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Our Mothers, Our Selves: A Literary Genealogy of Filipino Women Poets Writing in English, 1905-1950

EDNA ZAPANTA-MANLAPAZ

The Index to Filipino Poetry in English, 1905-1950 lists nearly a thousand poems written in English by Filipino women during the first half of this century.¹ All things considered, this is an impressive number of poems to have been written by two generations of women who were the first to use English as a medium for poetry. A natural curiosity leads us to ask: Who were these women? When did they begin to write poetry? Where did they publish these poems? What did they write about? Why did they write poetry, and poetry in English at that? How are they influencing the present generation of Filipino women writing poetry in English? But more than out of mere curiosity, we should ask these questions by way of acknowledging these women as our mothers and affirming the literary heritage they have bequeathed to us.²

The present essay introduces these women poets. Part One ("Maria and Her Daughters") introduces them as a group, identifying four features which they shared in common. Part Two ("Maria and Her Mothers") formulates a theory of literary genealogy that explores the significance of these Filipino women poets as our literary mothers.

MARIA AND HER DAUGHTERS

The story of Maria and her daughters begins not in the Philippines but ten thousand miles across the Pacific, in Berkeley, California. The date is April 1905. A group of *pensionados*, having organized

1. Edna Zapanta-Manlapaz and Gemino H. Abad, comp. and ed., *Index to Filipino Poetry in English, 1905-1950* (Manila: National Book Store, 1988).

2. This is not in any way to deny that Filipino women-poets had literary fathers as well as literary mothers. But as its title plainly states, the present essay is a "separatist" study focused on the mother-daughter relationship.

themselves into a Filipino Students Organization, published the maiden issue of their literary organ, *The Filipino Students' Magazine*. Its June issue features a poem:

Our Reasons in Study [sic]

On this beautiful western shore
 Is a spot which we all adore,
 Far from the buzzing noise and hum
 Of the city from whence we come.
 Here, amidst the trees and flowers
 Blooming fresh after April showers,
 We have come, and our best to do
 For the purpose we have in view.
 Each year has its busy season,
 Which gives us time to reason
 That we are here to work, not play,
 And our task to complete each day.
 And when these happy days are past,
 Through toil conquered many a task,
 To the beloved country returned,
 We will give what the years have earned.

Its author is a female student named Maria G. Romero. She is perhaps only dimly aware of it, but she is beginning a tradition of Filipino poetry in English by Filipino women. But that is not all that is significant about her. In several ways, she prefigures the hundreds of Filipino women poets who came after her.

First, she was a university student.

The opening decades of the century were a propitious time for Filipino women, a season of grace. After three centuries of confinement inside the house, they were free to walk to polling booths as well as roam the open spaces of academe and professional marketplaces. The gateway to this brave new world was the university. Maria Romero was among the first Filipino women to enter the hallowed halls of academe, preceding her sisters by several years.³ It was a privilege that had to be paid for at a high price, because in terms of race, gender and class, she found herself a stranger: a brown-skinned Asian woman studying on a government scholarship at an

3. The Instituto de Mujeres had been founded in 1900. As its name indicated, it was a college exclusively for women, as were a few others that were founded not long after. The University of the Philippines, founded in 1908, was the first coeducational institution in the country. The University of Santo Tomas, founded as early as 1611, did not admit women until 1926.

American university in a country ten thousand miles away from home. No wonder then that what weighed heaviest on her mind, deciding the topic of her poem, was the importance of study. ("... we are here to work, not play.")

Like Romero, most of the Filipino women who wrote poetry in English were members of the middle class who, either by reason of wealth or sheer talent, had gained access to tertiary education. Sitting alongside their male classmates, listening to the same lectures, taking the same examinations, these women inevitably developed a consciousness identifiably different from that of the greater mass of Filipinas. It is important, however, to keep in mind that what they had to say in their poetry ought not to be the basis for generalizations about Filipinas in general. They clearly constituted only a statistical minority. But it is equally important to keep in mind that it is this minority that was most articulate in noting the many and varied changes being wrought in the consciousness of the then emerging "modern Filipina." The writings of these women are valuable as a record of their impressions of the momentous changes taking place around them, and as a diary which confides their reactions to these changes.

Secondly, her poetry was published in a campus publication.

Elsewhere we have pointed out that "The form and substance of a considerable portion of our best poetry in English is chiefly attributable to its place of nativity. Writers on campus instinctively begin with poetry [and] write mostly verse . . . a considerable portion of our body poetic is on the whole campus poetry—as it were, a greenhouse flower."⁴

This claim is based on the fact that in the case of both male and female poets, about half of those listed in the *Index* published their works in campus publications.

Some of these poems probably first took shape as classroom exercises, painstakingly modelled after poems learned in literature classes. Some of the better ones showed enough originality to merit commendation from their American professors. Angela Manalang Gloria recalls how once a theme of hers was returned to her by Professor C.V. Wickers with the notation, "This is pure poetry."⁵

4. Gemino H. Abad and Edna Z. Manlapaz, eds., *Man of Earth: An Anthology of Filipino Poetry and Verse from English, 1905 to the Mid-50s* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1989), p. 14.

5. Edilberto Alegre and Doreen Fernandez, eds., *The Writer and His Milieu: An Oral History of the First Generation of Filipino Writers in English* (Manila: De la Salle University Press, 1984), p. 51.

No doubt encouraged by similar praise, students continued to write poetry on their own. The less timid of them proceeded to break away from the restrictions of regular rhythm and rhyme, making bold to experiment with the then revolutionary new form known as free verse. Drawn by a common interest in literature, students frequently met together. Loreto Paras-Sulit recalls how the prewar writers used to have monthly meetings in a *panciteria* to discuss each other's stories.⁶ Trinidad Tarrosa-Subido remembers that "most of the writers of those times . . . were not really competitive. . . . they were like a fraternity, a sorority. They were nice to each other."⁷

Some writers formally banded together to form clubs, the most prestigious was the U.P. Writers Club, which admitted members of both sexes. Some women writers formed themselves into the U.P. Writers Women's Club and later, the Women Writers Association. Asked about the purpose of the latter, Maria Luna-Lopez explained, "Well, nothing, except to show the men that there were women who could write. The feeling was that only the male writers were recognized. You felt as though something was holding you back. Actually, it was because the women really had not taken up writing seriously. They took it as part of their course at the UP, and so they tried to write for the *Collegian*."⁸ Encouraged by their professors and supported by their fellow writers, these students published their poetry in the campus magazines. Their collective effort forms the basis for the claim that "Filipino-English literature began with *The College Folio* and grew in the free and democratic pages of *The Literary Apprentice*."⁹

But greenhouse flowers, once removed from the rarified air of that environment, soon wilt. So it was with the campus poets of this early period, both male and female. The *Index* confirms that in the case of the female poets, the majority published no more than one or two poems each, and were not heard from again. The pattern was apparent even then. Trinidad Tarrosa, writing in an editorial of *The Literary Apprentice*, openly lamented the news that "a good number of women writers are . . . indulging in the not too taxing domestic hobbies to the neglect of all literature, creative or appreciative."¹⁰

6. *Ibid.*, p. 268.

7. Edilberto N. Alegre and Doreen G. Fernandez, eds., *Writers and their Milieu: An Oral History of Second Generation Writers in English* (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1987), p. 361.

8. Alegre and Fernandez, *The Writer and His Milieu*, pp. 148-49.

9. Abad and Manlapaz, *Man of Earth*, p. 253.

10. Trinidad Tarrosa-Subido, "Paging the Editor . . .," *The Literary Apprentice* 13 (December 1934): 99.

Happily, there were a few blossoms hardy enough to weather even the tempestuous climate usually found in the editorial rooms of national weeklies. Immediately following graduation from U.P. in 1929, Angela Manalang-Gloria became literary editor of *The Herald Mid-Week Magazine*. After the war, Trinidad Tarrosa-Subido and her husband put out a daily, *The Manila Post*. Later she became the editor of *Kislap-Graphic's* women's supplement and after that, editor of *Herald Mid-Week Magazine*.

Greenhouses as they may have been, campus publications nevertheless made possible the flowering of poetic talent that would otherwise have remained dormant.

Thirdly, she wrote on a subject indicative of her emerging sense of self as a modern Filipina.

Hindsight enables us to recognize that "our first verses in English in 1905 . . . [foreshadowed] the *chief matter* of our poetry until the mid-fifties—the love between man and woman, than which no subject is greater (Rafael Dimayuga, "Forget Me Not," June 1905); love of country, often enkindled by encounter with a foreign culture (Maria G. Romero, "Our Reasons in Study," June 1905); and, as though in anticipation of our first great literary controversy in 1940, the plight of the poor (Ponciano Reyes, "The Flood," April 1905)."¹¹

The same hindsight also makes us realize the significance of Romero's choice of subject for her poem. The only woman of the three student poets, she may well have been expected to contribute (what else?) a love poem. But contrary to that expectation, she chose instead a poem expressive of nationalist sentiment. Removed from the confined space of her island home, Romero found herself on a vast continent. Her experiences in that new space must have stretched the limits of her mind as well, giving it a breadth and depth it did not have before. Her choice of subject might be taken as indicative of a broadening of the modern Filipina's consciousness. Note too her use of the first person plural, testifying to her new sense of self as a member of a national community.

The point here is that from the start Filipino women poets writing in English, being modern Filipinas, felt free to use poetry in exploring the larger world outside. Not bound to an existing literary tradition for women, they did not feel themselves bound to restrict their writing to love poems and other conventional subjects of women's poetry.

11. Abad and Manlapaz, *Man of Earth*, p. 20.

This is not to deny a fact that the *Index* makes plain: that love was the favorite theme of women poets. But for that matter, it was also the favorite theme of the males. Campus poets of both sexes were particularly inclined to love poetry, being young and therefore falling in and out of love fairly frequently.

The popular impression even then was that women wrote on little else besides love. But figures culled from the *Index* say otherwise. A random sample of poems indicates that only approximately 37 percent of the poems are on love. The same sample also indicates that 16 percent were on nature and 12 percent on religious devotion.¹²

What appears as a common denominator among these themes is a preoccupation with, an emphasis on what is private rather than public. This preoccupation with the personal has often been interpreted negatively, as feminine apathy towards societal concerns. Especially liable to this misinterpretation are male critics who regard only social issues as "important" and consequently tend to dismiss all else as "trivial." This is not the place to argue against this peculiarly male bias, but it is important to point it out as symptomatic of a patriarchal system insistent on splitting life into the public and the private spheres, confining women only to the latter.

Fourthly, and most significant of all, she chose to write her poem in English.

The choice of medium has wide ranging implications beyond the fact that, as a Filipina studying in the United States and writing for *The Filipino Students Magazine*, Romero chose to write in English. For both the pensionados in the United States and students studying in local universities, English was the official medium of instruction. More than that, they regarded English as the language of both their present and future as new members of the American Commonwealth. Evidence of this regard is found in a variety of documents, specifically university publications. The first issue of *The Filipino Students Magazine* was dedicated to Theodore Roosevelt, "President of our United States." The inaugural issue of *The College Folio*, dated October 1910, carried an editorial stating its aim "to act as pioneers in . . . the adoption of the English language as the official tongue of the islands (because of the) diversity of dialects and the imperfection of all of them . . . unless we Filipinos mean to be cut off from the world

12. Melinda Dy, "Poetry in English by Filipino Women Poets, 1905-1950: A Descriptive Study" (M.A. Thesis, Ateneo de Manila University, 1990), p. 53.

of thought and action." In 1927, the students who were later to form the U.P. Writers' Club issued a manifesto claiming themselves "impelled by a noble aim to elevate to the highest pedestal of possible perfection the ENGLISH language in the Islands. . . ."

We who read these declarations from the perspective of post-colonialism, may be appalled by these students' political naivete but we need to concede it as fact. It is obvious from these declarations that the Filipinos of that period, far from perceiving English as "the oppressors' language," regarded English as an instrument of national liberation.

Women had a special reason for viewing English as an instrument of personal liberation as well. Unlike the young women of Malolos who had to assert their right to formal education, Filipino women of this period were welcomed into the universities. Sitting side by side with their male classmates, they listened to their American professors teach them the rudiments of the English language. Unlike their previous experience with Spanish, they were right there alongside the males learning the same language. Even more significantly, they were learning a language totally foreign to both sexes. This time around, the males did not enjoy a headstart. This put females and males on the same starting line, so to speak. In this way, English served as an equalizing factor, allowing women equal opportunity of expression.

To summarize, Maria Romero and her daughters, the first two generations of Filipino women poets in English, shared many things in common. Chief of these were the fact that they were university-educated women belonging to the middle and upper classes of Filipino society; they published their poems initially and largely in campus publications; they wrote on a variety of subjects other than love, testifying to the broadening consciousness of the modern Filipina; and they wrote their poetry in the English language.

Since the history of Filipino poetry in English is not even a hundred years old, it is not all that difficult to dig up and unearth its records. General information about these early women poets such as that provided above is already available. Continuing work will in time yield more details that may modify these generalizations. But it is not necessary to wait for the last artifact to be unearthed, labelled and put on exhibit before formulating a hypothesis on the nature of the relationship between the early generations of Filipino women poets and our own of today, between our mothers and our selves. But before that can be done, it is necessary to understand the relationship between our mothers and their own mothers.

MARIA AND HER MOTHERS

This article proposes two models of literary genealogy: that of Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence" and the other, that of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's "anxiety of authorship." The intention here is to inquire whether and to what extent either of these widely influential Western models applies to the case of Filipino women's poetry in English. The ultimate objective of such an inquiry is to explain the inter-generational relationship between past and present Filipino women poets in English.

In their groundbreaking work, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar appropriate Harold Bloom's paradigm of literary genealogy and use it to design their own feminist model.¹³ Earlier Bloom had postulated in a controversial work that the dynamics of literary history arise from the author's "anxiety of influence."¹⁴ According to this Freudian interpretation, every poet necessarily engages in an Oedipal struggle with his literary father, seeking to kill him by a "revisionary process" of deliberate misreadings. Only through such parricide could he hope to survive as a poet in his own right.

Gilbert and Gubar point out that Bloom's male-oriented theory cannot apply to a woman poet for the simple reason that "[her] precursors . . . are almost exclusively male, and therefore significantly different from her."¹⁵ Instead, according to Gilbert and Gubar, a woman poet experiences an "anxiety of authorship," which they define as "a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a 'precursor' the act of writing will isolate or destroy her."¹⁶

Frequently, to overcome this fear, the woman poet actively seeks "a female precursor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied and killed, proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible."¹⁷ In Victorian England, Elizabeth Barrett Browning had lamented, "England has had many learned women . . . and yet where are the poetesses? . . . I look everywhere for grandmother and see none."¹⁸ Across the Atlantic, Emily Dickin-

13. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

14. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

15. Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 49.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*

18. *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett-Browning*, 1: 230-32. Quoted in Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 539.

son echoed the same cry of bereavement. Thus a fundamental phase in Anglo-American feminist scholarship has had to be the search for and rediscovery of literary mothers.

Filipino feminist scholars are spared much of that spadework, the literary mothers of Filipino women poets having already been identified. What presently needs formulation is a theory of literary genealogy to explain the relationship between Maria Romero and her daughters on the one hand and on the other, the Anglo-American women poets they claimed as their literary mothers.

THE PATRIARCHAL MODEL:
BLOOM'S "ANXIETY OF INFLUENCE"

Does Bloom's theory apply to Filipino poets in English, whether male or female? Theoretically neither sex can be said to have suffered any "anxiety of influence" for the simple reason that, before them, no Filipinos had ever written poetry in English. In other words, they had no "precursors" to be influenced by. Their historical significance lies precisely in this fact: it was they themselves who were establishing the tradition of Filipino poetry in English, free to set the subject matter, style, standard of that tradition.

At the same time, they could not actually exercise this freedom because, by virtue of their choice of the English language as the medium of their poetry, they were in effect submitting themselves to the patriarchal lineage of English poetry, claiming descent from the long line of Great English Poets such as Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Eliot.

Note however that unlike British and American poets who were the legitimate heirs of these Great English Poets, Filipinos were not. To extend the familial analogy somewhat, the Filipino poets were merely "adopted" children.

Their claim to kinship rested primarily on their use of the English language and was reenforced by their imitation of English poetry. This is evident from the mere titles of many of their poems, e.g., Horacio de la Costa's "On Reading Keats" (1933); Virgilio Floresca's "Tiger, Tiger" (1937); Alfredo Litiaco's "To a Herrickrose Swain" (1940); Guillermo Castillo's "I Bring Thee Great Wealth, Georgianna" (1941); Nick Joaquin's "O Death Be Proud" (1947); Maximo Ramos' "To Virgins Taking an Examination" (1948). This imitation extended beyond titles and occasional allusions to full-length texts. There is Zulueta da Costa's long prize-winning poem "Like the Molave" (1940), written under the heavy influence of Walt Whitman. Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar" was the obvious model for several

local poems, among them Dominador Ilio's "Where Meet the Sky and Sea" (1934), Jose La Villa Terra's "Twilight and Ebbing Tide" (1935), Cornelio Faigao's "Night in a Small Town" (1935), and best known of all, Angela Manalang-Gloria's "But the Western Stars" (1928).

Most Filipino poets were content to affirm their kinship to the Great English Poets by imitation of their poetry but not a few explicitly identified with them. In a poem published in 1910, Juan F. Salazar wrote

I cannot write with Shakespeare's pen.
 But I can love with Shakespeare's heart.
 I love his skill and craft of man,
 The master of the poet's art.
 I do not care for fame, as he
 Enthroned, did feel himself a god,
 The depths he passed are dark to me,
 But I will grope the ways he trod.

Though he confesses his inability to write poetry as Shakespeare did, he nevertheless resolves to follow in his father's footsteps ("But I will grope the ways he trod.").

As Salazar identified himself with Shakespeare, so did Toribia Maño identify herself with Shelley:

If I could speak with Shelley's breath
 the skylark's song. . . .

 I would not curse a storm or squall,
 For Shelley would have loved them all.

In this case, the identification is not just with Shelley-as-poet but with Shelley-as-person ("For Shelley would have *loved* them all.")

In both examples, there is frustration over their acknowledged inadequacy relative to these Great English Poets. But apropos Bloom's theory of the "anxiety of influence," it is interesting to note the difference between the way the two sexes express that frustration. In the case of the male poet, the confession is categorical ("I *cannot* write with Shakespeare's pen"), but in the case of the female poet, it is oblique ("If I could speak with Shelley's *breath* . . ."). Is she perhaps dimly aware that, being a female, her identification with Shelley can never be except by hypothesis?

THE FEMINIST MODEL: GILBERT AND
 GUBAR'S "ANXIETY OF AUTHORSHIP"

In any case, Gilbert and Gubar argue that the female poet, aware that the Great English Poets are "almost exclusively male, and there-

fore significantly different from her," experiences an anxiety distinct from that afflicting the male poet. She suffers not "anxiety of influence," but "anxiety of authorship," diagnosed as "a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a 'precursor' the act of writing will isolate or destroy her."

Did the Filipino women poets of the early period suffer from this anxiety? The answer is "no" on two counts:¹⁹ First, the historical circumstances were such that these Filipino women were themselves establishing the tradition of poetry in English. Secondly, on the basis of their use of English as the medium of their poetry, these Filipino women poets claimed as their literary mothers British and American women poets. Writing at the time that they did, in the opening decades of the century, they were already drawing inspiration from women poets such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emily Dickinson, Amy Lowell, Elinor Wylie, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Sara Teasdale. Apparently feeling an affinity with these modern women, some Filipino women poets modelled some of their poems after theirs.²⁰ This sense of kinship with these Anglo-American female poets spared them from the "anxiety of authorship" suffered by earlier women poets who had not yet become aware of the female tradition in English poetry.

That the case of Filipino women poets does not fit the patriarchal model of Bloom comes as no surprise because the differentiating issue of gender is clearly marked. What is puzzling is why it does not fit the feminist model either. The problematics of the case can be summarized in two related points.

First, the identification by Filipino women poets with their Anglo-American literary mothers was illusory, based on a denial of basic differences between them in terms of race, culture and class. Having adopted English as the medium of their poetry, Filipino women poets assumed that they were the daughters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emily Dickinson, et al. This assumption was, to a great extent, groundless. Other than gender and language, what could brown-skinned Asian women claim in common with British and American women?

19. A "third" count is that in all probability the overwhelming majority of poets of this early period suffered no anxiety of any kind over the matter of "literary genealogy," they belonging to what today may be termed a more "innocent" age. For the present generation of Filipino women poets, however, the search for literary mothers is a real and pressing concern.

20. Angela Manalang-Gloria, for example, was praised by a critic as the local counterpart of Sara Teasdale. Later, Abelardo and Trinidad Tarrosa-Subido were referred to as the Brownings of the Philippines.

But why is it that Filipino women appeared blind to these basic differences of race and culture and class between their literary mothers and themselves? In much the way that adopted children seek acceptance from their foster parents by trying to be as like them as possible ("Like mother, like daughter"), Filipino women poets may have believed that the only way to assert kinship with these foreign literary mothers was to deny these differences or at least dismiss them as insignificant. This may explain why so much of early Filipino poetry in English sounded like English poetry or, to be more candid, like close imitations of a sometimes embarrassing kind. But for how long could Filipino women delude themselves? If anything, denial of these differences—whether conscious or not—could only breed anxiety.

It must be kept in mind that the Gilbert and Gubar feminist model is premised on identification by female poets with precursors of the same sex, the rationale being that the female poet recognizes in the female precursor someone who is (unlike the male poet) "significantly" like her. The theory proceeds from this premise that since the female poet identifies with this female precursor, she gains confidence from the latter's example that she too may aspire to authorship within a patriarchal society. ("If she could do it, I can do it too").

The issue operative in the opposition between the patriarchal and the feminist models is single, that of gender. However, in the inter-generational politics between Filipino women poets in English and their Anglo-American "mothers," the issues are multiple: race, culture and to a degree, class. Together these issues constitute an undeniably "significant" difference that precludes any real identification between the two groups. And where that identification is merely illusory, relief from the "anxiety of authorship" can only be partial, superficial and temporary.

The second problematic is that Filipino women poets' view of English as an instrument of personal liberation was illusory, since it ultimately served as an instrument of their colonization. Insofar as Filipino women poets had equal access (or at least, equal opportunity at access) to the learning of English as the new medium for the creation of a new tradition in Filipino poetry, they could view English as an instrument of personal liberation. What their political naivete prevented them from realizing, however, was that English was also serving as an instrument of their colonization. At the same time that the use of English enabled them to appropriate Anglo-American literature as the site for their own poetry, it also alienated them from the centuries-old tradition of vernacular literature.

Adopted children, feeling themselves constrained to suppress their alienness, often reject their natural parents or at least distance themselves from them. In a similar way, Filipino poets in English often refused to acknowledge vernacular writings as "literature," since their concept of literature was confined solely to that embodied in Anglo-American writings.

In poststructuralist terms, the English language had so constituted Filipino poets as *subjects* that they were unable to recognize themselves as *subject* to this cultural colonization.²¹ The irony of course is that the more completely they were colonized as subjects, the more blind they were to the fact of their subjection—and the less their anxiety over their alienation from their national heritage.

Another reason why Filipino women poets on the whole seemed almost blissfully ignorant about their cultural alienation was that the majority of them published no more than two or three poems each. But there may have been a few poets who began to feel uneasy about the appropriateness and even effectiveness of English as a medium for Filipino poetry. Certainly one such poet was Trinidad Tarrosa-Subido, whose deepening sense of alienation bred an anxiety expressed in a poem aptly titled "Muted Cry."²²

They took away the language of my blood,
 giving me one "more widely understood."
 More widely understood! Now Lips can never
 Never with the Soul-of-Me commune:
 Moments there are I strain, but futile ever,
 To flute my feelings through some native Tune. . . .
 Alas, how can I interpret my Mood?
 They took away the language of my blood.
 If I could speak the language of my blood

21. For a lucid exposition on subject positions, see Chris Weedon, "Language and Subjectivity" in *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), pp. 74–106.

22. Trinidad Tarrosa Subido's first language was in fact English, having been born in Shanghai and brought to the Philippines only when she was about five or six. While working at the Institute of National Language in the late 1930s, she became interested in Tagalog language and literature. Encouraged by A. C. Fabian of *Liwayway*, she began writing in Tagalog. She soon developed a facility in the use of Tagalog and in 1944 translated Balagtas' *Florante at Laura* into English. In a recent interview, she claims that she never gained sufficient self-confidence to ever attempt writing poetry in Tagalog. It is not insignificant that Tarrosa Subido later authored *The Feminist Movement in the Philippines* (1955). "Muted Cry," recalls Tarrosa-Subido in a 1989 interview, was first published sometime in the late 1930s. It was later included by John Siler in his manuscript, *Filipinas: An Anthology of Philippine Verse in English*, 1945 and 1960.

My voice would whirl up through resistless space
 Swiftly . . . sure . . . flight no one can retrace,
 And flung against the skyey breast of God,
 Its scattered words, charged with a passion rare,
 With treble glow would dim the stars now there.

II

Shakespeare, Dante, Sappho, and the rest,
 They who are now as poets deified,
 Never their language being them denied,
 Their moods could be felicitous expressed-
 Crimson of joy, purple of grief,
 Grey of unrest, white of relief,-
 Their dreams so colored, living forms they seem,
 The real lent enchantment like some faery-dream.
 If I could speak the language of my blood,
 My feet would trace the path their feet have trod,
 And stake me a niche within their lot of Fame,
 Of jade-and-gold, and carve me there a name.
 Ah, could I speak the language of my blood,
 I, too, would free the poetry in me.
 And this now apathetic world would be
 Awakened, startled at the silver flood
 Of Song, my soul aptly expressing,
 Each flood-note listeners impressing
 More as the water-drop into a pearl congealed
 Than as a ripple on the ocean's breast revealed.

III

These words I speak are out of pitch with ME!
 That other Voice? . . . Cease longing to be free!
 How canst thou speak who hast affinity
 Only with promised-but-unflowered days,
 Only with ill-conceived eternity,
 Being, as they, mere space lost unto Space?
 Forever shalt thou cry, a muted god:
 "Could I but speak the language of my blood!"

The poem is a *cri de coeur* expressive of the deep-seated anxiety that even now afflicts the present younger generation of Filipino women poets writing in English.²³

23. The mini-survey of contemporary women poets was drawn up by Marjorie Evasco who generously shared with me her own as well as her colleagues' response to literary genealogy.

Some of the Filipino women poets, convinced that only the language of their blood can free the poetry in them, attempt to escape altogether from this anxiety by writing poetry only in the vernacular, (even when they write other literary forms in English). Foremost among these poets are: Elynia Ruth Mabanglo, Lilia Quindoza-Santiago, Priscilla Supnet, Chit Balmaceda-Gutierrez, and Augusta de Almeida. These women, who used to write in English, have recently begun to write poetry solely in Filipino; Mabanglo, however, has consistently written her poetry only in the vernacular.

Others, unwilling to surrender their claim to what they regard as their rich bicultural heritage, attempt to contain that anxiety by writing poetry in both the vernacular and English. Poets like Marra Lanot, Rosalinda V. Pineda, Aida F. Santos, Benilda Santos and Joy Barrios write in both Filipino and English. Ester Bandillo and Ruby Enario write in Cebuano Visayan and English, while Merlinda Bobis uses Bikol, Filipino and English.

Still others continue to write in English, managing somehow to live with the anxiety and even drawing from it a tension that charges their creative powers. These are Grace Monte de Ramos (Negros Oriental), Marjorie Evasco and Lina Sagaral Reyes (Bohol), Fatima Lim (Manila), Lilia Lopez-Chua (Davao), Luisa Aguilar-Cariño (Baguio), Merlie Alunan-Wenceslao (Negros Oriental), Dinah Roma (Samar), Fe Remotigue (Surigao), and Christine Ortega (Negros Oriental), among others. An interesting development in the poetry of this last group is the intertextual integration of the vernacular and English, without the impulse or need to translate the vernacular for an audience that may read only in English. It is this group whose poetry may be said to be written not *in* English but *from* English.

The poet discovers his own distinctive subject in a special clearing of his own thought and feeling within some given natural language, be it English or Tagalog . . . at first, Filipino poetry was in English, it merely adopted that 'imperial tongue' . . . and its practice and cultural tradition. . . . But later, with Villa, Daguio, Nick Joaquin and Bienvenido Santos, poetry created its own special use of English under the subtle and irremovable [sic] pressure of the Filipino scene and sensibility.²⁴

To recapitulate, Maria's relationship with her Anglo-American literary mothers was superficial and therefore her relief from the anxiety of authorship was temporary. But as Maria's political con-

24. Abad and Manlapaz, *Man of Earth*, p. 2. For an extended discussion of this language issue, read the introductory essay prefacing the anthology.

sciousness steadily awakened her to the real nature of that relationship—a relationship imposed upon them both by a political alliance between two governments, one the colonizer and the other the colonized—she suffered from another kind of anxiety. The anxiety is not that described by either Bloom's patriarchal model or Gilbert and Gubar's feminist model. Instead it is an anxiety rooted in the fear that by writing in English, she is isolating herself from the native tradition, muting the language of her blood which alone can free the poetry in her.

This anxiety is a symptom of alienation that is being recorded over and over again by feminists studying the literatures of Third World countries which have been similarly colonized by an 'imperial tongue,' whether English or French or Spanish. This anxiety has been without a name, and all the more terrifying because it has not. But today it can be identified: an anxiety born of *alien-nation*. Giving this anxiety a name may prove, as of old, a means of gaining power over it, of taming that terror, and ultimately coming to terms with it by whichever way one chooses.