

Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific  
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Roderick G. Galam

The Promise of the Nation:  
Gender, History and Nationalism in Contemporary Ilokano Literature

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reviewed by Shirlita Espinosa

Reviewing Roderick Galam's *The Promise of the Nation*, in which all primary sources are written in Ilocano, a language used in northern Philippines, means that I have to rely solely on his translations of the texts. This limitation of me as the critic is more pronounced in scholarly exchanges in an international arena, when one considers that we both come from the same country. I emphasise this point precisely because it resonates with the theme of his book—the power of the nation-state to subsume sections, forces, languages, groupings and peoples under it and (unsuccessfully) flatten their differences. As a Manila-born Tagalog woman, whose proximity to the sources of governmentality and claim to Filipino language, both as the imperial lingua franca and as my native language, put me in a position to evaluate my own subjectivity as a (woman) 'subject' of the nation-state that draws its very constitution from the marginalisation and nationalisation of the Ilocano as an ethnic Other.

*The Promise of the Nation* is an analysis of five serialised novels and some poems (plus two short stories) published in *Bannawag*, a vernacular magazine that targeted Ilocano readership, from 1985 to 1998. Galam's expert textual analysis weaves in and out of the narratives. He uses theories on gender, nationalism, narratology and postcolonialism to show how these five novels imagine and write the grand narrative of nationalism and nationalist ideology at the expense of a politicised and gendered rendition that fairly assesses women's participation in nation-building. This book is a generous contribution to literary criticism of 'regional' literature in the Philippines—regional literature that has been unfairly relegated next to literature written in Filipino, and even more so, to literature written in English (by Manila-based culturati and literary barkada). Because critical works are hardly given attention by publishing establishments in Manila—the predilection to creative non-fiction writing is obvious for its market logic—Galam's scholarship is indeed a refreshing read that plumbs the many possibilities that a well-written criticism can bring to literature. Further to this, Galam's application of feminist theories to read Ilocano literature is a neat suturing of the relationship of the national and statist to the private and the feminised. While the connections made are neat, he also breaks these up to encourage deeper theorisings that do not settle for authoritative readings that tie down the positioning of women to historiographical and nationalist writings.

The textual and thematic analyses of the novels are meticulously done and at times become repetitive if not tedious to read.

Galam's project is to expose the flaws of nationalist feminism—the ideologically-dominant strain in the history of Philippine feminism—as subordinate to the nation-state's machismo, and to call for its reversion towards feminist nationalism where issues of gender are given primacy. The question 'Who's imagining community?' is a witty addendum to the discourse started by Benedict Anderson[1] and Partha Chatterjee[2] that Galam wants his readers to pay attention to: what is the gender of the imagined and the one imagining. In the act of juggling theoretical formulations and close reading, the author draws heavily from Caroline Hau[3] and Neferti Tadiar,[4] two American-educated Filipino scholars whose scholarship has influenced a younger generation of academics in the Philippines. This intellectual indebtedness—mostly expressed as endnotes—is a virtue indeed that characterises good scholars. This, however, also points to the work's unoriginal theoretical sleight of hand as his chapters unequivocally remind me of Hau's *Necessary Fictions*. [5] For instance, Galam's manoeuvring in critiquing the sexist novel of Reynaldo Duque, appropriates Hau's 'Unfinishing Revolution' chapter; the analysis of Clesencio Rambaud's novel as 'allegorical narration' takes after Hau's 'Authorizing the Personal and the Political'; and his uses of 'excess', the overriding theme of Hau's work, remains unacknowledged (see, for example, pp. 129, 162 and 258). Despite the inevitable result that Galam's work would have looked like a wholesale borrowing from others, it would have been tactful to cite the borrowings, big or small. The influence of Tadiar, moreover, comes in handy on Galam's gender reformulations that touch on the feminisation of labour through migration. The book's framework on nationalism and gender sits rather comfortably in the middle of the combined scholarships of Hau on nationalism and Tadiar on gender. The liberal use of borrowing, was shown in the way Galam lifts from Anne McClintock[6] in his discussion on Duque; from Sylvia Walby[7] in his analysis of Jose Bragado's chapter, and he draws on Cynthia Enloe[8] to analyse Rambaud's novel. Furthermore, he uses the work of Etienne Balibar[9] in his exposition of the *alsa masa* chapter. The neatly-segregated discussions of these big names and the chunky quotes in each of the chapters (we do not see these ideas 'converse' in one chapter alone), gives the book a kind of stiffness that characterises many thesis-to-book productions.

Now, what is curiously apparent in *The Promise of the Nation* is its attempt to exemplify what is feminist nationalism as literature. The book punctuates its project of solid critiquing of five nationalist-patriarchal novels by five male authors with the poetry of a woman writer. The first novel analysed is an easy exercise for Galam as Juan Hidalgo's work lends itself to an unchallenging deconstruction of his literary characters and what they embody in the grand narrative of the nation's history. The next three—Duque's *Angkel Sam*, Bragado's *Land's Flame* and Rambaud's *The Seeds of Lighting*—have more complex narratives that necessitate greater nuanced interpretation and theorising, all of which touch on the themes of the nation-state, law and militarisation, class struggle, ethnicity, to mention a few. Before Galam's coup de grace is Bernardino Alzate's attempt at nationalist historiography,[10] which is littered with

anachronisms as claimed by Galam. This lacklustre novel is treated by Galam with undeserved abandon; not only was it much shorter than others, his critique also reads as if it is incomplete. Despite Alzate's misgivings for his lack of talent or simply carelessness, he raised one area of scrutiny that is eclipsed in all others, that of the Chinese in the Philippines. Given Galam's generous use of Hau, I expected Galam to thoroughly dig in on the Chinese (woman) question. Not only is Hau known for 'excess and contamination' in Philippine literature, she also wrote extensively on the Chinese as historical subject. Although Galam pointed out how the character Mei Ling is a sexualised Other whose 'psychosexual' role in nation-building is both expected and undermined, he stopped from venturing further into the delicate figure of the Chinese as the racial Other from which 'Filipinoness' as identity is built, in literature, films, economic discourse, kidnappings, in geography and urban landscape, amongst others. This lull at the expense of the Chinese issue is somehow to gear up for the more intense exposition of Hermilinda Lingbaon-Bulong's poetics.

Galam is all praise for the sole female author in his book. He even made a Venn diagram to summarise the epistemological grounding of the poet's literary practice where Loob (Inside) and Labas (Outside) and the overlap of this—an in-betweenness that constitutes the marginalised and dislocated—are neatly put into place. What Galam would otherwise unforgivingly criticise as essentialisms in male authors, are allowed to pass unscrutinised. It is not hard to imagine that Lingbaon-Bulong gets concessions because she is a woman-feminist. In fact, the attention given to her and her work is exemplified by the interview sought by the researcher not extended to male authors, as indicated in the endnotes. What captivated Galam to the poet is her ability to express what he borrows from Tadiar as 'being-with-others,' the openness to be in solidarity with other women-subjectivities (the rebel, the domestic servant, the japayukisan, the labourer), despite her privileged subject position as a poet who need not be anyone of those she writes about. Furthermore, Lingbaon-Bulong, a writer who is not trapped in the historiographic-patriarchal tendencies of male novelists, is able to discursivise the female migrant's oppression that has become the normalised fate of millions of Filipino women in their different degrees of enslavement in the neoliberal economic system. Galam's apotheosising of the feminist-poet is indisputable in his reading of Maria Filipina, the 'entertainer' in Japan, as resistance through heroism as she cries while gyrating in front of a crowd hoping that 'if [her] tears fail to cleanse/ [Her] soul that is slowly falling into a ravine/ May one or two hungry mouths/ Be saved' (p. 256). What I construe as Lingbaon-Bulong's poesis in these lines as redemptive, a return to the pieta as a symbolic theme—if not outrightly reactionary—are read as the woman's internalised sacrifice as potentially radical and transformative. The use of the feminist-poet whose unique, revolutionary voice amidst the cacophony of a masculine orchestra to illustrate which path is correct is perhaps acceptable—in the name of feminism—despite the double-standard it disavows.

Galam's first book, all in all, is a good read with a lot to offer to students and enthusiasts of Philippine literature in its nuanced readings. Discussions on Philippine socio-political history were provided by Galam to shed light on the critiques of the novels, such as Cory Aquino's militarisation of the countryside,

the ethnic struggle against transnational capital and the state apparatus, and the early formation and growth of feminism in the Philippines. All of these are helpful guides that made the foray into Ilocano literature an easier task. Commendable in its engagement of 'regional' literature, it also sets the pace for further research into a more detailed questioning, for instance, if literature written in Ilocano has significant divergences from those written in English such as Aurelio Agcaoili's *Dangadang*[11] whose endorsement of Galam's work as 'irreverent and relevant' will perhaps mark his place in the pantheon of Ilocano scholars. What does it mean when an ethno-linguistically-specific novel is decidedly written in English? More significantly, one area which Galam could have delved into—the discussion I awaited but did not come—is how Ilocano literature has been shaped by the region's known close affinity with the strongman Ferdinand Marcos. While he touched on Marcos' legitimation as dictator in the novel by Hidalgo, reading the anti-Aquino sentiments of the author and the transfiguration of a character into Marcos, there was hardly an attempt to find the links between Marcosian nation-state and Ilocano 'regional' literature, or to be more inclusive, given the critical nature of his scholarship. It would be interesting to see how the influence of the unburied president—if it ever did—opened up spaces and opportunities to certain 'regional' literatures but not to others. It would be interesting to find out what Galam and other Ilocano scholars think about the general marginality of 'regional' literature and the long shadow of nation-state formation that Marcos casts.

#### Endnotes

[1] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1991.

[2] Partha Chatterjee, 'Anderson's utopia,' in *Grounds of Comparison*, ed. Jonathan Culler and Pheng Cheah, New York & London: Routledge, 2003, pp. 161–70.

[3] Caroline Hau, *Necessary Fictions: Philippine Literature and the Nation, 1946-1980*, Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2000.

[4] Neferti Tadiar, *Fantasy Production: Sexual Economies and other Philippine Consequences for the New World Order*, Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University, 2004..

[5] Hau, *Necessary Fictions*.

[6] Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, New York: Routledge, 1995.

[7] Sylvia Walby, *Patriarchy at Work: Patriarchal and Capitalist Relations in Employment*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

[8] Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

[9] Etienne Balibar, 'The nation form: history and ideology,' in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, ed. Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, London: Verso, pp. 86–106.

[10] Bernardino Alzate, 'Alsa masa 1973,' in *Bannawag* (1 January–25 March 1996).

[11] Aurelio Agcaoili, *Dangadang*, Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2003.