

philippine studies

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

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Philippine Studies vol. 41, no. 4 (1993): 523–528

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Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

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Toril Moi ends her account of feminist theory:

[We] can draw one important conclusion. There is no specific feminist literary criticism if by this one understands some sort of method or approach which should be inherently and exclusively feminist. There is no method or theoretical approach used in feminist criticism which is not also used or usable by non-feminist critics . . . (1986, 197-98).

What gives feminist criticism its specificity, she goes on to say, is "politics, the opposition to patriarchy and sexism in all its forms."

Given the limitations of time, the present note will confine itself to demonstrating one method based on one model proposed by one feminist critic belonging to one particular school of feminist literary theory.

Elaine Showalter, of the Anglo-American school, believes that "the appropriate task for feminist criticism . . . is to concentrate on women's access to language," for, as she maintains, "the problem is not that language is insufficient to express women's consciousness but that women have been denied the full resources of language and have [therefore] been forced into silence, euphemism, or circumlocution" (Showalter 1985, 255).

Silence, euphemism, circumlocution. These are the strategies of women who belong to what anthropologists Shirley and Edwin Ardener refer to as a "muted culture." As Showalter explains, "both muted and dominant groups generate beliefs and ordering ideas of social reality at the unconscious level, but it is the dominant groups who control the forms or structures in which consciousness can be articulated" (Showalter 1985, 262). Put plainly, in a male-dominant

This note was originally a paper read at the P.E.N. Annual Conference, Manila, 19 June 1989.

society, women are allowed to publicly express themselves in writing only when and how men allow them to.

"Dead Stars"

Given these theoretical assumptions, what then would be a feminist reading of Paz Marquez-Benitez's short story "Dead Stars"? (Marquez-Benitez [1975, 1-19]. All quotations from the story are taken from this text, the page indicated within parentheses immediately following the quote.)

The story is familiar to many of us: A man falls in love with a woman who is vacationing with the family next door. Unable or unwilling to break a nearly four-year engagement with another woman, he enters into a loveless yet "not unhappy" (p. 16) marriage. However, through the eight years of the marriage, he is unable to forget the other woman. When his work necessitates a visit to the lake town where the woman now lives with her parents, he drops in on her unexpectedly. He finds her not much changed but senses that something—he doesn't know what—had gone from their relationship. By the end of the brief visit, he realizes ruefully that all those years, "he had been seeing the light of dead stars. . . ." (p. 19).

So much for plot, so much for theme. For our purposes, however, we need to exercise the "hermeneutics of suspicion" and hypothesize a significance beyond the story itself. As we are engaged in feminist criticism, whose specificity we have already established lies in sexual politics, we need to interpret the sexual codes operative in the story.

What has the story "Dead Stars" to posit regarding the relationship of the two sexes? Let's look at the antagonists, as it were, in this battle of the sexes.

On the one hand is Alfredo Salazar, a young lawyer with the appearance of a poet who has "dreamer's eyes" (p. 3) and "[moves] with an indolent ease that verged on grace" (p. 3). His blood being "cool and thin" (p. 3), he is, by his own admission, unhurried, "calm and placid" (p. 8). Though this "placidity of temperament" (p. 7) is temporarily disturbed by the turbulence of courtship, he characteristically allows circumstances rather than choice to decide his personal fate.

On the other hand there is Julia Salas, who possesses "abounding vitality" (p. 5) that manifests itself in "[smiles of] evident delight"

(p. 4) and "[flushes of] frank pleasure" (p. 7), but whose "sunny" disposition is tempered by a "piquant perverseness which is sauce to charm" (p. 8). Preferring candor to coyness, she confronts Alfredo with the fact of his approaching wedding, an event he had not the honesty to inform her about; when he attempts to justify his action or rather inaction by rhetorically asking whether she had ever had to choose between something she wanted to do and something she had to do, she replies with an emphatic "No" (p. 13).

The contrast between the two personalities is dramatized in their respective responses to the crisis created by the love triangle. When Julia realizes that Alfredo will do nothing to act upon the love he had declared for her, she turns, walks away and, as we learn later, returns home to her parents in the province. In short, she simply gets on with her life, without him.

Not so with Alfredo, who attempts to escape the weariness of marriage with Esperanza by obstinately clinging for eight years to the dream of a might-have-been love affair with Julia.

Her response is, in a word, realistic; his, romantic.

Now this is clearly a reversal of the stereotyped roles assigned to the two sexes by a patriarchal society, which persists in characterizing the male as rational and pragmatic, the female as emotional and romantic. A feminist reading of the story views this reversal as an implicit protest against this form of sexism, as if to say: "Look here. Women are not the weak sex they are often made out to be. They are not genetically programmed to moon and spoon over a lover, or whine and pine away when that lover leaves. Nor for that matter are men genetically programmed to be strong, silent persons who are always clear headed when it comes to affairs of the heart. Look at Julia. Look at Alfredo."

Note, however, that this protest against sexual stereotyping is not articulated by categorical statement but by circumlocution. Let us trace the way Paz Marquez-Benitez leads the reader to a final indictment of Alfredo as the partner who is romantic to the point of self-delusion.

Her principal strategy lies in her choice of point of view. First, she chooses not to tell the story from Julia's point of view because then any direct, explicit criticism of Alfredo's behavior, coming as it would from a jilted lover, would appear to the reader as necessarily biased. Instead, she has the "incontrovertible evidence" (p. 3) supporting Alfredo's passivity come from the testimony of those closest to him: it is his father who suggests his "placidity of tem-

perament—or of affection" (p. 3); it is his sister who observes his "perfect physical repose—almost indolence" (p. 3); it is his friends who diagnose his blood as "cool and thin" (p. 3).

Finally, Paz Marquez-Benitez chooses to tell the story primarily from Alfredo's point of view, thus giving the reader immediate access to his intimate thoughts and feelings. At the same time, however, she is careful to allow the reader to draw inferences regarding the appropriateness of these thoughts and feelings.

Take for example Alfredo's courtship of Esperanza. He reacts not so much with elation over the discovery of a loved person but with anxiety over the possible loss of the experience ("Hurry, hurry; or you will miss it." [p. 2]) and its possible deceptiveness ("Was he being cheated by life?" [p. 2]). It is revealing that in his recollection of the initially intense phase of courtship—a recollection spanning three paragraphs—he makes no direct mention of Esperanza, except for an elliptical reference to her by the generic term "maid" (p. 2). This disclosure of Alfredo's obsession with love rather than the loved one prepares the reader early on for the later revelation of Alfredo as someone who blinds himself to the realities of marriage, preferring instead to fix his eyes on distant stars. After his fateful meeting with Julia eight years later, however, it appears that Alfredo at last awakens from his dream and finally opens his eyes to the truth that "he had been seeing the light of dead stars, long extinguished, yet seemingly in their appointed places in the heavens" (p. 19).

Had Paz Marquez-Benitez ended the story at this point, then Alfredo might yet be viewed as redeemed because of this insight into himself. But this is not in fact the way she ends the story. She adds a single sentence: "An immense sadness as of loss invaded his spirit, a vast homesickness for some immutable refuge of the heart far away where faded gardens bloom again and where live on in unchanging freshness, the dear, dead lovers of vanished youth" (p. 19). This simple sentence, with its ironic twist of self-revelation, renders beyond any reasonable doubt a final verdict on Alfredo Salazar as a man doomed by his own fatal romanticism.

At this point we may concede that the story does dramatize a reversal of the stereotyped sexual roles, but we might well ask: how do we know that Paz Marquez-Benitez intended the story to be read as a protest against the patriarchal system of her day? The answer of course is that we don't and that even if we did, it wouldn't matter because authorial intention is not what makes a text feminist. But

if not the author's intention, then what, we ask, generates the feminist meaning of a text? For one, the reader's response—which is why we speak of a *feminist reading*. After all, as Annette Kolodny claims,

All the feminist is asserting . . . is her own equivalent right to liberate new (and perhaps different) significances from [texts]; and at the same time, her right to choose which features of a text she takes as relevant because she is, after all, asking new and different questions of it" (Kolodny 1985, 160).

Surely a feminist reading of "Dead Stars" such as presented in this note can only add to the richness of significance found in this already highly regarded work in the canon of Philippine literature in English.

A Postscript

But does the story really reverse the stereotyped roles prescribed for the sexes by a patriarchal society? If Paz Marquez-Benitez had this in mind, then she might be said to have gone about it only half-heartedly. That is to say, her description of Alfredo betrays, in her own words, "little of exuberant masculinity" and in fact, suggests a degree of effeminacy. Alfredo is described as having a dreamer's eyes, a tall and slender form, graceful movements. More telling, his sister is said to regard him with the good-natured contempt of an attractive woman for a brother who is "apathetic to feminine charms" (p. 2).

In other words, the characterization of Alfredo raises a question of his masculinity, exuberant or otherwise. If the reader perceives Alfredo as "*may pagkabakla*," then the reversal of sexual stereotype roles becomes a moot point. Put flippantly, for want of a truly masculine hero, a feminist reading is lost.

A Postscript To A Postscript

Or is the preceding postscript, in its insistence on defining what is "truly masculine," precisely the kind of sexual stereotyping that "Dead Stars" and other feminist texts ultimately subvert?

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