roots: "'No,' he said softly, sounding very much defeated but brave, 'Thanks a lot. But you see, nobody would remember me now'" (p. 29). This reveals the condition of his repositioning: his marriage is something of a success, but at the cost of his sense of Filipino selfhood.

Santos' "Scent of Apples" is quite benign when compared with another story of the same period, "Woman Afraid." Its grim picture of the prejudices surrounding interracial marriages shows the possible dangers of redefinition. The story opens with a young couple, Alice, an American, and Cris, a Filipino, happily in love after first overcoming the misery of having to hide their relationship for fear of public disapproval. At the start of their relationship they are afraid to even walk on the street together, but after a few months they have reached a point of stable happiness, finding that they are accepted and that their relationship is recognized as one of genuine love. They spend peaceful evenings in the simple pleasures of music and laughter; their lives are vital and fulfilled. When Alice has overcome her initial doubts that "people might think

you are colored," (1991, 130) she accepts all of Cris' Filipino qualities as desirable, delighting in his warmth and affection, which she sees as a trait of his "lovely people" (p. 134). Even his dark skin is a quality that makes him look "like a God" to her; she hopes that their future children may look just like him (p. 139). She has bought into the ideals of Filipino culture, and has made a successful repositioning, at least temporarily. It is worth noting that in this story it is the American wife, who is physically on home territory, who has made the crossing. However, this reverse acculturation is inherently unstable because of its physical and social site; it sets the stage for a confrontation with the dominant culture.

The climate of the marriage becomes ominous when Alice hears about another intermarriage that has ended in disaster. Another American wife, Marge, a friend of the couple, has crumbled under the "slow torture" of constant prejudice (p. 138). The taunts of Marge's neighbors who call her half-Filipino children "monkey boys" drive her to insanity; she drowns the boys in the bathtub, screaming "Now, you can leave me alone. The monkeys are dead. Now, you leave me alone!" She attempts to kill herself and is taken away to an institution (p. 139). The failure of Alice's own marriage is more gradual and not as spectacular. As the story preys on her mind, it undermines the stability of her position in the marriage and erodes her confidence in the relocation and cultural crossing that she has made.

Alice finds that she is still bound by the codes of racial superiority/inferiority that she had initially seemed to transcend in the happiness of the marriage. She refuses Cris' sexual advances, shuddering with the fear that she might become pregnant and have a "monkey" child. Gradually she wilts away like a dying flower. The ocean crossing in this marriage has only been partially successful; Marge's story shows Alice a large gulf that her original redefinition cannot bridge. A fatal dysfunction becomes apparent in the juxtaposition of the traditional gender role of male superiority and the assumed racial hierarchy of white superiority, and the dilemma implied in the subordination of a white woman to a nonwhite man. The story thus shows a violent collision of codes; in this marriage, the elements of race and gender have so misshapen and debased its economy that physical fertility has become deadly. In this distorted system it is self-destructive for a white woman to bear "monkeys" sired by inferior nonwhite men, while presumably white men may beget such children on inferior nonwhite women with impunity.

While the story "Woman Afraid" may appear dated in this era of supposedly greater racial tolerance and of birth control, the pattern of self-imposed sterility in the confrontation with a competing set of codes

is one that continues to resonate in contemporary Philippine-American fiction. To recall Hagedorn's *Dogeaters* briefly: the novel ends Rio Gonzaga's story with her reflections on her own psychic emptiness.

Ty-Casper's *Wings of Stone*

It is not only intermarriages that provide the opportunity for either sterility or fertility; arranged marriages, in their confrontation with another set of codes, may in their own way be destructive or productive. The implications are both political and cultural, because these are not the family-arranged and socially sanctioned marriages of traditional practice; instead they are arranged by the individual concerned. They take place to acquire a green card, as a defense against deportation by the U.S. government. It is an attempt to circumvent a rigid legal code and to make the ocean crossing more possible and more permanent. However, to some this use of marriage is a source of guilt over the contravention of a moral code, exposing a form of inner death. Linda Ty-Casper's *Wings of Stone* shows the conflict in its protagonist, who has married to acquire a green card:

it was fake, his conscience outfaced him: outright fake based on a phony marriage. He, Johnny F. Manalo, had undermined the system by importing corruption. Intending to liberate himself in the United States, he had fouled it instead for himself and for everyone who lived there (1986, 12).

Johnny Manalo's overscrupulous sense of guilt comes from the ideals he has learned from his father, a doctor who has dedicated his life to treating the poor. He has no reason to feel culpable towards Rose Quarter, his wife, who he treats well and wishes he could love; he calls the marriage "fake" but in many senses it is a real one. Instead his guilt arises from his having married without love and at remaining in a marriage with a woman who is incapable of sustaining a loving relationship. In this equation of value, the ideal Filipino marriage is seen as one which is based on love and whose purpose is to beget children, not one for a blatant legal purpose. The arranged marriage in the novel thus becomes a representation of an inner sterility that ensues from the incomplete crossing.

The emptiness of the arranged marriage is personified in the description of Rose Quarter, who leads "a life that seemed full of stillborn hopes" (p. 68). She is psychologically handicapped, on medication "to control

her thoughts and emotions" (p. 69). Johnny has thought he could help her: "For some time he believed that if Rose Quarter had someone she loved, who could make her want to, she would become a butterfly instead of a moth" (p. 69). But he has come to realize that there is no hope for change. He finds this out through his relationships with two Filipino women: Sylvia, whose vitality gives him the impression that "she could just as well have sprouted wings," (p. 64) and his dead mother, whose loving relationship with his father seems to have set his ideals for marriage. The sterility of Johnny's relationship with Rose Quarter shows that he is still bound by the codes of Filipino marriage, that he has not made the crossing. The emptiness of his "fake" marriage is representative of the hollowness of the American experience for him. He has redefined himself in a way that is wrong and repugnant to him. Ty-Casper's analysis of the marriage shows that if the crossing is incomplete and the reconstruction of the self is flawed, then the marriage that takes place within an unstable value system cannot work.

For Filipinos in the U.S., one way to restabilize the value of marriage, to make it productive rather than destructive, is to rethink some of their rules. This is one view of the arranged marriage as a possibility. "Not Philippine girls," says the horrified Antonieta Zafra in *Bienvenido Santos'* "Immigration Blues" (1979, 12). Philippine "girls" are supposed to be special, and telling a man that they want a marriage of convenience is an unthinkable act, "degrading, an unbearable shame. A form of self-destruction" (p. 12). However, for her it works as a form of successful self-construction, when she finds in an arranged marriage not just an escape from the immigration authorities but a solution that has given her stability and happiness. It even turns out to be congruent with her religious beliefs; in her own words, her marriage is "a miracle . . . her friend God could not have sent her a better instrument to satisfy her need" (p. 13). Although Antonieta has no children in the marriage, the union seems productive and fertile in the satisfaction she has gained by reshaping her life and values. She has successfully overcome her initial scruples, with "no regrets" (p. 14), repositioning herself in terms of sociocultural and gender norms so that she attains a site where she can accept her actions.

Alipio Palma, the story's protagonist, has himself found happiness in an arranged marriage and looks back on his now-dead wife with affection. In this story he is happy to see the possibility of making another such marriage; he has accepted the revision of the role of the dominant male and is not ill-pleased with being the passive object of women's proposals:

"talk of lightning striking the same fellow twice" (p. 19). He reflects on the physical and cultural relocation of Filipinos in California: "The waves. Listen. They're just outside, you know. The breakers have a nice sound like at home in the Philippines. . . . across that ocean is the Philippines, we're not far from home" (p. 7). Although Alipio speaks of closeness to home, at the core of this story is the awareness of the distance that its characters have travelled. The journey over the ocean has moved these Filipinos onto new ground, where relocation within a new system of meaning becomes possible. Garrett Hongo's words in celebration of the work of Asian American poets are also an apt tribute to these Filipinos who have survived the crossing and revalorized their lives:

We are already upon the shore of this land, though, undeniably, there have been losses and lands left behind. We will not forget them....The people are running and shouting on the grassy hills above the strand where the wreckage of a boat bounces in foaming surf higher than knees. We lift our voices, bodies from the sand, and call. (1993, xlii)

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