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Circling the mountain: from naming to namelessness: towards writing and performing a contemporary epic poem

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**CIRCLING THE MOUNTAIN:
FROM NAMING TO NAMELESSNESS**

**Towards Writing and Performing
a Contemporary Epic Poem**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF CREATIVE ARTS

from

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by

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ABSTRACT

Circling The Mountain: From Naming To Namelessness is an annotated document which supports a 20,000 word epic poem (in two versions: English and Filipino) entitled *Kantada ng Babaing Mandirigma/Cantata of The Warrior Woman Daragang Magayon*. This explanatory text documents the process involved in writing and performing my epic, in which I recast a traditional myth about the active volcano Mt. Mayon in my region Bikol in the Philippines.

Through a discussion on feminism, language and the epic genre, this story of my creative process also explains the thesis of my epic poem: re-inventing the Self beyond rigidified and oppressive definitions of identity. This process of becoming is examined through three principal sections: naming, unnamng and namelessness.

Part One, NAMING, contextualises my creative process by establishing the inhibiting or oppressive names, labels, stereotypes and myths which define the Self (in terms of its gender or language), and which motivated me to write the epic.

Part Two, UNNAMING deals with my actual writing and performing of the epic. It illustrates how I break the signifiers established in Part One by re-visioning the Self beyond the definitions imposed by any constraining tradition or ideology.

Part Three, NAMELESSNESS, concludes the commentary on my creative process and assesses the politics of such a process and the epic. It asserts that oppressive signification may be avoided if the Self becomes 'nameless' in its ever-shifting identities.

Initially, this documentation protests against rigidified naming (in which the Self is defined as an absolute and fixed identity by its sexual or ideological Other). Such an issue is resolved with this proposition: 'Unname' the Self into namelessness by allowing the fluid, healthy, interactive and non-hostile play of its multiple Selves and Others.

To John

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PROLOGUE

I come from the foot of an active volcano. An old story says this mountain was once a woman. Having heard her voice will the earth, wind and water to fire, I figured she must have been a formidable being in her time.

It amazes me then that a myth of silence came to be woven about her. Rumours insist that, once, she was a beautiful silent creature. That her father and lovers wrote her tragic fate.

Such a story is out of character. Her more than eight thousand feet of wounded but solid core of fire tells me that this is not her story. It was imposed on her.

I am indignant. I decide to read this mountain's body with my own. Her body will tell me another story. Her own story. Each of her wounds is a mouth. She will tell me many stories.

I pretend my body is a word. Then, I stretch myself around her immense girth. This is the only way - if I encircle her, I will gather what she holds. I will know her own stories.

I write-span her circumference of power.

In the end, I find myself curled around her. Surprisingly, my soles are planted firmly on my head. I have stretched myself this far. I am a dancer executing a difficult figure. My soles on my head. I have come full-circle. I touch me - what I am, what I am not, and what I can be. I find my own story.

PART ONE

NAMING

SETTING OUT



*Know me now
in the years you dreamt,
the tossing of days
that have desired to rise,
in the hit-beat of each minute
that deepened gashes into grooves,
into wounds not mine alone.*

Reply of the Mountain
(Prologue, Kantada)

I shall take you around the mountain. I shall tell you the story of how I wrote my story - of how I circled the volcano, allegorically, while writing and eventually performing my epic poem *Kantada ng Babaing Mandirigma/Cantata of The Warrior Woman Daragang Magayon*. No, I did not scale the mountain. I only gathered its girth. In a span of five years (1987 - 1993), I gathered stories - both myth and reality - around and about the volcano and its foothills, in order to re-tell them into another story. Now, having concluded both trip and tale, I shall re-trace that act of gathering and re-telling in this documentation.

This explanatory text about my writing and performing of the epic is also structured as a journey around the mountain. It is a re-trekking, not only of my creative process, but also of the poem's thematic development. As such, this documentation assumes that its reader is familiar with my epic. Even so, in order to contextualise our journey, I reiterate my epic's basic argument, which is also asserted in this documentation: *To struggle against rigidified and oppressive definitions of Self, I must endlessly re-invent my identity in answer to the need of a particular moment; hence, I can become a multitude of beings, always uninhibited and self-empowering*. Such a process of becoming weaves through three principal stages: naming, unnamings and namelessness.

Naming is the act of defining identity, which, though necessary to acknowledge that which is named, can result in oppressive stereotyping. This rigidified possibility of naming is what my epic and this documentation rejects, through the process of unnamings: the process of breaking names which inhibit or disempower the human being. Unnamings is made possible by taking on a new identity that restores dignity and power. Continuous unnamings, in the hope of exploring different identities, leads to an ideal state of namelessness, in which the individual is not fixed under one self, but remains fluid and amorphous in his/her multiple and ever-shifting identities. This ideal state of namelessness is my objective for the female protagonist in the epic.

As a tale of 'unnamings' the Self into namelessness, my epic re-writes a traditional myth about Mount Mayon, an active volcano

in Bikol, the region where I was raised in southern Luzon Island of the Philippines. This folk story tells about *Daragang Magayon* ('Beautiful Maiden') who becomes an item of war booty traded by powerful men and whose grave later grows into an active volcano. My epic, on the other hand, re-names and transforms the disempowered Beautiful Maiden into the Warrior Woman, who rejects the determination of her fate by male authority and, instead, takes up arms in defense of her self and tribe. Moreover, in my refusal to subsequently 'fix' her within a single and combative stance, I also portray the Warrior Woman beyond the armed struggle and in the varied possibilities of human experience.

This feminist vision of a self-determining woman, who continuously explores her multitude of selves, was inspired by the fiery and seemingly amorphous Mount Mayon. I grew up at the foot of this imposing 8075 foot peak of burning rock and sometimes lush vegetation. This volcano has a distinct conical shape - indeed, it is considered as the most nearly perfect in the world - yet we Bikolanos claim that the mountain never quite looks the same. It wears a different face at every angle from which you view it, especially if you are travelling around it. The mountain has an awe-inspiring gracefulness, yet it is also 'wounded' from many eruptions. As well, it has a dual nature: It is life-giving yet death-dealing. Volcanic soil nourishes vegetation, yet an eruption easily destroys life.

In 1987, Mount Mayon's presence convinced me that the the myth of the passive Beautiful Maiden is entirely inconsistent with the volcano's powerful and ambiguous nature. A helpless damsel at the mercy of men - who wrote her tragic fate - is unlikely to become an active volcano. So, as a feminist poet and a storyteller, I decided to correct this inconsistency in another story. I told my own version of the myth about this mountain, breaking the established control of male authority - of 'the universal father.' In writing my epic, I intended to not only create a new tale, but to protest against 'the patriarchy' - especially against the language it employs to signify (in labels/myths) femalehood. (For the purposes of this paper I use 'patriarchy' in a feminist sense of the term: The historical accretion of power - as institutionalised in language,

family, social authority, gender relations, political power, et al - that reflects, projects and protects in all its relationships the superordinate interests of the male, both collectively and individually.)

Let me now sketch the background of my epic's intentions, which are parallel to the purpose of this documentation.

OUTVOICING THE ICON

Before I became involved with women's issues of personal and social liberation, I had usually engaged the voice of the patriarch, 'the father'. I had been scared, scarred, angered and grieved by his authority. On the other hand, I had also felt secure in invoking his word - after which I had then often wondered: How true is this sense of security? Nevertheless, despite this earlier doubt about his power over me, I had sought his approval just the same. In my mind and with my tongue, I had questioned and rejected his voice, yet I still allowed it to determine the state of my consciousness.

Such is the typical 'war of parts of the self', which feminist Sheila Rowbotham describes: 'One part of ourselves mocked another, [which means] part of us leapt over' into will and language, but 'part of us stayed at home ...' (in du Plessis,'85:40) Indeed, it is extremely difficult to divorce ourselves from the silent roles which have been written out and imposed upon us by the father. Up until now, many women from different cultures would still agree with poet Audre Lorde who writes that 'I have not ever seen my father's grave.' For many of us, his living monolith still looms, as Lorde writes, 'massive and silent' ('82:9) - and silencing, pushing our eyes upward, so that it is difficult to decenter the gaze. Held in awe, we find the personal sounds of our throats either arrested or streamlined into his shape.

Thus I wrote an epic poem of roughly 20,000 words (in each of the Filipino and the English version). I decided to fracture, with my own voice, the language of the father and unname his construct of my world: To re-tell this story of the volcano, which disempowers woman, into one that empowers her; then to

metaphor in my own language, unshackled by the edicts of the supposedly superior gender. These feminist intentions eventually multiplied into related aspirations: To write this new story in poetry of epic length. To write it in Filipino and English, hybridising both tongues in the process. To depart from traditional translation, which frequently privileges one language over the other. And to perform my epic with the spirit of my mothers who, in pre-colonial Philippines, had chanted heroic tales. I wrote the epic about the volcano in order to shatter iconic notions - which I initially blamed on the father alone - that baptise woman, language, and creativity.

However, as I neared the end of my creative journey, this blaming stance against the father eventually shifted into self-reappraisal: What if my gaze is withdrawn for a time from the monolith and drawn in? And I look at myself instead. I listen to the sounds not only from my throat, but from every part of me. There will be many voices at once, too many to tune in to one timbre, into his timbre. Then I will *outvoice* the patriarch. Then I will not even be concerned about finding his grave. These realisations brought me to the conclusion that burying him was the least of my concerns. Such a conclusion finally shaped my vision beyond an angry and combative feminism.

Even as I created a warrior woman redressing the injustice wrought by male oppressors, I also emphasised that warriorhood is not the end-all and be-all of feminism. Whilst presenting in the epic the multiple possibilities of an empowered woman, I often reminded myself that I myself must not remain ideologically petrified in one or other particular stance. Most especially now, as a feminist, I refuse to be defined as the angry victim with a festering resentment: *I am* - because I have a battle to fight. If such were the case, I might even reject healing and reconciliation, were they possible, because a state of peace might render me irrelevant. Consequently, my righteous identity might disintegrate without its indignant political position.

At present, my feminist ideal extends beyond a singular combative position, as this documentation will explain. In this text - which has personal, literary, historical and ideological perspectives

- I will illustrate an iconoclastic creative process which affirms the major premise of my epic: the Self's re-definition into multi-selves, including and beyond warriorhood. As I have mentioned earlier, the epic's thematic development spans three stages of becoming - from naming to unname into namelessness - which is an intrinsically iconoclastic process. Such a development is also my personal passage into self-realisation as a woman writer portraying female empowerment in two languages, by merging current issues with past traditions. In telling you about my epic, I shall inevitably be telling about myself: how I was *named* and how I attempted to *unname* myself into *namelessness*.

IN MY VOICE

What follows is not a formal academic dissertation, but the story of why and how I wrote a creative work, the epic. It is a personal document, driven by the creative work and its themes, not by a postulate that needs to be argued in academic discourse. I also stress that my intimate approach to this explanatory text is inevitable, not only because it is about my writing of the epic, but also because the epic is, in fact, my life-story. After having re-read my epic numerous times, I find that the conflicts, struggles and desires of its warrior woman could easily be transposed into my own, more mundane world. I realise that her story is actually *my story*. Thus, I am reminded of Balzac's statement: 'All fiction is symbolic autobiography.'

The epic is symbolically autobiographical, but my documentation of its writing is literally so. Personal anecdotes and observations, journal entries, even letters are, in fact, the springboard of most of the arguments in this journey. Initially, however, I was apprehensive about my personal 'stripping' in this documentation. I did know of Nietzsche's 'most fearful warning for any autobiographical text' - that the author could interpret herself falsely. (Sprinker in Olney,'80:334) I could tell about the poem and the creative process not according to what they actually are, but to what I wish them to be. Even so, such a telling in this documentation will not necessarily be a falsehood, but an aspired-for reality. In effect, this documentation is not meant to be the

product of an historian which (as Georges Gusdorf puts it) 'shows the objective stages of a career', but the result of the creator's effort 'to give the meaning of [her] own mythic tale.' (ibid:48)

I maintain that the author is alive after all, despite the obituaries penned by certain post-structuralists. Gusdorf implies that we cannot entirely disregard what post-structuralist writer Catherine Belsey describes as 'the humanist assumption that subjectivity, the individual mind or inner being, is the source of meaning and of action.' ('80:3) It is not *the* source, but it is certainly *a significant* source. Like Robert Hughes (in The Culture of Complaint), I question the reduction of 'the writer of intention' to 'the author of function.' ('93:21) Indeed, I will tell you about my intentions during this documentary journey - and with much pleasure, as it is a rare opportunity to do so in this age of the author's proclaimed demise.

In 1991, I spoke about my intentions in the epic at an international conference on 'Myths, Heroes and Anti-Heroes' at the University of Western Australia. (typescript,'91) My method of storytelling/paper delivery became a small bone of contention; I was told that my text was controversial. Someone said, 'It is not an academic paper, but an impassioned plea.' This dichotomised perspective seemed to suggest that scholarly writing cannot be impassioned as well. I noted then that within a binary consciousness, both camps of the mind can easily end up calling each other names.

Jane Tompkins, one of the pioneers in using autobiographical elements in her scholarly writing, describes traditional academic writing as a 'straightjacket': 'It is a tenet of feminist rhetoric that the personal is political, but who in the academy acts on this where language is concerned? We all speak the father tongue, which is impersonal while decrying the father's ideas.' (in Heller,'92:17) Filipino feminist writer Rosalinda Pineda-Ofroneo also protests against 'traditional research', which is 'objective, measured, cut-and-dried, static, frozen in time, deprived of feeling and context, mirroring the values and realities of the dominant class and superior gender.' (in Kintanar,'90:50) While

there is truth in these arguments, their blaming stance tends to devalue any scholarly text, in the same way that a 'straightjacketed' academic demerits impassioned writing.

One critic has noted that 'today, writers as well as readers suffer under the tyranny of linguistic conceits and whims. We do not simply have the manipulation of language to control [us], but the dread state of language in control.' (in Steele and Threadgold, '87:201) However, I refuse to be inhibited by such a control in writing this documentation, so I merge the personal style with theoretical annotations. I prefer the 'passionate scholarship' of French feminist writer Barbara du Bois. (in Bowles and Klein:108) Humanly dynamic, it writes the world with a heart, without ditching the mind. It breaks the flat severity of the academic landscape. It allows rough upheavals and declensions. It acknowledges crooks and crevices along the way, even the promise of future furrows. More importantly, it writes even the spaces without earth - and what more could one ask for in circling a mountain?

THIS IS MY STORY

In this documentation's journey there are three main stages ahead of us - naming, unname and namelessness - which span ten chapters.

Stage 1. NAMING (Chapters 2 to 5) contextualises my creative process. I establish the names, definitions, labels, stereotypes, myths, traditions and the ideological framework surrounding the major variables in my work: woman, the epic and the language issues which shaped my poem.

Chapter 2. *Thy Name Is Woman* examines how the Filipina has been oppressively named or mythologised by the patriarchy from pre-colonial to the present times.

Chapter 3. *Arms and The Man (And Woman)* draws attention to the sexual politics in 11 Philippine ethnopoems, in which male warriors colonise territories and women, who are only incidental to the narrative.

Chapter 4. *The Epic Tradition* examines the epic form and its conventions in both the Philippines and the West, in order to provide a point of comparison for my own epic.

Chapter 5. *The Language Fetish* proposes that language and its politics can easily become an agent of colonisation. I cite here the language debates which have inhibited or determined my voice.

Stage 2. UNNAMING (Chapters 6 to 9) is about the actual writing of my epic. I explain how I break the icons of my ideological or sexual Other. This discussion is about re-claiming power by paving a personal road, which is not prescribed by any patriarch, tradition or ideology.

Chapter 6. *Unnaming: Re-claiming Power* presents the tension and harmony at the outset of poetic inspiration. It foregrounds my iconoclastic urge to break totems: patriarchy, feminism, the colonising language, and even the epic genre.

Chapter 7. *Re-interpreting The Ancient* focuses on the initial source of my epic: the traditional 'beauty myth' about the volcano which is set in pre-colonial Bikol. This chapter also explains how I re-tell the past (Bikol prehistory and folklore) using current issues.

Chapter 8. *Re-inventing The Epic* is a discussion of my epic, based on the traditional epic form and conventions (as detailed in Chpts. 3 and 4). I examine what aspects of my epic draw or deviate from tradition.

Chapter 9. *Re-dreaming The Voice* illustrates my actual use of language in the epic. I document my passage as a writer from ordinary translation to bilingualism, and ultimately into what is hopefully a state of creative freedom from language fetishes.

Road 3. NAMELESSNESS (Chapters 10 to 11) harmonises the different ideological conflicts (which I encountered in writing

and performing my epic) and, at the same time, critiques my own politics which are realised in the creative process and in the work. I explain how the creative journey is concluded, while examining the implications of my re-told tale.

Chapter 10. *Namelessness (Is Conditional)* establishes how 'namelessness in the multiplicity of selves' is embodied in my epic protagonist, in writing and in epic performance.

Chapter 11. *Coming Full Circle* concludes and summarises the writing of both the epic and this documentation. It explains my realisations after finishing these two texts, and critiques some of the arguments in them.

Our task is clear: to trek three major stages composed of eleven chapters before we get to the other side of the mountain. We are now about to take our first step by examining the phenomenon of naming woman through oppressive labels, myths and stereotypes.

THY NAME IS WOMAN



*Between fleshcap and skull,
a dark space sits.
Its feral teeth
whittle the head.
Whittle thought to shape.
Whittle names assigned.*

Chapter IV, Sirangan

Names establish order and meaning. Naming, after all, is a means of knowing. According to Barbara du Bois (in *Passionate Scholarship: Notes on Values, Knowing and Method in Feminist social Science*), 'naming defines the quality and value of that which is named' - its very existence. (loc cit) Kress and Hodge, on the other hand, note that naming leads to familiarity with, and easier classification and memory of, what is named; as well, they emphasise that 'only that which has a name can be shared.' ('79:5)

Naming is also problematic, because, most of the time, our names are not necessarily 'ours'. Ownership (of a name) might only be assigned by a powerful name-giver, who defines one (via this name) as Other - a lesser antithesis or a clone of his/her Self. We are either subsumed into this name-er's world, where, as Vietnamese feminist Trinh Minh-ha (in Woman, Native, Other) writes, 'Our threatening otherness' is 'transformed into figures that belong to [his/her] definite image-repertoire.' ('89:54) Or we are cut off, 'never named, never uttered' (du Bois, loc cit), virtually made non-existent. These arguments posit the power for our self-definition with the name-giver: It is this agent's sense of reality and value, not ours, which is handed out/down. Worse, this name-er can trap us in his/her/their inflexible definitions, which prevent us from inventing our own.

In a sense, such a problematic and oppressive form of naming is akin to colonisation. Like naming, *colonisation* is also a process of manipulation or suppression of the will of the named/colonised and, at the same time, imposition of the will of the name-giver/coloniser. Minh-ha writes that 'naming is part of the human rituals of incorporation.' (op cit:77) So is colonisation: The colonised is incorporated within the coloniser's system, which is conducted *inter alia* via his/her language. In such a system, the colonised is defined by the coloniser: 'Around the colonized there has grown a whole vocabulary of phrases, each in its own way reinforcing the dreadful secondariness of people ... Thus the status of colonized people has been fixed ... by a ... colonizer who was theoretically posited as a categorically antithetical overlord.' (Said, '89:2) This antithetical overlord is the name-giver, the wielder of

language as a tool for culture, gender or class denigration. His/her handing down of labels to the supposedly lesser Other may also be seen as an act of mythologising.

According to Roland Barthes, *myth* as a 'collective representation' is either a traditional tale of origin, or simply a 'reflection.' ('77:165) From this distinction, we can deduce that there are (at least) two notions of myth: the traditional and the contemporary, which, by their nature, are related. Filipino anthropologist F. Landa Jocano considers myth as a form of oral literature which deals 'with supernatural beings and culture heroes, with origins and explanations of things and phenomena in the surrounding world.' (Aquino,'92:Preface) On the other hand, the contemporary theoretical notion of myth is now only, says Barthes, a 'discourse', 'a phraseology', 'a corpus of phrases (of stereotypes)' which are 'socially determined.' (loc cit) These concepts of traditional and modern myth, while different, can reinforce each other; that is, the beauty myth in the traditional tale about the volcano is affirmed by our contemporary and consumeristic fetish of the beautiful body.

These notions of naming, colonisation and mythmaking, which I have touched upon, are the bases of the following discussion on the oppressive naming of the Filipina by the patriarchy from pre-colonial to contemporary times. It is an accepted reality (in fact, a cliché by now) that the white and the brown father alike have defined/colonised the Filipina. She is bound by his social constructs and contract, in which (as Victor White puts it) 'the god is male and father only, and ... is associated with law, order, civilization, logos and super-ego, religion - and the pattern of life which it encourages.' At an even more subliminal level, as Jacques Lacan maintains, the phallus is the insistent signifier. ('77) This powerful signifier/name-giver has defined and colonised the female experience according to its own labels, stereotypes, icons and myths.

PRE-COLONIAL POWER

The very name of my country 'the Philippines' is problematic in several senses. Our archipelago of over 7000 islands was named, by the Villalobos expedition, literally 'in the name of the father' - 'Filipinas' in honour of King Felipe of Spain, the country which thereafter ruled this distant colony for three hundred years. (Arriola:18) Obviously the name of the patriarch stuck - a symbolically important point, but not one which I will further labour.

More relevant to this discussion is the fact that, prior to the arrival of the Spanish - and indeed for a long time after it - there was no all-embracing political unity or sovereign state which encompassed the archipelago and identified itself as such. Rather, its various regions were ruled by numerous tribal/ethnic/linguistic groups and alliances. Hence, in this paper, when I refer to the 'pre-colonial Philippines', it is to a geographical entity, not a political union, and not a collective culture displaying linguistic and religious homogeneity.

As a result of this diversity, the 'pre-colonial Philippines' that I and other writers refer to is something of a hypothetical construct, an amalgam. Were I, for example, an anthropologist or a linguist, I could not write of disparate groups with such leeway. As a poet, however, I believe that such a licence does not do disservice to the general entity that was the 'pre-Philippines'. Nor to the observations made. Statements about specific groups, e.g the Ifugaos or Bikolanos, do not necessarily hold true for other regions - nor are they necessarily inapplicable.

In the Philippines, many feminists believe that female colonisation started only with the arrival of the Spanish colonisers. Feminist historian Fe Capellan Arriola declares in her book *Si Maria, Nena, Gabriela atbp. Kuwentong Kasaysayan ng Kababaihan* ('Maria, Nena, Gabriela and Others Historical Tale of Women') that pre-colonial women seemed to have been powerful, self-determining, and more importantly, equal to men. ('89:9) Compared to our present situation, this interpretation of history is indeed very inspiring. However, I question whether the past was really lived

according to how we would wish to have lived it ourselves - as a society where there is gender equality and female power?

Much as I may want to believe this vision, I am wary of a possible feminist or post-colonial nostalgia - even a Rousseauesque romanticism - which might portray an Edenic time for pre-colonial women. While I shall present some historical readings (on religion, shamanism, social roles and sexuality) which either attribute power to women or establish gender equality during pre-colonial times, I will also raise questions about such readings. I do not assert any certainty to my dissenting hypotheses - they too are principally speculative. Any present claim for (or against) female power in the pre-colonial Philippines must be conjectural, as our contemporary, post-industrial society concepts of power can hardly share the same parameters or concepts of power operative in a tribal, agrarian society. Our reading of that past is, of course, always coloured by our current ideological positions.

According to Arriola, most origin myths in the Philippines do not have gender hierarchies: The first woman and man were created or came to being simultaneously. (ibid.) In other parts of Southeast Asia, the high deity is, in fact, the union of male and female. (Demetrio,'91:46) For instance, the gender of *Gugurang*, the supreme god of the pre-colonial Bikolanos - my ethnic group - is quite ambivalent, according to Bikol historian Danny Gerona (Interview,'93). Among the Tagalogs, another Philippine ethnic group, the chief deity, *Bathala*, embodies a duality in unity: *Ba* is the first syllable of the word *babae* (woman), which symbolizes generation; *Tha* means light or spirit; and *La* is the first syllable of *lalake* (man) which symbolizes potency. (Mananzan,'92:3)

Such a model of gender harmony affirms the Chinese concept of *yin-yang*, which is also noted by mythologist Joseph Campbell - there is 'the mystical oneness of the Eastern as opposed to the Western deity.' He adds that in cases where the chief deities are female, 'Eastern mythology reflects a matriarchal society.' ('87:26-7) In The Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets, Barbara Walker writes that in this tradition of the goddess, the 'female figure [is] almost always more powerful than the male.'

('83:346) However, in the Philippines, 'we do not have a tradition of female goddesses like other cultures.' (Mananzan:loc cit) To trace female *political* power in our few goddesses (as ruling deity) would be problematic anyhow, because they are basically portrayed not as a sovereign, but as progenitor/nurturer - a role which some feminists consider as just another limiting stereotype. While we may agree or disagree with such an opinion, the question remains: What is wrong with the nurturing role anyway? Among hunting-gathering and agrarian societies, in which maintenance or increase of the tribal clan or band, through birth and nurturing, is of pre-eminent importance, such a role was probably the source of a specific dimension of power.

One of the indices of power is authority - and shamanism is often seen as evidence of authority among women in ancient Philippine cultures. The *babaylan*, who is the priestess and medicine-woman, was once 'the holder of wisdom.' (Jocano,'75:41) She was the physical and psychic healer of the people. Was this the reason why even the priest - the *bayoc* - also dressed like a woman? (Demetrio:128) Could it be that the act of healing was feminised, because of its nurturing nature? Consider again how this life-giving role has been in recent years under fire from some feminists, as it is usually associated with the confining demands of domesticity. However, it can be argued that shamanism goes beyond a domestic role into psycho-symbolic functions which our contemporary and westernised consciousness will, perhaps, never completely understand.

The shaman was also warrior-like in her struggle 'with demons and the spiritual foes of her people.' (ibid:131) Philippine feminist poet Marjorie Evasco writes that this role of the shaman was evident when the Spaniards came, as she '... led uprisings to protest against the desecration of their faith and the imposition of an alien creed.' (in Kintanar,'92b:23-4) According to the late Philippine journalist Dolores Feria (in The Stag Affair), the shaman also 'presided over the arts and certain tribal rituals ... [she] chanted ancient epics, which were alleged to have been handed down by the gods in some earlier age.' ('91:8) American writer Joan

Halifax notes world-wide a similar role for the shaman - as a poet and singer, who dances and creates works of art. ('80:4)

The Ifugaos - one of our indigenous peoples, who dwell in the Central Cordillera of northern Luzon - believe that the privileged role of epic chanter can *only* be given to women, '... because legend says that ascended folk heroes appear only to them as intermediaries.' (Feria,'84:10) This role certainly honoured women as the repository of early heroic literature, which, however, trivialised (and even excluded) them in the tale of heroism. The woman was a medium of stories in which she played incidental and disempowered roles that were either sexualised or domesticated. The heroes of the epics, which she chanted, were mostly male warriors. These gender roles will be confirmed in the ethno-epics to be discussed in the next chapter.

Some writers believe that our foremothers did enjoy greater equality with men. Feminist historian Fe Mangahas holds that in pre-colonial Philippines, a female and a male child were '... equally welcomed by the tribe. Naming was done at random and names did not distinguish by sex. Lineage was traced bilaterally from both father and mother.' (in Azarcon,'87:11) Bikol historian Lilia Realubit cites a Spanish chronicle which indicates that pre-colonial women 'were liable to no one in word or work.' ('81:31) Thelma Kintanar explains (in *Babae: Bilanggo ng Kasarian o Babaylan?* [Woman: Prisoner of Gender or Shaman?]), that conjugal property was divided equally between spouses, which was why it was important for women to marry within their social rank. (in Kintanar,'92b:5)

Early Spanish chronicler Antonio de Morga's records, translated by American writers Blair and Robertson, may lead one to believe that there was no double standard of sexuality in Pre-colonial Philippines: 'Married women ... were not constrained by honor to remain faithful to their husbands, although the latter would resent the adultery, and hold it as just cause for repudiating the wife.' (Vol XII,'73:25) In fact, when their wives committed adultery, 'action [was] never taken against them, but against the [male] adulterer.' From these instances, any contemporary woman,

sexually repressed and discriminated upon by her patriarchal Catholic culture now, could easily read (and wish to read) female sexual liberation and even superiority, at least, in her country's past.

Other records (as detailed in Blair and Robertson) might be even more affirming of her desired sexual freedom. In some cases, men were expected to use a sex gadget - possibly for the woman's pleasure or for birth control - when they had intercourse with their wives. (Vol V:117-19) And virginity - which is now a Catholic prescription - was once considered 'a misfortune and humiliation.' (Vol XII:25) In fact, there were men paid 'to ravish and take away virginity from young girls, ... [as it was] a hindrance and impediment if they were virgins when they married.' (Vol XVI:131) But, I ask: An impediment to what? The reproductive capacity of women? Is it not possible that the tribe actually controlled female sexuality, albeit in a different fashion, but one which we are now interpreting as a sign of sexual freedom?

Could it be that the Catholic demand to be a virgin now is just the reverse of the social expectation to be a non-virgin then? While the pressure now from the Church is *chastity through sexual repression*, the pressure then from the tribe was, perhaps, *procreation through sexual openness*. Thus, the hidden anguish of the sexually uninitiated contemporary woman - described as a 'frozen delight' by one friend - might be hardly different from the pain of an ostracised, barren woman of ancient times. This pre-colonial woman had to prove her power to conceive. According to Mangahas, trial marriages were institutionalised, in order to determine a woman's ability to bear children; infertility could break a betrothal. Mangahas also writes that women developed their sexuality for the purpose of 'reproduction and fertilization', [a situation which] then 'denied them access to the political sphere.' (op cit:11-2)

While I express doubts about the alleged power of pre-colonial women, which is retrospectively constructed by feminists (using a contemporary notion of power), I am also aware that my dissenting speculations are very much determined also by a

present-day ideal of femalehood. In effect, the contexts of both feminist historians and myself are many times removed from the societies and times about which we are speculating; thus, none of our assertions can ever be considered as realities. Our primary records of that past - which we are only re-interpreting now - were written not by native Filipinos, but by Spanish chroniclers. So, how can we ever be certain about that ancient time? The actual past has been concealed from us, not only by the Occidental father's destruction of our written - and oral - history, when he first arrived in the Philippines, but also by his displacement of our culture through what historian Renato Constantino condemns as the 'inculcation of colonial values and attitudes.' ('78:Preface)

COLONISATION AND DISEMPOWERMENT

I blame the Spanish colonisers for destroying the pre-colonial records of my forebears, so that I am left with a greater uncertainty about the past. More significantly, I am outraged by the colonialists' crime of stripping the Filipina of her self-worth and dignity - and this aspect of colonisation will be discussed in this section. However, it is necessary to acknowledge the fact that colonial institutions have also taught me how to curse and crush colonisation. I am now able to argue in this manner, partly because I have been schooled in Western thought, like all other thinkers who have decolonised their consciousness after being educated within the imperialist Other's context. It is only fair to admit that many of my ideas in this documentation have been appropriated from the West. Nonetheless, I cannot absolve the white man of the 'stag affair', which he institutionalised when he first arrived with the cross and sword in 1521.

According to Dolores Feria, in such a 'stag affair [i.e. the patriarchy] that the entire Spanish colonial epoch was to establish for generations, ... women had no power and little space. It was not unlike that in any modern theatre of war'. ('91:9) In this psychological war, however, religion was the most potent weapon. When the Filipina was baptised in the name of one tall father with pale skin and long nose, she became the embodiment of the *Mater Dolorosa*. She fell in love with pain: 'Be like Christ crucified, or like

his mother with a heart impaled by seven daggers', the clergy advised. (Arriola, op cit:21) Indeed, the easiest way to vanquish a people and keep them subservient is to glorify silent suffering - thus, the Filipina lost her voice. Then she lost her confidence in her body.

As a vessel for nurturing the man's seed, the Filipina was instructed to keep her body pure for him. Such a prescription on the female body must have marked deeply on our consciousness as a people, because, despite our pseudo-American modernity now, virginity is still a fixation, if not a fetish. We often hear this remark, especially among the old folks: '*Kailangang doncella siya sa araw ng kasal. Huwag magbisikleta at baka mapunit ang hymen.*' [She has to be a virgin on the day of the wedding. Do not go cycling lest the hymen gets broken.] (ibid:23) Apparently, we have not progressed much from the time when the Church translated the Filipina's hymen/honour into the honour of both her heavenly and her earthly father - in which case, both fathers became its rightful guardian. They held the lock and key to her chastity.

The white priest in holy frock - being directly descended from 'The Father in Heaven' - was not to be outdone in this noble vanguardship. Of a purer shade, he was regarded as the Filipina's ideal protector. Hence, in the cold confines of his kingdom, many bastards were conceived to inherit the name of the white father. These *mestizos* grew up believing, as the 'inferior' natives believed, that they were a head taller than the brown-skinned *indios* in all aspects of life. Of course, 'the image of the European coloniser had to remain an honourable one.' [For] '... he did not come as exploiter, but as enlightener. He was not seeking mere profit, but was fulfilling his duty' to his One God. (Kabbani,'86:6) As has been observed by Feria, 'the harshest terms for women have always been imposed by monotheistic religions.' (op cit:11)

It has been noted that 'Beyond doubt, major religions of the world have a dubious record with regard to women ... For example, Buddhist women could not head the religious community. Hinduism usually held women ineligible for salvation. Islam made a woman's witness only half that of a man. Jewish men blessed God

for not having made them women.' (Carmody,'79:14) And the Christian belief in one male god as the source of absolute power became the perfect excuse for dominating women. Christianity is, as critic Walter Kendrick puts it, 'the ultimate theophallogocentrism'. ('83:9) It is also among the most misogynistic of institutions, even while it preaches love. Its fixation is judgment; its habit, naming women: If she is not Mary, she must be Eve.

Feminist writer Mary Daly explains Eve as the dark Other. She asserts that in the cosmic case of 'false naming' (woman as the root of all evil), the mystery of evil (based on the 'Fall of Man') was feminised according to God's viewpoint (as depicted in Genesis). ('73:47-8) Thus, from that time on, men have always conjured the harlot in women, while women have suppressed their bodies, lest they be so conjured. Nowadays, however, while the Filipino Catholic condemns Eve (the temptress), he/she desires her. His is an open and often gratified desire, but hers is usually a secret shameful burning. This schizophrenic regard of female sexuality probably began, if not deepened, with the coming of the American coloniser and Hollywood.

The democratic ideals of the United States allowed the Filipina to have an education and career beyond nurturing the Filipino family according to a strictly Catholic - or even tribal - norm. After more years of westernisation, the Filipina even began to discover her own sexuality - not that the North Americans eradicated the Catholic tenets which shaped it. America did not, unlike Catholic Spain, act as the watchdog of the Filipina's virginity or 'female honour.' Instead, it exploited her sexuality. In World War II, her commodification by Uncle Sam began - prostitution became a lucrative business in the Philippines. More *p a m - p a m s* (prostitutes) to service the American soldiers. More bastards born and left with their mothers. '*Pinay, hanggang pier ka lang*' - Filipina, you can go up until the pier only.' (Arriola:68) Thus, some later later, the Filipina became stationed around the pier, so to speak - and the American bases inspired a dramatic boom in Philippine prostitution.

One of the most influential phenomena in America's colonisation of the Philippines was the power of Hollywood. This new religion of glitz and glitter provided an antithesis to Catholic Spain's prudish virgin. The fair-skinned vamp with generous 'tits-and-ass' became the dream of every red-blooded Filipino. As far as historian Constantino is concerned, the Filipina was inspired to copy such an image. In a heavily ironic statement, he describes her physical attributes: 'definitely caucasoid of the Hollywood type, for, by means of modern cosmetology, their skins are bleached, their hair is brunette, red, or even blonde.' [And their nose aquiline, thanks to rhinoplasty]. 'The female physical dimensions are 35-24-35, true or false. They have fairly straight limbs and pointed toes.' (op cit:96) If the Filipina had desired white skin and European features during the Spanish times, after Hollywood she became more ambitious: She now dreams of more oomph to flaunt, perhaps the *materyales fuwertes* ('good materials', referring to a good figure) of the white sex-goddess on the silver screen.

It is apparent now that the image of the contemporary Filipina is a co-creation of Catholic Spain and prurient Hollywood. Whatever power that we had thought she had during pre-colonial times is now buried by years of colonisation - 'three hundred years in the convent and forty years in Hollywood' as a popular quote sums up our history. However, now that those years of domination are over, can we claim that colonialism has also come to an end? Sadly not, because, today, the modern Filipina is still continuously colonised by her new master: the Filipino patriarch with his schizophrenic loyalty to the Church and Hollywood. Worse, from all memories of colonisation, she has constructed herself as subordinate. Such memories are affirmed and deepened by oppressive socialisation, as this next section will consider.

INTERNAL COLONISATION

From birth, the Filipina has been taught to live and maintain the old constructs of subordination. It is not biology that demands we be the ideal mother and wife, who keeps the stove and bed forever warm for the man of the house and his progeny. 'Biology is destiny' is a problematic statement. (Porter,'91:67) We

do have a choice not to become a wife or a mother; and - if we decide to be one - a will that refuses to be martyred as the sole nurturer. I do not see servitude or suffering stamped on my genes. 'The choice is up to us, and not our genes,' argues writer Barbara Ehrenreich. ('92:37) Even so, every Filipina, from birth, is up against her whole culture and history, which prescribe particular roles, most of which are justified by her possession of womb and breast. Evasco identifies these roles as:

Positive Roles: The innocent and virginal girl; the virtuous, self-negating woman; the silent suffering wife and mother; the faithful and constantly-waiting sweetheart; the dutiful sister or daughter; and the benevolent aunt who chooses single blessedness for familial duties.

Negative Roles: The fallen woman, the insufferable nag, the angry bitch, the seductive temptress, the despicable whore, and the frigid spinster. ('90:4-5)

These roles are largely determined by her sexuality, which is considered positively relevant, only when it relates to child-bearing. Outside of this capacity, her sex becomes a cause for caution and shame. From the time she begins to menstruate, the Filipina is conscious of the edict to 'save her virginity for her marriage.' (Holmes,'90:85) Then, when she becomes a dutiful wife, she 'must do all that she can to please her husband' sexually. However, as a good woman, she must not talk about sex, nor must she initiate it. (ibid:64) Her pleasure is a cause for shame. After all, sexuality is basically aligned with motherhood.

In a small, overpopulated third world country (of 62 million people), 'the Church insists on the outdated dogma: 'Go, ye, and multiply.' Cardinal Sin of Manila continues to strictly enforce the tenets on sexuality imposed by the Catholic tradition. A news item in the Philippine Daily Inquirer tells how the good Cardinal had 'called on Roman Catholics to unite to fight those promoting abortion and the use of condoms.' ('93:1) Never mind if the woman's health suffers after seven children. Or, that poverty has become the way of life of many people. Of course, 'God may provide - but never contraceptives.' (Feria, op cit:20) To my mind, however,

providing does not include legislating as well on matters which concern the body. I agree with early feminist Lucy Stone who in 1855 stated: 'It is very little to me to have the right to vote, to own property, ... if I may not keep my body, and its uses, in my absolute right.' (in Wolf,'91:11)

By the power of the Church, it seems that we cannot own our bodies in the Philippines. No wonder, the late ex-President Marcos had the gall to declare against his political contender Corazon Aquino in the elections of 1986: '*Ang babae ay pambahay, pangkama lamang.*' (The woman is for the home, for the bed only.) Indeed, the female workhorse is still for the home, despite her earning power outside of it - such is the double burden of a woman, especially in a third world country. To illustrate, a female university lecturer may teach 24 to 30 hours a week, then still sell clothing, underwear or sausages in the faculty room. Her hectic schedule concludes with cooking for her family and attending to the baby/ies at night. Then, when her whole household is fed and cared for, she is also expected to meet the needs of the husband who will not let her sleep. Such a scenario is also familiar in the corporate world. Even female executives, after hours of decision-making and drawing up major policies, are still expected to run an efficient household, be a great cook and tell bedtime stories.

In the city slums and in the farm, the situation is worse. Typically, the city woman will have several jobs, from cooking and selling meals in a corner stall to cleaning or doing laundry for a fee, and the peasant woman works in the fields every day. While both women are expected to contribute to the family coffers, they are also charged with the endless household chores usually attached to the bearing and rearing of children. Sometimes, these women even become their families' payment for a debt owed to the landlord or the master, either as his menial or his whore. Indeed, as they say of themselves, *jingle lang ang pahinga* (pee-ing is the only rest). The spectre of social class is inseparable from their sex - the poorer a woman is, the more disempowered she becomes. However, this is a fact which is usually unacknowledged by the Filipino male - who believes that the female is actually lucky, because she is protected and even idealised by a nurturing Catholic enclave.

Many Filipino men today still believe that the Filipina is blessed. Filipino journalist, Larry Henares, writes about the good fortune of the Filipina. Aside from enumerating her multi-roles, which make her seem like a character from a wonder book, he also concludes that: 'The woman is the keeper of the keys to the exchequer, and it is in this role that she often finds herself as an investor and risk taker ... and that is how family fortunes are started - by women. But the Filipino woman will never admit this, not in a manner that might rob her husband of his prerogatives as king of the manor and the lord of her creations.' ('88:5)

This is all very well for a household with an endless cashflow. However, says writer Leonora Angeles (in *Women's Roles and Status in The Philippines. A Historical Perspective*), '... the lowered purchasing power of the peso and overall economic crisis experienced by most households do not make financial management a source of power.' (in Evasco,'92:22) It is instead a cause of greater oppression. Nonetheless, the Filipina plods on as, according to poet Evasco, a 'silent suffering martyr ... [who] affirms her strength by enduring her pain' (in Kintanar[a]:14) - by suffering all the roles, enumerated above, in order to keep the peace of a model Catholic family. No wonder I often hear other cultures admiring the Filipina's 'hardy character' - but there is no sense in being 'hardy' in the case of hardships which need not be suffered. Indeed, masochism is one quality of women in the Philippines, according to Jasmin Vinculado. In a critique of Philippine television, she writes that 'we just love to be debased' (in Diliman Review, '91:25) - and usually in sexual terms.

DEVIL'S GATEWAY

When the early Christian theologian Tertullian said of woman, 'You are the devil's gateway', he echoed every man's justification of his desire. Desire is healthy, but only when it is responsible. Not so these days when desire can easily be gratified, then blamed on the desired or the construct of desire.

The Filipina is such a construct. Philippine popular culture (in films, TV and comics) boasts of the 'ST' (sex-tease/sex-trip)

which rides on images of its Eves and Magdalenes. Television screens *Chicks to Chicks* or *Palibhasa ... Babae Lang Kasi* (Because She Is Only A Woman); tabloids headline 'Half A Million Pesos for Gloria's Boobs' (in Azarcon,'87:53); songs echo, '*katawan! katawan!* (Body! Body!). And sexism and sexual abuse confront us everywhere: from the corner store, where men hoot at girls passing by, and jeepneys, where you can get pawed, to the universities and multinational offices where your boss or a colleague takes liberties with his hands and his language. However, these are mild cases compared to the phenomenon of rape.

Executive Director of Philippine Women's Crisis Center Racquel Edralin-Tiglao 'traces the psychology of rape to men's feelings of dominance over women ... Rape is less a sexual urge than a man's assertion of his overbearing power and dominance.' (loc cit:6-7) Feminist author Susan Brownmiller considers a man's genitals as 'a weapon to generate fear.' ('75:35) Disempowered by the phallus, women have turned against themselves after sexual abuse. Many a victim believes she, says Naomi Wolf, 'triggered the violation.' (op cit:43). She lives with self-hatred and the condemnation from a voyeuristic society, who rapes her several times in court and in the media. As feminist fiction-writer and poet Lilia Quindoza points out, in the Philippines, 'the media contributes to the public humiliation' of those 'who come bravely forward to fight their cases in court'. ('92:29) Such an intimidation begins in the hands of the authorities who are supposed to protect the victim. According to Senator Leticia Ramos-Shahani: 'The rape victim has the triple burden of proving that she is a rape victim, that she is telling the truth and that the assailant was not the victim - that is, of female stimulation of his sexuality.' (in Unas,'92:8)

In 'peace', such is the case; in war, it is worse. The Philippines has a history of rape of its women in wars not only against our external, but our internal colonisers as well. With militarisation since the time of Marcos, our history is littered with gang-rape, sexual abuse and torture of political prisoners and civilians, and all other crimes that debase women. In many cases, these are explained as having been 'done to effect military goals'. Women, as 'objects or territory of the enemy, are appropriated or

violated at will by the aggressors ... rape and related atrocities have been used in warfare to intimidate and humiliate communities and cultures and to impress on them their powerlessness.' (Tauli-Corpuz,'92:12)

As US journalist Lance Morrow puts it - rape is not just 'an ugly side effect' of war, in which women become 'Homeric booty.' The 'ethnic cleansing' in Bosnia, for instance, has institutionalised rape as 'an instrument of war.' ('93:19) And the Time Australia feature article, *Papal Appeal An Unpopular Admonition to the Women of Bosnia*, explains that the Church aggravates the tragedy, with the Pope asking the women now to 'bear their violators' children rather than choose abortion.' ('93:43) Indeed, 'sexual violence doesn't end with the act', as feminist Nicole Brossard writes. The victim is imprisoned 'in a space of fear, a space of shame, a space of self-negation.' (in Hartwell,'88:51) Because of a man's irresponsible desire and contempt of women, a human being is condemned to a lifetime sentence of, at most times, irreparable tragedy.

THE INTERNATIONAL NAME

There is such a thing as rape through language: name-calling with the innuendo of sexualisation. This act of female representation also embodies sexual violence. As well, its victim is trapped in a space of shame - sometimes, even in a space of self-denigration. Such is the case when the Filipina is treated as a commodified item in the international market - when her sexuality becomes the selling point.

While there is the reality of thousands of Filipinas seeking a better material future abroad, the vicious stereotyping that occurs with this phenomenon is distressing. Filipinas leaving the country for a better life abroad is as a necessary economic scenario, but I deplore the consequent class- and culture-based prejudice which accompanies it, and which strips the Filipina of dignity wherever she goes (and even in her own country).

When a woman from any country works or seeks her fortune abroad, this does not mean that she automatically becomes

a commodity, which the employer or the host country (or the uppity lot back home), can exploit, categorise or condemn. But we have come to a time when the word 'Filipina' has earned a negative magic ring. From my and my friends' experiences, I deduce that it is difficult to travel with the name 'Filipina' stamped on your passport and your face - immigration officials frown at your passport, taxi drivers propose marriage, western men give you a knowing look, so that sometimes you are even pressured to pretend that you come from another country. The saddest situation is when a compatriot disowns you in another country, simply because you are with a white man.

However, is there not an actual commodification of the Filipina beyond just a name imposed by others? Do we not, in fact, have Filipina sexual workers or mail-order-brides, who, by the nature of their reason for leaving home, are inevitably sexualised within the host country? These are delicate issues which I will not discuss, as they would entail a thorough economic and social study. However, let me cite the common sexual representation and reality of the Filipina in different countries around the world.

United States. A Playboy magazine article *Why they love us in the Philippines* ran this subtitle - *Even as a dictator fell, the more serious business of servicing the U.S. Navy went on as usual.* (Collins,'89:267) Such was the scenario before the US military bases left the Philippines: prostitution of our women and children. But now, the bases are gone. Can we rejoice? The children are still on the streets, and the Filipina prostitute has become an icon: the exotic Other as sexual machine - 'They are amazing. They are machines. LBF machines. LBF? Little brown f...king [sic.] machines. If it ain't brown, turn it down. PBR. PBR? Powered by rice. Two bowls of rice and they can f...k [sic.] the whole day'. This conversation between two western men was overheard by American journalist John Graham, who describes the Philippines as the 'sexual vortex of Asia.' (in Benigno,'92:11)

Australia. To the white man, Asia is 'one big nightclub, one lush garden of Eden where the women are petite, subservient and available.' (Broinowski,'92:183) The feature article *A Fairy Tale The*

Filipina Tragedy in Australia affirms this assumption. It cites a Melbourne company's newsletter which has 'a picture of a fat, tattooed Australian dancing with three Filipinas wearing bikinis.' The caption reads: 'We were wondering if it were the horizontal folk dance craze that's a big hit in the Philippines at the moment.' ('91:10) Such an image fuels the fantasy of many Australian men who come to the Philippines for brides: a sex-mate who can also keep house. Today, this phenomenon of the mail-order bride is even worse with serial sponsorship and domestic violence. According to a news item, '11 Filipino wives have already been murdered in Australia, with the Australian husband being convicted or charged in most cases.' (Larriera, '92:2)

Japan. The *japayuki* and the *hanayome-san*: the prostitute and the mail-order bride. Feminist researcher Aurora de Dios (in *The Case of the Japayuki-San and the Hanayome-San. A preliminary Inquiry Into The Culture of Subordination*) writes that in 1987, 37,989 (a conservative figure) Filipinas went to Japan as entertainers. *Cultural entertainers* [italics mine] is a euphemism for bar girls, hostesses, striptease dancers, etc ...' (in Evasco, '92:36-7) Many of these women arrived as 'cultural dancers' or receptionists, only to find sexual services as part of their job. Worse, some of them have been exploited by the Yakuza, the Japanese mafia. This continues a grotesque tradition of Japanese sexual enslavement of Filipino and other Asian women, as epitomized in the 'comfort women' (military sex slaves) of Japanese soldiers during the Second World War. The main difference in this current phenomenon is that it includes Filipino brides (*hanayome-san*), who marry farmers from the countryside of Japan, and the misconception among some Japanese that every Filipina in that country is for sale.

In the Middle East, Italy, England, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, we have another phenomenon: Filipinas as domestic workers, coping with the difficulty of being away from a family-oriented culture. Many of those who work in the Middle East and Hong Kong live (and die) with tales of misfortune: rape during the Gulf War, the physical and sexual abuse in the hands of their masters, or coming home in boxes. While the setting is outside our country, the stories ring of home-grown realities.

As previously asserted, it is clear that the Filipina has already been sexualised and oppressed by the Filipino male, even before she leaves home. Thus the question: How can we rage against 'those rapists or murderers', when so much indignity happens in our own backyard? Sometimes, I wonder whether the Filipino male's rage at the oppression of the Filipina abroad is born partly of his proprietorial regard for her. Anger is, of course, a natural thing, but when we vilify America, Australia, Japan, and all the other countries that have unjustly named or disempowered the Filipina, it is also worth remembering that we have consented to this baptism and victimisation in many instances of our history, and that we have perpetrated this oppression ourselves.

The Filipina has been colonised and is still being colonised in the name of, not only the white, but most especially, the brown father, who claims to be the guardian of her honour. After all, her 'naming' has 'a sedimented *his* tory of its own.' The 'present historical instance of "naming" ... [only] repeats or recuperates' the old names (Radhakrishnan,'87:207). Such 'old names' will be discussed in the next stage of our journey around the mountain.

'ARMS AND THE MAN' (AND WOMAN)

*Hear the gasp of green shoots
pushing through our bones
each time the blade is raised.
Listen to this little death within.*

Chapter III, Pagtuga

To some extent, the act of naming the Filipina by the foreign coloniser may have just re-affirmed and further aggravated the oppression attached to her previous names, which, I suspect, were already basic gender stereotypes in our pre-colonial culture. Evidence of these stereotypes may be found in the oral epics of our indigenous peoples.

These heroic poems, according to Philippine writer Jovita Castro, 'reflect a tribal society before the coming of the Muslims and the Spaniards' ('84:4), thus they may be considered as oral prehistory. French writer Paul Merchant even proposes that such epics may have been told 'in the need for an established history.' ('71:2) In the Philippine situation, as those epics (which survive) come from the mouths of our people themselves, they are probably closer to 'the truth' than our contemporary re-readings of the historical documents written by the Spanish chroniclers. Besides, as a myth powerhouse, these surviving indigenous stories embody the social structure of the tribal community. Hence, their portrayal of gender relations probably reflect, to some degree, the sexual politics of that earlier time.

Nevertheless, even these speculations may be debated on two counts: the *authenticity* of the received oral tradition, and the reliability of my own reading of it. Even if it is true that the indigenous epics or 'ethno-epics' (such as *Darangen*, *Agyu*, *Ulahingan*) have been preserved by various tribal peoples, how can I be sure that their narratives have not been influenced or even substantially changed through the years following our first European contact? I should not assume that time stopped for those epics - that they remained as fixed texts. When I read them now, I am of course interpreting them from my contemporary feminist perspective, which is many times removed from the epoch of these epic stories. In effect, my exegeses of the epics depend as much on a hypothetical construction of the past as the earlier mentioned interpretation of the Spanish chronicles by feminist historians.

Hence, this chapter is not a pronouncement of historical facts, but an exercise in speculation, which contributed to the writing of my own epic - to reiterate, I wrote my own story in

protest against the old myths, which I interpreted as narratives that disempower women. My interpretation is a result of a literary reading of these narratives, albeit grounded on feminist ideology, rather than a historically or anthropologically informed examination.

ANCIENT SEXUAL POLITICS

I will examine the gender relations evident in Philippine indigenous epics, and will occasionally cite Western epics for the sake of clarification and/or comparison. I will relate these stories to contemporary situations, in order to suggest that today's gender discrimination is just the repetition of an age-old issue. The gender stereotypes portrayed in the epics (both Philippine and Western) sound very familiar indeed. Throughout their narratives the principal binary opposition of 'male/female' is reiterated in the following permutations:

MALE	FEMALE
warrior	consort or assistant of the warrior
heroic son	caring mother
brave chief	beautiful princess
warrior	cause or prize of war

Epics are heroic stories about great (generally) male warriors. These stories glorify and resolve a man's war. Not that they are without a woman's war. I like to think that they do have some undercurrents of the women's struggle for a sense of self and dignity. However, this other war is usually only peripheral, incidental or even submerged in the plot. While all women characters are often defined/labelled by or according to the demands of the male protagonist, the women's struggles are hardly named. Hence, they are virtually non-existent.

Such is generally the case in these eleven indigenous epics from different parts of the Philippines:

EPIC TITLE	ETHNIC GROUP or PLACE OF ORIGIN
<i>Livungan-Arumanen Epic (Ulahingan)</i>	Manobo
<i>Ag Tubig Nog Kibuklagan</i>	Subanon
<i>Agyu: Ilianon Epic</i>	Ilianon
<i>Hudhud hi Aliguyon</i>	Ifugao
<i>Kudaman</i>	Palawan
<i>Darangen</i>	Maranao
<i>Epic of Labaw Donggon</i>	Sulods
<i>Tuwaang Epic Cycle,</i>	Manuvu
<i>Epic of Biwag and Malana</i>	Gaddang
<i>Ibalong or Handyong</i>	Bikol
<i>Epic of Matabagka</i>	Bukidnon

The common paradigmatic structure and elements of these epics are:

Male warrior goes to war to save/conquer/win -
honour a tribe/a woman.

Female consort assists hero (or decorates the narrative).

In the *Ulahingan*, for instance, the warrior Agyu fights against darkness; earlier, his wife Tigyekuwa has assisted him in preparation for battle. (Cultural Center of the Philippines [CCP] typescript,'93) The fact that women in Philippine epics only aid the hero as he girds for war and that they never go to war themselves is asserted by the late William Henry Scott, an American anthropologist based for 40 years in the Philippines. (Interview, Nov.'92).

In the *Ilianon Epic*, however, the women do not even get to assist the hero, as they are confined to disempowered positions. In

this epic, Agyu fights the Moros. He is with another warrior Banlak, who abandons his wife Mungan because she is sick of leprosy. But when Banlak hears that Mungan recovers and turns into 'a beautiful lady', he decides to return to her. Incidentally, Agyu's son, Tanagyaw, also becomes a warrior. He is offered the daughters of *datus* (chiefs) as peace token or prize for saving them from invaders. He is said to have a 'charming' wife - who is not even named. (CCP typescript:2)

Note that the male protagonists in these two epics are portrayed as active and honourable heroes, defenders of peace and justice. The women, by contrast, are either a docile or spurned wife, a war prize, or an 'aside' acknowledged only as 'charming.' Because the women's stories are never told, I wonder: What about their own battle against the pain of losing a husband to a war? Or the tragedy of being rejected or desired, and won without any choice to withdraw from the game of powerful men? At least, in the *Iliad*, the women's stories are told as well. Andromache, Hecuba, Cassandra and the collective cry of all female Homeric booty, though non-central, are significant aspects of the text. I feel that, compared to those characters, the women in Philippine epics are subjected to more indignity, as in the case of the next tale.

Ag Tubig Nog Kibuklagan is about Timuway, 'a warrior bereft of human sympathies. He wants to test the prowess of other chiefdoms and render them under his vassalage.' (ibid:1) (In his singleness of purpose, I am reminded of Aeneas, 'the juggernaut, the war machine, the depersonalized instrument of destiny' [Beye,'66:227], whose emotional ties are necessarily cut because of a fated mission; Aeneas abandons Dido to lead the 'remaining Trojans to Italy.' [ibid:215]) At the call of combat, Timuway leaves his wife, who is in labour, before he begins his conquering spree. Her efforts to convince him to stay are to no avail: a man has better things to do. Eventually, Timuway's son, Taake, grows up to vanquish *datus* in war as well.

In this epic, the men are preoccupied with colonisation, while the women are inevitably caught in their bloodsport. One character, Lady Pintawan, is promised as a reward by her brother

Maula to anyone - 'be it a dog or a pig' - who can go up the ladder of *kris* or blades leading to her tower. (CCP:4) Pintawan reminds me of the money bag waiting at the peak of a banana trunk, greased with oil, for the most agile climber - a familiar sight during fiestas in our villages. Apparently, a woman is - as many war narratives portray her - a perfect excuse for tourneys which allow the men a chance to strut their muscles in order to outdo each other.

I raise these questions then: Why is violent competition, as in war, usually the means to measure 'manhood' in almost all cultures? I agree with Hartsock who suggests there is 'a masculine eroticism which forms a part of military valour', that thrust of the spear or the sword in a 'competition for dominance.' (in Porter, op cit:183-4) War is male. Erich Fromm proposed that it is basically 'a gentleman's agreement between the authority figures on both sides that they will kill off each other's youths, and even win social approval or adulation for doing so.' ('73:178) This licensed murder seems to enhance masculinity, a belief which raises more questions: If our world's histories had no wars to speak of, how many men would have felt wanting in self-respect, dignity, and that proverbial 'manhood?' And how many women would have been so relieved that they did not have to lose their own self-respect, dignity and womanhood in a man's war?

Hudhud hi Aliguyon, an Ifugao harvest song, is also about a male engaging in duels to prove his prowess. The woman is cast in the traditional role of the nurturing mother who is taken for granted by a surly son. Aliguyon's mother worried 'that her son was probably too young to know what he was doing, but Aliguyon showed his irritation by kicking [thus breaking] ... a bowl of wine down the yard', at the same time cursing his mother. (CCP:5)

In *Kudaman* we are told the adventures of the hero in acquiring wives, ten at the most. The main female character, Tuwan Putli, who is originally married to another man, becomes one of Kudaman's wives after he saves her from being decapitated by her father for having an extra-marital relationship. She is eventually cut into two, 'the two halves becoming two women maintaining

their original beauty', in order to settle Kudaman's and his rival's conflict. (ibid:6)

Cliche as it is, let us consider the double standard of sexuality here: Kudaman can have as many as ten wives, but one sexual encounter of Tuwan Putli can cost her her life. Kudaman's ten marriages are valid in the eyes of the tribe, while hers is considered an adulterous idyll. Indeed, society's mandate makes the female fate all the more grim.

Until now, our sexual relationships are still governed by this patriarchal bias. Late last year, for instance, in a TV program in the Philippines about women abandoned by or still living with philandering husbands, most of the aggrieved wives maintained: '*Masama pag ang babae ang gumawa,*' (It is bad if it is the woman who does it.) Expectedly, being a man, the husband is allowed to have *queridas* or mistresses, but when the wife 'strays', the community is morally repulsed. It becomes punitively harsh. Thus, the 'adulteress' is either psychologically decapitated or cut into two: her radical self and her guilt-ridden/shamed other.

The wife, of course, must never dishonour her husband. The first song the *Darangen*, which is about the exploits of heroes fighting wars and avenging honour, emphasises such a dictum. The hero Diwata Ndaw Gibon marries the 'beautiful princess' Aya Paganay Ba'i, who is advised by her brother to -

*Promise me that you will never
turn against your own dear husband
But rather, do your best, give him
More honor and prestige so that
He will bring more fame to Bumbaran!*

(ibid:7)

And as this 'dear husband' dreams of transforming his small kingdom into 'a dominant one', he decides to take five other wives. Upon hearing his plan, Aya Paganay Ba'i feels 'the whole world crashing down', but she finally agrees to his wish - after all, was she not advised by her brother to give her husband 'honor and prestige?' (ibid)

Initially, one may accept polygyny as a fair practice within its particular cultural context. The epic explains that, after all, such a conjugal arrangement worked: The women 'lived harmoniously without being ruffled by misunderstanding or jealousy.' (ibid) Besides, people from cultures which practice polygyny claim that it is a means by which the community supports its women who have no economic resources. However, I doubt the 'exercise of will' of the woman involved in such an arrangement. With little chance for personal autonomy - because she is not equipped to seek it by a society that believes her place is the home - what voice can she raise when her husband decides to have ten wives?

My critical position on this culturally specific practice reminds me of an incident at an international poetry festival which I attended in Kuala Lumpur. A European female delegate asked about the power of women in Muslim communities in Malaysia. While the Malaysian women in that forum were hardly allowed to answer (being ignored by the chair), the male delegates outdid each other in explaining *for* them. One Middle-Eastern male poet was quite offended that a meddling Other would question Islamic culture. That incident makes me wonder now whether, being a non-indigene critiquing the sexual politics in the literature of indigenous peoples, I am also courting offense. 'Mind your own business. Live and let live.' seems to be the pre-emptory defence of the 'periphery' against the 'centre'.

However, can any tradition be beyond question, when it inhibits justice and free choice that are a requisite to a dignified life? Note that in the epic *Darangen*, all the women 'annexed' to Datu Gibon's name, in order to expand his kingdom, did not choose their fate with a free will. We cannot trivialise, least of all erase, their possible initial resistance, even though they eventually lived peacefully within the polygynous household. The less powerful will, displaced or conditioned by the edict of the superior Other, cannot always be explained or justified as a 'natural' constituent of an indisputable culture. Thus, a female doctor from Sudan who, as a child, had undergone genital mutilation raises this critical question: 'Why is it that only when *women* [italics mine] want to bring about

change for their own benefit do culture and custom become sacred and unchangeable?' (Bone,'93:9)

The reason is - culture and custom are the best excuse for *controlling* women. However, among women for whom culture and custom are not a tight enough leash, there are other means of restraint. Another song of the *Darangen* tells about how, in a battle, the warrior Madali defeats a recalcitrant princess and her magic. Of course, when she is defeated, she is 'so depressed that she wants to end her life.' Apparently, even the narrative puts the woman in her proper place. We are shown that deep within this potential woman-warrior, she is faint-hearted and self-destructive, playing the fool's role in a drama of male dominance. This story also features Madali's cousin, Bantugan, 'a first-class playboy', and his 'various excursions into many places and lands courting ladies or visiting his women.' (*Darangen*, Vol.2,'87:Preface) His sister Lawanen becomes his lover; but when he eventually learns about their blood relations, he blames her for their sexual iniquity. (Which is, even today, a common consequence of illicit liaisons: Let the woman take the blame for causing the man to 'sin'.)

The Sulods' epic of *Labaw Donggon* is also about winning maidens. Labaw Donggon is in search of the 'well-kept maiden'. This Lothario finds several women who stir his desires, and woos them all in the same manner. Each one is poetically sexualised in his eyes:

He likens her legs to the insides of banana stalks, and her thighs to the inside of split bamboo. He adores the swaying of her hips and her gracefulness ... "the well-kept" one alone is the object of his desires.

(CCP:8)

'Well-kept' - as in the family's prized possession - that will eventually be turned over to a husband for a lifetime of safe-keeping. One 'well-kept maiden', however, happens to be married, so Labaw Donggon fights with her husband, who eventually imprisons him. Labaw is rescued by his sons who kill the husband. Chided by one of his wives for 'his greed in covetting other men's wives', Labaw Donggon is defended by his brother: 'That is how all valiant fighters should behave.' (ibid:9-10) Thus, 'even in his

demented state', Labaw requests to marry the widow of his captor. When his wives threaten him that 'they will not restore his [magical] power if he weds the widow', he explains that a 'valiant fighter' like him must 'possess more women, so that he may have more sons who will inherit *his name* [italics mine] and who will become just as mighty as he.' The wives accept his wish and help him restore his power. (ibid)

Even now, in many cultures, *his name* (the patriarch's honour) is still the icon which subdues a woman's will. The warrior's impulse to colonise women in his quest for property and progeny is timeless. From the early wars to the current Bosnian conflict, conquerors often view women like countries which need to be subjugated. Napoleon Bonaparte said, 'Nature intended women to be our slaves ... they are our property... They belong to us ... Women are nothing but machines producing children ...' (in Feria,'91:3) The wives in the *Darangen* seemed to have agreed to a similar argument which used progeny as an excuse for female colonisation. However, we can justify this instance with the fact that, perhaps, the women's capitulation was not so much in acceptance of colonisation at that ancient time, as it was in understanding that procreation was necessary for the survival of the tribal unit.

Nevertheless, the women in most Philippine epics also protest against disempowerment - understanding, perhaps, that these patriarchal maneuvers are *not* intrinsic to custom or culture - yet surrender power just the same. In the end, they always become the nurturing mothers who are generous to a fault. But must motherhood translate into martyrdom? Sacrifice for a worthwhile cause is commendable, but sacrifice in the name of a selfish patriarch, who believes that he must have power in order to breed more patriarchs, seems a foolish choice. It is as if a woman's ownership of a womb gives her no option other than to forgive, and be fertilised by even a culprit - and at the expense of her self.

We seem to forget the duality of the older mother-goddess, which writer Barbara Walker has recorded - 'the cosmic parent', who is both ruler of birth and of death. As Walker writes, during the Middle Ages, this kind of mother-goddess was suppressed and

eventually replaced by male gods: 'Men long since tore down the goddess's shrines, as Christian gospels commanded them to.' ('83:346) As a result, the patriarch was able to re-order the world according to his preferences. The world must become his playing field - and, in the epics, among the more popular sport of the hero is winning the hand of the woman after a contest with another man. Such is the story of the *Tuwaang Epic Cycle* of the Manuvu. Tuwaang attends a wedding, where the groom cannot meet the bride price, so the hero saves the situation by taking the groom's place. The bride decides to sit beside Tuwaang. Fighting, of course, breaks out. (CCP:12)

This epic begins with the *tabbayanon* or 'proem', not necessarily related to the epic's story, which 'focuses on the older of two sisters ... who deviated from traditional ways by engaging in premarital relations. ... Conscious of the transgression, the girl decides to commit suicide.'

*For what else could be the reason
for living
Father's precepts have been
broken,
His admonitions violated
Because of my indiscretion.*

(Manuel,'75:49)

'Premarital chastity is held in high regard among the Manuvu, and suicide is often resorted to in order to erase any tinge of dishonor.' (ibid.) In which case, today's Filipina cannot hold the Spanish Catholics alone as responsible for her culture's obsession with virginity. There was an earlier father who had set the precepts which marked her sexuality. As Priscelina Patajo, in her study on the epics, concedes: '... folklore does not in itself prove that there was absolutely no sexism before the Spaniards arrived with their Cross and Sword ... The women characters in Philippine epics, for example, had minor roles while the men and their heroic deeds claimed the limelight.' ('72:199)

In Philippine epics, the female is almost always translated into 'sight.' Comparatively, in the western context, we remember

Helen of Troy who, as one of the most popular icons of the beauty myth, is 'pure soundless sight' alone - she only 'appears.' In the *Epic of Biwag and Malana*, a similar object of voyeurism is depicted:

*Reling sought privacy behind a bush,
Reappeared like a naked nymph, she dove
Into a crystal lake where lilies grew,
White flowers blushed in envy of her beauty rare.
Jealous of the lilies and water of the lake,
Two youthful eyes ravished her naked state.*

(Lumicao-Lora,'84:137)

To this day, the act of 'ravishing' with the eyes is a common invasive activity of men. 'He undressed me with his eyes,' women often say. '*Ang babae ay itinuturing ang sarili bilang isang "sight", isang tanawin, isang objek ng mata.*' [The woman considers herself as 'sight', a spectacle, an object of the eye.] (Datuin in Kintanar[a]:61) In which case, she is expected to remain passive. After all, as social theorist John Berger notes, '*men act and women appear.*' ('72:47)

'Appearing', as a lot of women know, can be intensely intimidating. How many times as an adolescent or as a mature woman have I had second thoughts about walking by the corner store, where men gathered to drink and oggle women? And how many times have I been chastised by a former boyfriend who blamed me if other men took liberties with their eyes? Reling of the *Biwag and Malana* story was probably not even allowed to echo these questions. Again, there is a no-win situation here. The indignation of the protective male, who discovers the peeping Tom, can be as proprietorial as the ravisher's. As expected, the incident eventually leads to a fight between the men.

I include the Bikol Epic *Ibalong* (an unfinished text) in this discussion, even though its authenticity has been doubted by modern Philippine anthropologists (which will be dealt with in the next chapter.) *Ibalong*, after all, is a significant landmark in my creative journey towards my own epic, and is also set in the region of Bikol. The epic's major female character, Oryol, is (according to Bikol folklorist Merito Espinas) a 'sagacious' snake-woman who is

more clever than the epic's hero, Handyong. (loc cit:'83) Initially portrayed as a monster, Oryol, 'champion of deceit' - as Bikol writer Jose Reyes Calleja describes her - cannot be vanquished by Handyong. ('68:14) In a sudden change of heart however, this monster eventually helps the hero conquer other monsters.

Espinas claims that the name Oryol must have come from the Bikol word *oriyon*, meaning 'envy.' He maintains that Oryol was actually jealous of the power of Handyong. (loc cit.) This female monster, consistently portrayed in many versions of the epic as the seducer with the siren song (Reyes, *ibid*), must - in a fickle moment - become the hero's ally. While Oryol is a potential epic heroine with powers greater than the hero's, she is of course kept in place within a peripheral and suspect heroism. She is the dark female Other, the vamp or the witch, who can only be tamed or made heroic through male intercession.

There is one Philippine epic which seems to have given the woman the lead heroic role: *The Epic of Matabagka* from a Bukidnon tribe (in the Visayas region) has a female protagonist. Writer Pineda-Ofroneo cites the thesis of Corazon Manuel, in which she writes about this woman warrior:

Matabagka, the epic's heroine, is actually a warrior princess, who, through magical powers, defends her people from invaders. The men of the tribe happen to be away so it becomes a woman's task to defend the fort. Interestingly, the epic ends with Matabagka marrying the leader of the erstwhile enemy tribe.

(in Kintanar[b]:32)

This epic is a far cry from the others already discussed, because the protagonist is a woman and her reason for taking up arms has more to do with necessity than a self-conscious attempt at heroism - it is not at the pretext of flexing or flaunting war muscles. However, much as we commend this alternative epic, we remember that she takes up arms, only because, (as Manuel writes) 'the men of the tribe happen to be away.' This suggests that combat is basically a male endeavour. Thus, compared to other women characters of Philippine epics, Matabagka is a 'deviant' character. As

A.T. Hatto explains in a study on epic heroines, the 'worst deviancy' of epic heroines is 'to forsake their feminine role and assume the role of men, whether as wooers ... or as wielders of power.' (Vol. II, '89:257) However, in the case of Matabagka, such aberrant behaviour is checked in the resolution - she marries the enemy warrior. That this warrior is an enemy instead of an ally suggests this warrior woman's symbolic defeat. She is reined in by matrimony, and the male order of the world is restored.

MANDATE OF THE HEROIC

It seems mandatory that, for an epic to become such, a man must win a war. 'Of arms and the man I sing,' so begins *The Aeneid*. Such celebratory opening couches the theme of all the Philippine epics which I have cited, excluding of course Matabagka's story: Men are heroic in war. This brings to mind fascist Filippo Marinetti's *Manifesto of Futurism*: 'There is no beauty apart from conflict. There are no masterpieces without aggression.' Almost as if it were eulogising the nature of the epic, his manifesto further reads: 'We want to extol war - militarism, patriotism, the anarchist's destructive gesture, the glorious death-giving ideas and - contempt for women!' (in Wolff, '76:258) This statement echoes feminist Susan Brownmiller's view of war - though made in protest rather than in applause - 'War provides men with the perfect psychological backdrop to give vent to their contempt for women ... [who are] peripheral, irrelevant to the world that counts, passive spectators to the action in the center of the ring.' ('75:54) Such is the case in the epics discussed. There are no real epic heroines, except for the 'deviant' Matabagka. There are only 'heroes.'

My use of the term 'hero' does not only mean 'protagonist.' Epic heroism obviously has two requirements: man and his courage in combat. In her book on Philippine epics, Jovita Castro depicts the epic hero as a 'brave warrior' who, 'after each episode [usually a battle], ... comes out even more dazzling.' (op cit:3) Filipino Jesuit priest Miguel Bernad contextualises this warrior against a heroic age of the Philippine 'Pre-Spanish Pre-Christian era, ... when every brave was a "Malakas" (Strong) and every maiden a "Maganda" (Beautiful).' ('66:290) Such obvious gender binaries in this

description of the heroic age leaves no room for a female protagonist to take an active part in heroic endeavours. Similarly, in heroic poems of the Old English times, there is 'little room for either a churl or a woman', because of the 'august presences' of 'the earl and the churchman', as English writer George K. Anderson confirms. ('66:95)

In the Homeric epics, the hero is also a man engaged in 'superhuman deeds in battle.' (Abrams,'88:52) The Iliad's heroes are (according to Beye) 'leader[s] of men.' (op cit:85) ' "Young man" is synonymous with "hero." ... In heroic societies, ... a young man could acquire a real and lasting name only when he had achieved an exploit, often witnessed by visual evidence, such as a head or part thereof, to the effect that he had taken a life.' (Hatto:223) In his book Storytelling And Mythmaking. Images from Film and Literature, Frank McConnel finds that the epic hero is also male, who, however, goes beyond the physical scenario of the battlefield. To McConnel, the epic hero is 'the founder', 'the primal king', 'the representative and the interpreter of the gods.' He considers 'the patriarchs from Adam to Moses ... [as] heroes founding communities under God's virtual presence, His Law.' ('79:26) Lord Raglan's 'list of 22 items that widely characterise the heroic life', affirms such an image of the male ruler descended from the deity. The hero is of noble birth, 'reputed to be the son of a god', who eventually 'marries a princess' and 'becomes a king.' (in Hatto, Vol. I:6)

In another vein, mythologist Joseph Campbell envisions the 'mythological hero' as a 'redeeming hero' with a spiritual dimension. This 'carrier of the shining blade, whose blow, whose touch, whose existence, will liberate the land', is the 'champion of creative life' pitted against 'the ogre-tyrant who is the champion of the prodigious fact.' But this liberator is not always male. 'The hero ... is the man or woman who has been able to battle past his [her] personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, human forms ... The hero has died as a modern man [woman]; but as eternal man [woman] - perfected, unspecific, universal man [woman] - he [she] has been reborn.' ('75:22-4, 284-5) It is all very well that Campbell acknowledges female heroism, but that he linguistically omits her from his discourse makes me wonder

whether this acknowledgment is mere tokenism or whether female heroism is such a rarity, that the idea is actually outside of our consciousness - basically, 'hero' means 'man.'

Having now explored the landscape of 'heroism' in Philippine ethno-epics and in explanations of the mythological heroic identity, I conclude that such a landscape is male territory. The male warrior in battle gear, adored and adorned like an icon, is the image which threads all of the cited texts - indeed, 'of arms and the man' do they sing. The woman is almost always only incidental. She is but a space between the warp and woof of the woven story. Generally, she has two roles to play: a man's reason or excuse to be heroic - as his cause for, or prize of, war - or an added adornment to the heroic narrative. If and when she is promoted to a more active character, she is usually cast in stereotypical roles, which are still defined by the male image-repertoire. Eventually, if and when she rises above these roles as a possible hero, she is reined in by a more powerful male character.

This mythological 'naming' of woman - which disempowers her - in our and other culture's indigenous or traditional epics is not unlike the actual categorisation of women in colonised Philippines. In which case, I reiterate my earlier supposition that the baptism of female identity (within patriarchal terms) in the hands of the Western Other is only an affirmation of ancient names. No wonder, such names have prospered, so that in many narratives now, the female protagonist hardly becomes 'heroic' beyond domestic terms. As Feria notes: 'For heroines we have in profusion, provided they concentrate on cutting out flags, heroism behind the cooking pot. But heroism of the mind is not so easily accepted, unless it involves traditional compliance with a purely supportive feminine role.' ('91:63)

THE EPIC TRADITION



*Remember this song.
Tomorrow, I will unravel
its weave. I will tell you
the tale of each strand,
even the tales before it*

Prologue

In contrast to the 'male' narratives discussed in the previous chapter, I had considered my own poem a 'woman's epic' when I began writing it. I had given it a name, even as I questioned naming. Upon finishing my work, however, I wondered whether I had betrayed my thesis of 'namelessness' or had been presumptuous. Qualifying the poem as a woman-specific text at the early stages of my writing was understandable, but calling it 'epic' was another story. 'Epic' after all - especially in its iconic sense - is such a grandiose claim. But, as I write this documentation, I assure myself that I *had* to name/identify my form at the beginning of the creative process, in order to have some working direction. According to du Bois, 'that which has no name ... [is] 'powerless to claim its own existence.' (loc cit)

Initially, I only had an uninformed sense of the epic, a memory of it from earlier readings. Poetry, magnitude, life's panoramic grandeur and the male epic hero - these constituted my experience of the epic before I wrote the first word. Nevertheless, that was perhaps the best way to begin - with simply an instinctive sense of the genre, which was reaffirmed through my writing. Now that I have finished and performed the poem, I have no doubt that what I have written is an epic, a claim which I will attempt to establish in this chapter. I will explain the epic form and conventions in both Philippine and Western culture which, as I shall illustrate later, coincide with my own work.

EPIC: A TRADITIONAL GENRE

Whether in the Philippine or the Western tradition, epic is usually described as a narrative about heroic exploits; the 'heroic' being, as Sir William Davenant asserts, associated with the 'ideas of greatness and vertue.' (in Waith,'71:1) Such a narrative is either a primary/folk or a secondary/literary text, depending upon whether its authorship is known. This tale of powerful protagonists, which is always told with a magnitude of content and form, is also often based on the oral tradition of stories. In fact, the word 'epic' originally denoted something which is orally performed.

As Filipino folklorist Florentino Hornedo points out, the word 'epic' comes 'from the Greek *epikos*, from Greek *epos*, word, song.' It is 'an extended heroic narrative poem concerning the exploits of heroes.' (CCP typescript:1) In Philippine language, this literary form has varied names, which mean 'song or chant', belonging to different indigenous groups. For instance, we have (as Jovita Castro enumerates) 'the Ifugao *hudhud*; the Suban-on *guman*, the Maguindanao and the Maranao *darangen*, the Mansaka *diawot*, the Manobo *owaging*, *ulaging*, *ulahingon*, *ulahingan*, which are variants of the same word.' ('84:3) However, according to Hornedo, 'there seems to be no specific [generic] term for "epic" for which reason this foreign word has been adopted and filipinized as *epiko*.' (CCP:6)

Hornedo further writes that 'there are two kinds of epics generally distinguished from each other by their authorship.' The 'folk epic' or the 'ethno-epic' is a poem of 'unknown authorship and preserved in folk oral tradition' (ibid:7), as against the literary or 'secondary epic' whose authorship is known. (Abrams,'88:51) In 1963, Filipino epic scholar Espiridion Arsenio Manuel, noted that 'folk epics ... [are] narratives of sustained length; based on oral tradition; revolving around supernatural events or heroic deeds; in the form of verse; either chanted or sung; with a certain seriousness of purpose, embodying or validating the beliefs, customs, ideals, or life values of the people.' (CCP:loc cit) Homer's works are also classified as 'folk' or 'traditional' or 'primary' epics, because they were 'shaped ... from historical and legendary materials which had developed in the oral traditions of the artist's people during a period of expansion and warfare.' (Abrams:52)

There is considerable similarity between the features of Philippine and Western epics. Epic scholar Charles Rowan Beye, in examining the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, echoes Manuel's and Hornedo's definitions: The epic is 'a sung, or more likely chanted, account of the doings of either gods or men, performed by a professional.' The genre is in the line of the 'saga tradition' - it is episodic. ('66:7) It is also a poem of 'high quality and of high seriousness' which employs 'words in a very distinguished way', as

E.M.W. Tillyard writes of the English epic. It has 'amplitude, breadth, inclusiveness' and the writer's 'control commensurate with the amount included.' Thus, as Tillyard adds, it must be 'governed' by a 'powerful predetermination' of the 'conscious will' in order to weave a 'heroic impression.' It must also be "choric" ... the writer must express the feelings of a large group of people living in or near his own time.' ('54:5-12)

Hamlyn's Encyclopedic World Dictionary and The Glossary of Literary Terms share similar definitions of the epic; it is synonymous with 'heroic poem' - 'a long narrative poem on a great and serious subject, told in an elevated style, and centered on a heroic or quasi-divine figure on whose actions depends the fate of a tribe, a nation, or the human race.' However, 'epic' is also 'often applied, by extension, to works which differ in many respects from this [traditional] model but manifest the epic spirit in the scale, the scope, and the profound human importance of their subjects.' (Abrams:51-3) Such a concept of what is 'epic' is explained by McConnel. He claims that 'the quintessential epic theme is *founding*, establishing the elemental laws by which a great civilization governs itself, ... [thus] the epic may be the archetypal tale of the founders.' ('79:28-30)

However, in the Brechtian tradition of epic theatre, 'epic' is not associated with heroism or greatness. Such a theatre is a literary genre which German dramatist Bertolt Brecht designed to contrast with dramatic theatre. This epic theatre is narrative, rather than active. The audience grapple with and examine the dramatic action, but do not participate in such an action with the characters. As a result, their emotions are motivated into becoming realisations. Consequently, they are (so the argument goes) driven to political action. (Grey,'76:71-2)

What is 'epic' then in Brecht's theatre? According to Professor of German Literature Arrigo Subiotto (in *Epic Theatre: A Theatre for the Scientific Age*), 'the formal aspects of epic detachment and narration' were the inspiration for 'the fundamental changes, [which] Brecht and others wished to achieve in drama.' Subiotto argues:

In common parlance, too, the use of the epithet 'epic' implies a large-scale, panoramic span of events often covering a person's life or even several generations; essential to this is the vantage-point of the spectator standing outside the action and able to see it in its totality.

(in Bartram,'82:31)

As a tale of episodes, the traditional epic form is also echoed in the epic theatre. While each episode of an epic tale contributes to a whole story, such an episode can also stand as an independent narrative. Similarly, an episode in the epic theatre also, says Subiotto, 'stand[s] independently as evidence of a process taking place rather than a psychic revelation of characters.' (ibid:33) Magnitude, which is a mark of the heroic epic is, I believe, also intrinsic in the epic theatre. This theatre may not be a lengthy narrative with larger-than-life heroes, but, as a political medium, it encompasses a life which is larger than the life it portrays on stage. It spills off-stage in its ambitious aim to spur the audience into significant action.

Whether Western or Philippine, folk or primary, literary or secondary, or even Brechtian, all of the definitions/descriptions of the epic which I have cited somehow affirm the ordinary person's perception of 'epic': It always has magnitude, whether in purpose, content or form. Such a concept was what I basically started with in writing my own work. The other qualifying features of the epic - in its written and oral form - only eventually seeped into my writing from my memory of previous readings.

THE EPIC FORM

I will briefly discuss several features common to both Philippine and Western written epic forms: episodic nature, main parts, literary conventions and language usage.

With regards the genre's episodic quality, Filipina epic researcher Elena Maquiso explains 'that epics like the *Ulahingan* come from a large *kepu'un-pu'un* or root cluster of narratives consisting of smaller *sengedurug* or episodes which when sung by

themselves do stand as complete epic narratives.' (in Hornedo, op cit:4) 'Each song is complete in itself, although it is only a fragment of the whole epic cycle.' (Manuel,'58:7) 'Cycle', according to Hatto, means a 'grouping of episodes about a hero, a lineage, an event ... whereby they are more or less tightly related to one another.' (Vol. I:275)

In the *Darangen*, the recorded episodes are called 'books.' Short episodes of epic tone however might simply be 'epical fragments', which are part of a larger narrative. (Hornedo:5-6) This narrative can have variations. As Castro explains, new episodes may be invented to replace the original ones, though not necessarily consciously, or to add to them. The epic chanter's lapses of memory through generations or the audience's demand for novelty might be a reason for such inventions. (op cit:4) These 'amendments' to the original text may be done on either of the two sections of the epic: the introduction or the major narrative.

The introduction is either a dialogue or a supplication/invocation, while the major narrative is the text's main body which consists of several episodes. In Philippine epics, these two parts are usually separated textually. The introduction is expected to launch the narrative. In rare cases, however, the introduction may not have a direct bearing on the main story. For instance, in the *Tuwaang Epic Cycle*, the *tabbayanon* or 'proem', which is an introductory dialogue between two sisters, moralises against pre-marital relations, instead of setting the story of its hero Tuwaang. In the *Ulahingon*, on the other hand, the opening *Pamara* (Permission) prepares us for the tale. This *Pamara* is 'addressed mainly to the *busaw* or bad spirits that might be eavesdropping. The singer would like to inform the *busaws* that the song is not intended for them, hence, they should not be around listening.'

*Do not listen to my song
to my voice which is rising
hear it not;
my voice is getting louder*

*for we are passing the time
enjoying as one.*

(Pamara, Agyu, Manuel,'67:46-7)

In the Bikol epic *Ibalong*, the introduction is a 'supplication' of Yling, a bird, to the poet Kadunung, 'imploring the latter to sing of the heroic events in the beautiful country of Handiong.' (Reyes,'68:20) *Biwag and Malana*, the *Gaddang* epic, also begins with a supplication (called 'Invocation') to a storyteller, in this case an old woman:

*Afu Ola, we can't sleep; tell us of stories great
Like those you chant for newlyweds
Or on the night of wake when one is dead;
Of giant monsters or deeds of heroes brave.*

(Lumicao-Lora:135)

Though supplicatory in nature as well, the opening of the *Darangen* epic is nevertheless recited by the storyteller herself who, in what seems like a prayer, invokes God's blessing:

*May God grant me the grace I ask
That I shall not commit a sin
as I try to imitate the
different modes of life for is
It not our habit to find new
Ways to divert us when lonely?*

(Darangen, Vol. 3:9)

In the Homeric form, this invocation is typical. It is also made to a deity, usually in the name of poetic inspiration. However, it is not presented as a text separate from the main narrative. This invocation briefly addresses the Muse/Goddess, then immediately launches into a gist of the tale. In the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *Aeneid*, for instance, the epic invocation 'begins with the mention of a man, or at least of a human force ... [then] moves toward a summary of passions and tests to be undergone by the central character, and conclude (however indirectly) with a vision of the polity, the community, the city which the epic hero's agony will help establish.' (McConnel:24)

After this prelude comes the narrative proper. It starts by contextualising the action either in what I call the 'once upon a time' mode used for fairytales, or in *medias res*, which is 'the art of beginning in the middle.' (Merchant,'71:vii) In this latter device, the story commences at a crucial point of the plot, i.e., the event just before the great heroic task. Then, through flashbacks, the narrative proceeds to reveal the incidents which led to such a crucial point, and eventually moves towards the climax and its consequent resolution. The *Iliad*, for instance, opens with the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles over Chryseis. Achilles demands that he should have Chryseis (as his war booty), but Agamemnon would not yield her.

The epic might begin in the middle of a significant conflict prior to the famed battle. Such a conflict is eventually explained through flashbacks in the re-telling of the narrator or, at rare times, the characters themselves. Hence, the tale unfolds, rich with repetitions and parallelisms, which can even become an extended simile. Among Philippine ethno-epics, the repetitions create a motif running through the tale. The following are examples of this repetition of scenes, a device which I find almost ritualistic because of their constancy: 'the offering of betel chew, or getting dressed, or marriage celebrations', or the preparatory rituals for battle. 'Key words' are also repeated to aid the memory of the singer. (Castro:3)

Parallelisms are common between episodes, as in the wooing adventures typical among the polygamous chiefs of the ethno-epics, which I have discussed earlier. The extended simile is, on the other hand, perhaps more evident in secondary epics, where the author consciously utilises such a literary device. Virgil 'often makes its point of comparison with the narrative action, then evolves organically, true to the dynamics of its own image.' Such technique can also be found in Homer; for instance, writes Beye, 'the comparison of Menelaos' wound with the staining of ivory' and the simile which likens Paris to a horse. (op cit:104)

Epic language is not conversational or casual, but elevated. Writer J.B. Hainsworth describes the 'Greek epic style' as objective and formal - the poet hides his personality behind elaborate and

artificial diction.' (in Hatto I:34) Beye confirms such an observation. He writes that epic language was 'apart from natural speech, an artifice, handed down from the distant past, given over to describe the real in unreal fashion, and thereby creating a very special world and vision all of its own. It had the sanctity and grandeur of aged obscurity that is akin to the qualities of the English of the King James Bible.' (op cit:11) To a modern ear, such a language has an archaic ring, a mythical quality, which is in keeping with the heroic age it attempts to recreate.

The conventions that I have explained here - the episodic narrative, the two-section text, the beginning in *medias res*, the employment of repetitions, parallelisms and the extended simile and the elevated style of language use - are the most distinct qualities of the written form of the epic.

EPIC AS PERFORMANCE

'The original form of the myths and epics was song.' (Demetrio:55) 'No one can read the *Darangen* - one has to sing it!, (*Darangen*, Vol. II:16) 'The epic's material is sung, not read, just like the heroic folksongs of the Teutonic people in which minstrels were accustomed to celebrate the deeds of their kings and warriors.' (Reyes, loc cit) 'Since time immemorial, the *Kalinga* have sung the feats of their fictitious culture heroes, thereby proclaiming the bravery of their people.' (Billiet,'70:2) 'In the earliest times then, epic poetry was a sung, or more likely chanted, account of the doings of either gods or men, performed by a professional.' (Beye:189) 'Homer's epics 'were carried all over the Greek world by professional reciters, and their performance became a regular feature of certain festivals.' (Hatto, Vol. I:24)

All these accounts of the epic attest to its orality. Here are some aspects about epic performance gathered from different cultures: the ritual aspect, the style of performance, and the behaviour of the audience. First, the ritual aspect: Probably, the epic was originally a theatric rather than a literary genre. Mirroring the early age of theatre - which is linked with religious ritual - epic is, to this day, still a medium of worship in some cultures. For instance, the performance of *Pabuji*, an epic from Rajasthan, is 'a principal

form of worship.' (ibid:30) Epic performances in South and Southeast Asia (write Flueckiger and Sears) 'often celebrate ritual passages: births, deaths, marriages, and religious observances. ... In dramatic *Ramlila* [variation of the Ramayana] performances in central India, infertile women from the audience directly participate in the enacted sacrifice made by King Dasharatha for progeny - in hopes of themselves becoming fertile.' ('91:1,10)

The epic as ritual may, however, not be a consciously wrought or observed part of the genre. In epic singing, both performer and viewer may simply tune into - by sense and spirit - the stories about the beginning of their culture. In such an experience, they repeat the rhythms of their origin - what is in the heart of ritual anyway, but a process of repetition which takes on the quality of worship or a connecting with one's origins. In another light, Hatto explains the unconscious ritual sense in epic performance - "'primary heroic/epic occasions" ... [are] distinguished from occasions where pure entertainment is the aim. Primary occasions at their highest potency are cultic ... heroic/epic poetry as pure entertainment before only a handful of listeners to who it relates, will soon capture them in a gentle ritual sense, unawares.' (op. cit:147)

This 'ritual sense' is a comforting thought in this age of the television, when screen characters have obviously displaced indigenous heroes, even in far-flung villages in the Philippines. While it is true that up until now, some of our ethnic groups still practice the tradition of epic performance, one wonders how much of its 'cultic' element remains. If Castro argues that epic chanting was basically entertainment for a people who used not to have access to Wonder Woman and James Bond (op. cit:4), we can deduce that such a tradition is certainly in its death-throes now, having been taken over by technology.

Before we consider this tragic inevitability, let us recapture the styles of traditional epic performance using specific examples from different ethnic groups - among the Manuvu (an indigenous people of the South of the Philippines), epic singing is 'the highest achievement in the narrative art.' Two vehicles of

expression are observed according to E.A. Manuel: 'a long sustained and complete story and a melody that buoys it up. In contrast to ordinary singing, which is greatly restrained, epic singing is energetic ... there is not only weirdness and wild fantasy, but also freshness and aboriginal power that hold one captive from the beginning to the end.' ('58:25-6)

In the *Ulahingon* of Northern Cotabato (Philippines), on the other hand, the chanter has 'a drawling style', which 'becomes more spirited' during battle scenes. At this exciting point, 'the singer is said to be *abmanahansang*, that is, chanting his [her] lines in a stacatto manner.' (Manuel, E., '58:45) In the Ainu epic of Japan, the chanters, says Professor of Japanese literature C.J. Dunn, 'always lie on the floor, beat on their breasts with their hands, and chant in the throat, half grunting, half retching, with a wrinkled voice, slower, more relaxed than a Buddhist priest reciting sutras, faster than the chanting of *no* plays.' (in Hatto I:332) This primordial quality reminds me of the only epic chanting which I have heard: the *Hinilawod* from Panay. Even if I do not speak or understand the dialect, in which it was chanted, I 'understood' the strangely mesmeric sound as a familiar total experience. It was like listening to my pulse and heartbeat.

Epic chanting is not only an auditory experience. It comes with spectacle, usually dance and drama. Philip Lutgendorf cites these 'primary performance genres' used for an epic text: 'recitation, oral exposition, and dramatic enactment.' (in Flueckiger and Sears:84) The drama is usually heightened by dance. In the *Darangen*, for instance, 'the *onor* (singer), jumps into the *sagayan* or war dance, while singing about the battle scenes. He or she is joined by a partner. (*Darangen*, Vol.1:6) As well, the *Ainu* epic comes with what Dunn refers to as 'ceremonial dances.' (loc. cit.) Even Homer's works are performed with dance accompanied by the bard's chanting. (ibid:34)

The spectacle of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* is however more complicatedly wrought. The event makes use of, says Flueckiger and Sears, 'an array of styles that range from two-hour recitations by a single performer and informal women's singing

groups to all-night shadow puppet plays and professional theatrical productions performed for thirty consecutive nights.' (op cit:1) The *sendratari* (art-drama-dance), a staging of the Ramayana and 'a major form of contemporary Balinese theater', even 'utilizes such elaborate technical apparatus as lighting, sound systems, sets, and props.' (ibid:134) The epic performance is certainly a rich display of creative energies.

Nonetheless, the epic singer/dancer/actor is not only, as Hatto calls her/him, a 'creative performer.' (op.cit:2) She or he is an author of the text as well. Stuart Blackburn observes that 'oral performance adapts the written texts in nontextual ways, which produce even more fundamental change.' (in Flueckiger and Sears:106) This process of adapting and changing certainly means a creation of another text, a performance text. With the post-structuralist concept of the multiplicity and multiplication of text, we can conclude that the performer's non-textual adaptation of the original text is in fact a new text. It evokes, but does not 'photo-copy' the original. If anything, with the addition of spectacle, it enriches the primary text. Designing a full act and even improvising on the old narrative, in order to suit the occasion or the taste of his/her audience, the singer is actually writing poetry as he/she is performing it.

Finally, in order to complete our picture of traditional epic performance, let us also examine the behaviour of the audience of such an event. 'The audience does not ... appear to be restrained after the fashion of modern concert hall audiences. People walk about, getting food for themselves and talking while the bard sings.' According to Blackburn, this 'animated' scenario reflects 'the actual conditions of oral poetic performance.' We are reminded 'that no oral poet wanted or expected a "close reading" of what he was putting together.' (ibid:8) Filipina lecturer May Segundo, who wrote an M.A. thesis on Bikol folksongs in 1989, similarly describes the actual performance of folk traditions: It is informal and gets very lively, especially when the audience have had their fair share of drink. She also mentions the element of 'residual response' - Robert Smith's terminology (Bauman,'71:84,10) - which she claims is a gauge for a good performance. If it had made an impression, the

viewers may even be able to sing a line or two from the show, days after it is over. (Interview, Aug.'93)

A relaxed audience, spectacle, music, dance, poetry recitation and the ritual aspect of performance - these are the features of an oral epic tradition. This ethno-epic tradition (which is eventually recorded in a written text) must originally be in the language of the ethnic group which claims it as their own; otherwise, the authenticity of such an epic becomes debatable. This is the case of the 'alleged' Bikol ethno-epic *Ibalong* (originally called the *Handyong* or *Handiong*).

A QUESTION OF AUTHENTICITY

Here are the principal criticisms of the *Ibalong* - 'some epics do not have the original texts like the Bicol *Handiong*.' [italics mine] The epic *Ibalong/Handiong's* earliest recorded version (before 1867) is in Spanish. The authenticity of ethno-epics, which do not have an original vernacular version was, according to Castro, 'subsequently doubted by a noted scholar, E. Arsenio Manuel.' (op. cit:2) Hornedo, who has made the strongest case against the *Ibalong*, writes: 'In earlier listings, the "Handiong" (sometimes also called "Ibalong" or "El Ibal") used to appear; but this has been shown to be a fragmentary epical composition by a Spanish Franciscan Fr. Bernardino de Melendreras, and not a Spanish translation of an original Bicol epic as has been believed earlier.' (op cit:2)

Two Bikolano folklorists, Jose Calleja Reyes and Lilia Realubit, have however disputed the abovementioned critiques. In my several interviews with them, they maintained that the *Ibalong* is authentic. Reyes agrees that 'the distinguishing mark of an ethno-epic is its vernacular text', but argues that the vernacular text of the *Ibalong* is actually in oral form. Basically, the issue in dispute here is about language: Why is the original *Ibalong* text in Spanish and not in Bikol? And why, if there is an oral vernacular text at all, has it not been recorded all this time?

Reyes refers to the Breve Noticia Acerca del Origen, Cultura, Religion, Creencias y Supersticiones de los Antiguos Indios del Bicol, an account on the ancient Bikols which was written for the

Archivo del Bibliofilo Filipino (Vol I, 1896) by Fray Jose Castaño, a Franciscan who once lived in Bikol. In this account, Castaño mentions 'a fragment of a certain unpublished manuscript in verse.' (del Prado,'81:2) In an article on the epic, Reyes writes that 'the fragment as published into 60 stanzaic quatrains (in Spanish) spoke not of customs and beliefs, but of kings, of ferocious animals and monsters, of mortal combat between man and beast, of erupting volcanoes and a great flood, of a kingdom in the primeval land of the Bikols, of the invention of household utensils and an alphabet.' (Reyes: loc cit) To him, this unfinished tale is an epic fragment, and it was recorded not by Melendreras, as Hornedo theorises, but by Castaño himself.

Reyes and Realubit both reject the argument that such an epic fragment is only a literary invention of the coloniser. They speculate that this original text in Spanish could in fact be a translated recording of the stories native to Bikol. That an oral epic tradition existed is proven by Reyes, who claims that he has encountered people in the hinterlands of the Bikol region who can sing versions of the epic in the vernacular and, says Reyes, 'in an intonation different from the Spanish way.' (Interview, Dec.'92)

Realubit, on the other hand, remembers her grandmother who once told her stories about Oryol - a major character in the Bikol epic - and an *agta*, a Filipino aborigine, who narrated the exploits of Baltog, the king of *Ibalong*. Realubit also cites the naming of a kind of rice after Handyong, the heroic warrior of the epic. To her, these instances prove that the epic exists within the folk culture of the Bikolanos, and that it is not a mere creation of the Spanish friar's imagination. These purported facts from Reyes and Realubit fuel the speculations on the existence of an oral text during the pre-colonial times. However, the lack of a written document in the vernacular, which pre-dates the Spanish manuscript, remains a strong argument against the authenticity of the 'alleged' Bikol ethno-epic.

This Ibalong debate fuelled my own claim on the epic genre. Unconsciously or consciously, perhaps, I wrote my epic with the hope of giving my native region another epic, one that would

not be a bone of contention in debates on authenticity. This is the reason why, as I would explain in a later chapter, I had to research on Bikol prehistory and folklore, in order to write my epic: I want a tale which is unquestionably Bikol's. This need to be 'authentic' is also the reason why I included this discussion on the epic form and conventions in this documentation: I need to legitimise my claim on the genre.

THE LANGUAGE FETISH



*My lips forgot to grow
their private syllables.
I was too busy chanting older gods.*

Chapter II, Magayon

I have three tongues - Bikol, Filipino and English. I write, work, fret, love and dream in all of them - sometimes speaking them all in one breath. It is no trouble at all. But before I started writing the epic, I used to be anxious about my choice of language. I felt guilty when I privileged one over the other in writing. I was worried that I did not use language according to expectations. Or, that I did not use it at all. Before I could speak, I noticed that I would weigh words in terms of their cultural background for fear of tripping over some prickly political issue. I was word-scared. Once, I was frantic that I dreamt in the wrong tongue. I grew word-weary. I thought the epic would never happen. After a while though, I realised how I was enslaved by the cultural legacy of language. Indeed, 'to speak a language is to take on a world, a culture' (Fanon,'86:30), but to take on a world or a culture as dogma is not to speak at all.

Nietzsche described language 'as a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms - in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people.' (in Said,'78:203) Note that what is 'mobile' and involving 'human relations' eventually can become 'canonical' and 'obligatory.' But is not language, like humanity itself, in continuous flux? Language will still be in movement, even after a long period of usage. To attempt to freeze it into canon - as if one could - would be to deny its essential mobility.

This next lap of our journey is a word-road with different signs on language use: 'Use The Native Tongue.' 'Use Proper English.' 'Filipino Is Not Tagalog.' 'Write in Bikol Instead.' 'Write With Balls.' 'Write As A Woman.' These prescriptions, which are primarily concerned with the issues on ethnicity and gender, may impose a rigid road on the traveller. Thus, language as pure joyous sound, which does not hinge on an agitated political platform, may become - sad to say - quite incidental to his/her creative journey.

THE CURBED PLEASURE OF ENGLISH

'How I love the English language.'

'But you are a Filipino!'

'What a pleasure to speak, write, sing it - to celebrate it!'

'But you are committing a crime!'

A nationalist Filipino or my 'politically correct' alter ego is arguing with me and establishing a cause for guilt. The joy of writing in English is somehow dampened, as I am inevitably caught in the political issues attached to colonialism. It is difficult to escape this debate in a country which inherited English through a process of colonisation. Even now - and perhaps especially now - when English has become more than our second language, what may be called by nationalists as our 'old colonised ways' are being shaken by the dispute against the coloniser's tongue. To illustrate, here are some of the arguments in such a dispute.

Filipino writer and academic Roger Sikat wonders whether we need to learn English in order to acquire knowledge. He cites the case of Japan, which did not use English to manufacture its technology which is now the envy of America. (in Santiago, A.:12-13) Playwright Rolando Tinio even asserts that, in fact, English takes us farther away from knowledge. (ibid) Renato Constantino claims that 'knowledge of the language [English] opened the door to cultural penetration and of course facilitated the transformation of the Filipino into a consumer of American goods.' Constantino is contemptuous of the Filipinos' 'possession of English', which, to him, only made them 'understand the masterpieces of advertising prose and thus elevated their hitherto brutish tastes' toward Western consumerism. ('78:110)

Furthermore, Susan Cipres-Ortega notes that the Filipino psyche is endangered in the hands of English as a language and a culture, if we do not let that psyche grow through the native tongue, culture and orientation. ('81) Finally, poet Virgilio Almario assesses our language problem in this metaphor: *banyaga sa dulo ng*

ating dila [the foreigner at the tip of our tongue]. ('93:65) I say that it is not only at the tip but at the root of the tongue, there where our throat is.

Having been born with American English already ingrained in my culture, I feel as if the language has been stamped on my genes. As a child, I grew up with American books, then studied and lectured in institutions which taught Western ideas in English. Thus, the conflict is not just an incidental worry 'at the tip of the tongue', but a primary cause of the schizophrenic consciousness of a writer like myself - I love the English language, yet I actually have a native tongue which has been displaced by it.

This dividedness is affirmed not only in the Philippine situation, but among other colonised nations. For instance, Malaysian writer Lloyd Fernando tells an anecdote about his countryman who writes in Malay, but was also educated in the West. This writer complains about his bi-cultural situation: 'If you are a writer in English, you will be asked: "Why don't you write in your native language?" Then you will have to ask yourself [the same question].' ('90:39) This conflict is eloquently written about by Caribbean Nobel Laureate poet Derek Walcott:

Where shall I turn, divided to the
vein?
I who have cursed
the drunken officer of British rule,
how choose
Between this Africa and the English
tongue I love?

(in Gray,'92:54)

'For many, this devotion to the language of the oppressor is a source of anguish,' notes novelist and journalist Pico Iyer in an essay *The Empire Writes Back* ('93:59) Perhaps this is because, when the colonised remembers the difficult past, it is always with anger against the coloniser who brought *the scourge* yet, at the same time, *the gift* of this tongue. I do not have to go very far into the battles fought by my ancestors, in order to illustrate the vicious imposition of English on our native consciousness: at eight years old,

I was whipped by my teacher (a Filipino!) for speaking not in English, but in my dialect. I can agree, literally, with African writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o who says that 'the physical violence of the battlefield was followed by the psychological violence of the classroom.' He condemns the 'cultural bomb', which to him is the 'biggest weapon' of 'imperialism' ... it 'annihilate[s] a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves.' ('86:50)

In imperialism (in this instance, Western; though other cultures - the Chinese in Tibet, for instance - are equally culpable), 'language is one of the most complex forms of subjugation, being at the same time the locus of power and unconscious servility.' (Minh-ha,'89:52) Indian poet R. Parthasarathy realises the extent of this subjugation, and thus pushes English away - 'nothing is more incongruous than the presence of the English language in India. English will always remain a foreign language to us. I realised that I could never function as a poet in English.' (in Amirthanayagan,'82:67)

But, what if one actually *can* be an effective poet in this second language? What if any writing dysfunction is caused more by a disapproving cultural climate which rejects everything attached to colonisation? The arguments against English can indeed become a thorn on one's side. However, it can be a manageable thorn. One which our consciousness can pull out if and when we ask: What if I am denying myself the joy of using *a* language, and not *the coloniser's* language?

POST-COLONIAL RESOLUTION

According to Helen Tiffin, 'it is "language", not *Prospero's* language, that Caliban has been taught.' ('87:24) This argument of some post-colonial thinkers easily dissolves the conflicts attached to writing in the Other's tongue. Such a position corrects the mistaken notion that the English language of the coloniser (the centre) is the same language that should be used by the colonised (the margin). In an attempt to deconstruct the age-old power hierarchy imposed by colonisation, post-colonialism has come up with arguments that

weaned the English language away from its colonial roots. Thus, the prescription - 'Use proper English' - from the centre can no longer be wielded over the margin.

The authors of the book The Empire Writes Back explain post-colonialism as an endeavour which involves the struggle out of the colonised past, in order to construct a future which is no longer determined by the Western order. As the English language is part of that order (runs the argument), such a language must also be rejected - in fact, subverted - through the process of abrogation and eventually appropriation. By abrogation, is meant the denial of the centre's English as the norm; while appropriation is the act of decolonising by using the master's English - the language of the centre - in the mode and context of the subject's marginalised cultural experience. This subversive 're-placing' of language from centre to margin allows the colonised to create their own English which is distinct from the center's. (Ashcroft, et al,'89)

Turning the foreign tongue away is not the ultimate recourse. As African post-colonial theorist Chinua Achebe writes: 'Can an African ever learn English well enough to be able to use it effectively in creative writing? ... Certainly yes ... Can he ever learn to use it like a native speaker? I should say, I hope not. It is neither necessary nor desirable for him to be able to do so.' ('65:30) Such is the case, because the writer already creates his/her own English within the native experience. In doing so, 'the texture, the sound rhythm and syntax of the original language determine the shape and mode of the English variant.' (Ashcroft,'88:64) For instance, Indian English, which writer John Simpson describes in its 'manner of colours, clashing yet harmonious, raw and uncoordinated, with a lavish interest in their tone, ... is not a pastiche of the original; its vibrancy is entirely its own.' ('92:18)

Another example of appropriating the English language may be seen in Caribbean poet Edward Brathwaite's trilogy The Arrivants. According to W. H. New, Brathwaite is able to recreate local rhythms: 'calypso, limbo, blues, reggae, speech rhythms, drum rhythms, syllables that mimic crow noises and syllables that emulate rain ...' New explains that 'literature which uses the actual

language-sounds and syntax of the people becomes, then, an arena in which the people's political and psychological tensions can find expression.' ('78:368) In fact, the very act of using English according to the rhythms of one's own language is a political release of tension among colonised societies. We affirm to ourselves that the Western Other is no longer the invulnerable icon - it has been taken to task. As Vikram Seth puts it aptly, '... the English language has been taken over, or taken to heart, or taken to tongue, by people whose original language historically it was not.' (in Iyer,'93:54)

'There is not one English language anymore, but there are many English languages ... each of these Englishes is creating its own very special literature', as Robert McCrum, co-author of The Story of English, explains. (ibid:58-9) Philippine writers in English are also creating such a literature in an English with a spirit all our own. Linguist Andrew Gonzalez, who notes that no Filipino can speak the Standard American English [which is also at variance with Standard British English - which comparatively few citizens of the UK even speak], maintains that Philippine English should be considered 'at par with American, British, Australian, Canadian and other varieties of English in formerly colonized countries in Asia and Africa.' (Cruz,'92:30)

With these many variants of the language, how can we impose an English which is prescribed by any self-acclaimed centre? It is now ridiculous to raise the indignant question: 'But what are you doing to the King's/Queen's English?' After all, my English is *mine*, not 'the King's'. The plethora of decolonised 'Englishes' simply make the disputes against English as a colonising language irrelevant. We can no longer condemn the Other's tongue, because it has already been 'Served.' It does not belong any more to America or to Britain, but to the country that appropriates it. Thus, the language is already the property of Philippine writers who have coloured and textured it with the native soul. However, despite this argument, there are still nationalists who, in their loyalty to the native language, frown upon those writers' use of the foreign tongue. In the wake of this language debate, some writers in Filipino are even divided among themselves as to which *is* exactly their native language.

THE NATIVE CONFLICT

The language conflict (Filipino vs. English) remains unresolved, and is made more complicated by another debate: *Tagalog* vs. *Filipino*. At present, among writers working in the native tongue, this is the basic question: Which is really the national language - *Tagalog* or *Filipino*? Such a political rift will be dealt with in this section, because, in a way, it also affected my writing of the epic. At a certain point in my creative process, I also had to answer to the question: Is my language *Tagalog* or *Filipino*?

Tagalog was originally a dialect of a Southern region of Luzon (the northern island of the Philippines). From among the varied Philippine dialects, *Tagalog* was chosen by the Philippine government to become the national language and was renamed *Filipino* or *Pilipino*. According to writer and critic Buenaventura Medina, 'this national language is still *Tagalog*. *Filipino* is just a socio-political label.' (Interview, Jan.'93) Literary critic Isagani Cruz, however, opposes Medina's claim and its requirement that language usage be based on the grammar of the original *Tagalog*. (Interview, Jan.'93)

Cruz's argument is affirmed by Nilo Ocampo (in *Argumentong Kolonyalismong Tagalog. Girian Pa Rin*. [Colonialist Tagalog Argument. Still in contest.] Diliman Review), who dubs this privileging of *Tagalog* as *Tagalog colonialism*. He reminds us that what we assigned as the national language is only one dialect, and not the combination of all dialects. ('91:4) As a result, other ethnic groups are not keen to learn, much less use, *Tagalog*. Incidentally, I belong to an ethnic group which speaks another dialect, *Bikol*. However, for reasons which I shall explain in a later chapter, the choice of *Tagalog* as a national language does not make me feel colonised.

The issue of 'internal colonisation' is asserted by other ethnic groups. Cruz, however, resolves this issue by theorising that *Filipino*, the national language, is different from *Tagalog*, the dialect. He maintains that the language spoken in the streets is no longer *Tagalog*, but *Filipino*. He further states that the actual use of a

language is entirely different from what is prescribed in the *balarila* (grammar book based on *Tagalog*). In line with Cruz's argument, linguists Fe Otones and Paul Schachter describe this new language sprung from *Tagalog* as the *Educated Manila Tagalog*. Another linguist Lourdes Bautista calls it a 'dialect of *Tagalog*.' It is no longer the original *Tagalog* - thus, it need not be constrained by the rules of the original language. (Cruz,'92:30)

Almario, nonetheless, argues that this differentiation of *Tagalog* from *Filipino* has made its users careless. He says that if they make a mistake in *Tagalog*, they say, 'This is *Filipino* anyway.' Almario asserts that there is no *Filipino* yet - it is still being developed. (op cit:41-2) With this belief, he refers to the rules of *Tagalog* for proper usage. Meanwhile, Lilia Quindoza (in Diliman Review), another pro-*Tagalog* writer, responds to the charge of colonialism: *Tagalog* will not kill the other dialects. Instead, it will bring them to life. *Tagalog* will enrich the other dialects, in the same way that the other dialects will enrich *Tagalog*. (loc cit:58) 'Regionalisation', which means use of *Filipino/Tagalog* in the regions, will make the different indigenous languages blend. Eventually, everyone will have a part in developing the national language. (Jose,'88:3-4)

This *Filipino vs. Tagalog* debate has also figured in the writing of my epic. It has kept me on my toes - and has made me doubt my language. Undeniably, it is difficult to write within a context offering different languages vying for primacy. But when these languages are given strict labels or names, which come with do's and don'ts on usage, the writer feels tied, even manipulated. At times, s/he does not hear a word, but the word behind it, heavy with political pressure. This is not only in terms of culture and ethnicity, but of gender as well.

WRITE AS A MAN/WOMAN

Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood speaks of the syndrome which 'defines masculine and feminine types of writing with adjectives like "objective" as opposed to "subjective" and "universal" as opposed to "confessional," "personal," "narcissistic" and "neurotic." ' (in Minh-ha:27) The manner of using language is

gendered and reduced into male/female oppositions, which are fixed in a hierarchy. This is another language issue which had a bearing on my writing, not only of the epic, but especially of my earlier works. I was either advised to write with a tougher and more emotionally distanced outlook, or to be non-sexist, yet to celebrate my femaleness.

The advice - 'Don't be too emotional' - has probably been heard by most women writers. For instance, Australian writer Colleen Burke relates that when she was just beginning to write, male writers dismissed her work as 'too emotional.' So, she 'went away and tried to write what they wanted [her] to write.' She took a 'depersonalised stance.' (in Brooks,'89:27) Another Australian writer, Anna Couani, even used the third person and 'eliminated most of the qualifying (like adjectival, adverbial) elements' in her work in order to create 'an effect of objectivity, perfection and stasis.' (ibid:31) I imagine that their aim was to achieve aesthetic distance. According to Trinh Minh-ha, 'for a woman, such distance easily takes on the face of alienation ... she must learn not only to impersonalize the voice she stole or borrowed, but to internalize gradually the impersonal generic interpretation of masculine pronouns and nouns.' ('89:27) Such an impersonalisation is in effect a demand for restraint.

Restraint may also come in another form. Philippine novelist Kerima Polotan, who explored sexuality at a time when women did not write about 'such things,' says, 'Men write of lust and avarice and deceit and no one walks up to them and accuses them of having been guilty of these. But around the woman writer, this malice is a continuous swirl, fed by gossip and conjecture, and if the writer is vain or weak, the fear of her womanly reputation soon overcomes her and she compromises by writing advice columns instead.' (Ofroneo in Kintanar,'92a:53) The case of the late fiction writer Estrella Alfon, who was hounded by an obscenity suit for what was then thought of as a 'daring' piece of fiction, reinforces Polotan's point. (ibid:28) A professor of literature whispering conspiratorially, and with a knowing look, that a female poet's works are 'erotic', also illustrates the risk of gossip and even censure (and as late as the 1980's, too!) which could face a female

writer. On the other hand, male writers are endorsed in writing erotic literature - '*Lalaki, kasi.*' (Because they're men.)

Worse than this double-standard in writing about sexuality is another consequence of gendering language - equating the writer's sex with quality of writing. 'She who writes well "writes like a man" and "thinks like a man"; that used to be the highest praise a male reader could bestow upon a woman writer or speaker.' (Minh-ha:27) A clear example of this is the way Filipino writer Almario extends his kudos to Elynia Mabanglo, a female poet - '*Tila mas may bayag pa daw si mabanglo kaysa sa ibang lalake*' [It seems that Mabanglo has more balls than other men.] (in Cruz,'90:158) To write with conviction, daring, and virtuosity is to write 'with balls.' As feminist Flaudette May Datuin says (in kintanar), it seems that creativity, originality, and the capacity to individuate and to own are considered male qualities. Any woman who has these gifts is thought of as '*mala-lalake*' [man-like]. ('92a:13)

Against the background of such sentiments, one can believe that (Australian writer Joan Kirby says in Brooks) 'as a creation, "penned" by man, ... woman has been "penned up" or "penned in".' (op cit:17) Every macho male writer constructs the female writer as a lesser Other. Helene Cixous urges us however to break out of this construct: 'If woman has always functioned "within" the discourse of man ... it is time for her to dislocate this "within", to explode it, turn it around and seize it; to make it hers, continuing it, taking it into her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of.' ('80:257) It is now time to write as a woman.

According to feminist writer Rachel Blau du Plessis, 'female aesthetic begins when women take, investigate, the structures of feeling that are ours.' (in Eisenstein,'80:142) 'An important aspect of feminist writing has been (a) recognizing that language itself has been colonized by the male experience, and (b) trying to find a language which can describe female experience adequately.' (Petersen,'86:55) Thus, we resolve to listen to the body. The *l'écriture féminine* of the French feminists enjoins women to read

and write with their bodies. We should become what Doris Lessing (in du Plessis) refers to as the 'vulval shape' which opposes 'the phallic tower.' (op cit:13) Write with the 'vulva' - and not with the 'balls?' This advice, which is echoed in other writing strategies that prescribe another gender exclusivity, is, sad to say, little more than an inversion of the patriarchal model.

After about four years of numerous non-sexist language seminars and consciousness-raising programs in the Philippines, I feel that some of us feminists have made a fetish of our sex as well. That we have also gendered language, and gendered it in absolute terms. That we have burdened language, which we had freed from its lables, with our own set of labels. I remember that at the early stages of my epic, I had to tread carefully, lest I tread on our toes, which I had made so precious like all our other body parts. So what have we done to language? Have we become what critic John Hanrahan calls as 'the neo-puritans' - the self-righteous 'social engineers' who 'talk in tongues'? ('92:3)

I am at this point, jumping the gun, and giving you a glimpse of the end of the road - my current position as writer and feminist. Perhaps, this is my exasperation getting ahead of me, getting ahead of us in this trip around the mountain. Or just a part of my position of anti-naming/labelling - the other side of the gendered coin. The unspoken responsibility of the female user of language. That side which I shall reveal more to you as we continue traversing the road.

PART TWO

UNNAMING

TOWARDS UNNAMING: RECLAIMING POWER

*We touch skin
and shed skin.
We remember self
and find another.*

Chapter IV, Sirangan

My creative landscape has three basic totems: woman/man, language, epic - all of which have been named by an institutionalised centre, be it the patriarchy, feminism, a colonising language, or a specific literary genre. As a consequence, I had a difficult journey around the mountain while writing and performing the epic. Initially though, I thought the given labels would arrange an unproblematic creative process. Naming, after all, constructs the concepts of woman, language and epic. However, in 'wording' them into reality, the totemic centre (patriarchy, feminism, etc.) also fixed their identity within an absolute dogma, ideology or tradition. It was not easy then to take on the task of a cartographer creating a new and personal road map.

I began to ask myself: What if I unname these totems, 'untotem-ing' them into concepts in transit instead? I can carve a new space as I circle the mountain, not as a plodding follower of existing signs, but as a creator of signs that are not fixed, perhaps even ambiguous, fluid, amorphous. Each step then would not be an ordinary pace, but something akin to dance, involving varied movements. I who have kowtowed before established authority was getting into mischief. Kimberly Benston's explanation, however, reminds me that this iconoclastic urge is probably latent in the human psyche:

... the refusal to be named invokes the power of the Sublime, a transcendent impulse to undo all categories, all metonymies, and reifications, and thrust the self beyond received patterns and relationships into a stance of unchallenged authority. In short, in its earliest manifestations the act of unnamings is a means of passing from one mode of representation to another ...

(in Gates, Jr., '84:153)

Unnaming presupposes *re*-naming (for culture abhors a nomenclative vacuum). Contemporary Indian writer R. Radhakrishnan asserts, the 'victims of representation ... [eventually] achieve a revolution against the oppressor. ... This 'discourse of the oppressed proceeds to unname itself through a process of inverse displacement; it gives itself a name, that is, represents itself from

within its own point of view; and it ponders how best to legitimate and empower this new name.' (in Parker, '87:208) Unnaming then is the decisive act of the named to wean her/himself from the centre. This phenomenon of liberation is the focus of this chapter: I shall tell you about how I came to understand unnaming as a means to reclaim power, which we lose once we are defined in inhibiting terms by an imposed language and its privileged ideology or tradition.

My tale includes: my initiation into feminism, the Philippine feminist setting (and how I related to it), my journey from English to Filipino, the beginning of my epic, and my eventual realisation that all beings cannot be fixed under one definition. This is a re-telling of the very early stages of development of the politics which shaped my epic and also of the beginning of my writing. It is a journey towards questioning the labels or definitions set by the patriarchy, feminism and language in general, which culminates into the thesis of unnaming (in turn, this will be explained and illustrated in Chapters 7 to 9).

My process of unnaming probably started even before I started questioning my writing and the anti-creative and absolute representations of my sexuality. I like to think that unnaming begins when one is acutely aware that there is something very wrong about the scheme of things, even if one is an accomplice in its creation. I recall well my doubt, with its undercurrents of rage, as a traditional female. I nourished my anguish after each welcomed disempowerment. I generously handed it around to friends who would listen, wept it to the priest in the confessional, raved it to the walls of my cramped room which looked out into a firewall - which was as impregnable as my well-nurtured victim status. Even my metaphors began to sing about my helplessness. There was a groping quality about my early poems.

*every night from work,
she proceeds to test for damp
the lingerie redundant on the line.
the wash are shadows of other hangings*

(*'In A Room To Let', Rituals, '90:37*)

Timorous, even when at the brink of protest -

*she concentrates upon the rosebuds
of the china, hoping, hoping,
they would break.*

(*'Dinner In Progress'*, *ibid*:31)

Which I always tried to resolve into a happy ending -

*... with a little light,
Their bodies will be on the mend again.*

(*'The Windowkeeper'*, *ibid*:67)

Within this victim consciousness, my poem about Mayon Volcano began. In 1987, with no inkling that five years later it would become an epic, I wrote a poem in English which I could not finish. It celebrated the beautiful female beneath the naming gaze of a man. It is too bad that I threw away that original draft in favour of its later versions. It was only later, when I realised that the poem was going to be my most ambitious endeavour to date, that I began keeping records of its progress. However, I know that the original manuscript started with the same lines which now open my epic:

*daragang Magayon,
in this half-light, you stun me.
you repeat a perfect crest,
a once-upheaval caught at its height.*

(typescript,'89)

I also recall two very basic female metaphors which I used for the volcano:

*a breast heaved and held
with no letting go of breath*

and

*skirt spread / unending lawn for all feet -
billowing, seeking all corners.*

(*ibid*)

I wanted the volcano to be the all encompassing earth-mother, powerful yet flawed. Unconsciously perhaps, I did not want it to be named as 'the Beautiful One', which is how we Bikolanos have labelled it - I was rejecting a local fetish. Besides, we had had an eruption in 1984, and the volcano was no longer the nearly perfect cone of which we had always been extremely proud. As a result, my image turned out to be that of a wounded mountain, pregnant with power. As a friend remarked, I was being 'unmistakably female.'

Writing the poem, I was ambivalent in my intentions - condoning the gaze, yet wishing to break it at the same time with another poem, a sort of reply to the gaze, which would protest against naming. At that early time, I already thought of two poems juxtaposed in contrapuntal dialogue. However, the iconoclastic voice could not speak. I was halted at the point when the 'name-er' says: *I can not love you with no name*. Because the mountain did not live up to the gaze's expectation of perfection, she was nameless; as such, she was not worth having. And the mountain did not know what to say to that. I wrote a potential epic, then set it aside, probably because I did not have yet the voice to protest. I was more comfortable with the peacemaking or pained, timorous voice:

*her nimble fingers straighten
his starched collar and button up a cuff.
and stray upon his sleeve,
half-clutching at its smell of soap
(oh, yesterday, it waved freely
with all her daily wash!)*

*then her walking breaks,
while half her chattering
is stolen by the wind;
her hand slowly slips into his
as she tips her toes
for that fatal hasty kiss.*

(*'The Wife'*, Ani '88:36-37)

In 1987, I became friends with several feminist writers, who could not believe that I had been suspended so long on tip-toe for 'that fatal hasty kiss.' These women literally nursed me psychologically. My anger and pain became the levers for actual protest. I learned about the feminist concept of 'patriarchy' for the first time - that 'there is no reality not already classified by men: to be born is nothing but to find this code ready-made and to be obligated to accommodate oneself to it.' (Minh-ha:52) I came to blame the patriarchy for all the oppressive definitions of Self that I had to live with. These definitions, which I discussed in Chapter 2, impelled my feminist advocacy.

PHILIPPINE FEMINISM

As a middle-class female academic trying to write poetry and at the same time break out of a traditional woman's role, I became a feminist. This section of my story is about reclaiming power via the feminist movement - about the nature of Philippine feminism, particularly among the writers who became my friends. It is about women unnamng themselves out of the language of the patriarchy - about how my poetry developed along feminist lines. As well, it is also about how I realised that some feminists can be as rigid as the patriarchs - that defining the Other only within the absolute terms of the Self is not just a male practice.

When I was initiated into the feminist ideology in 1988, Philippine feminism was at its height. Filipinas networked, organised, and rallied not only against the patriarchy, but against national issues like the US bases, militarisation, and economic oppression of the grassroots. They pursued the arrested struggle of the first feminist organisation of the '70's, the *Malayang Kilusan ng Bagong Kababaihan* (Liberated Movement of The New Womanhood, acronymed as MAKIBAKA, which means 'fight' or 'join the struggle'). As feminist Adora Faye de Vera comments, this organisation was 'nipped in the bud during the time of Marcos.' However, the new feminists of the '80's took on this defunct organisation's political objective - female participation in the 'comprehensive liberation in the context of a national struggle.' ('92:14)

Except for some of its members, who were actively engaged in that pressing struggle within a country rocked by political turmoil, the women's group where I belonged was basically a safe haven for a writer like me who was more interested in personal liberation. While I also chanted with my feminist friends against the patriarchy, I never got so far as to be politicised in terms of the nationalist issues of that time. But what could be more 'significant' for a middle-class female academic, who had an axe to grind, than a chance to rage within a context that validates anger and pain? I, whose only brush with political rallies was in hastily skirting them on the streets in order to get home, never felt that I truly belonged to the feminist cause.

I was a 'sister', only by my identification with the collective women who were also carving a personal space within the national struggle. There existed, too, their own process of unnamings within the greater battle to re-name the existing political order. At that time, when women were actively involved in people's struggles involving class, national or gender interests, these same women were, says de Vera, 'slowly developing their own struggles, not simply as particularizations of general issues but as definitions of their own needs and their own ways of envisioning their future.' (ibid:8)

Poet Evasco writes: 'In fulfilling the healing vision, Filipino women need to awaken to the psychological process of individuation and connectedness.' (in Solidarity, '85:24) This feminist perspective made me feel that, despite my non-engagement of the national issues, I was also legitimised - I belonged! I had a place in the ideological schema. I look back to that time and think that my cause as a feminist writer then was actually as self-centred as Alice Walker's reason for writing: 'It is, in the end, the saving of lives that we writers are about ... We do it because we care We care because we know this: *The life we save is our own.*' [italics mine] ('80:158) My advocacy was in literature - more like a 'literary advocacy', a fiction for comfort.

In what Evasco describes as our 'word-madness' which fueled the 'fantastic stories of our survival as literary women'

('89:3), we wove a tapestry designed with so much anger - anger with pain, the repeated warp and woof of most of our metaphors. At that time, I recognised anger as a driving power in the struggle to break the oppression caused by a patriarchal system.

into stone.

This struggle

Has turned me

into stone.

('The Poverty of Stone', Lina Sagaral Reyes, Ani '88:96)

*Ang babae ay hindi karneng dinuduro at kinikilo
ginigisa ang laman sa iyong mga pangako
nilalaga ang buto sa iyong pagsuyo
at ginagawang chicharon
upang maging pulutan.*

('Kasalo', Joi Barrios, *ibid*:43)

(The woman is not meat
pinched and weighed,
flesh saute'd in your promises,
bones boiled in your passion,
and fried crisp
to go with your beer.)

*Napiping himutok ay umaalon
At ang labis na gutom ay sumusuot sa butas ng karayom,
'Pagkat ang bathala'y malamig,
Malamig na estatwang marmol.'*

('Laberinto', Priscilla Supnet, *ibid*:18)

(The dumbled rage ripples
and the deep anger threads the needle,
because the god is cold,
a cold marble statue.)

To these poems of protest, I added my own statement with - I thought at that time - not enough rage. I always felt that my poetry was rather 'soft' compared to the gut-level certainty in anger of my friends. Even as I protested, I was still 'prancing':

*today, i am a she-goat kicking aside
the stupidity of fences,
and growing thunders for eyes.*

(Rituals, '90:15)

Such a protest ends in a celebratory note. I still wanted my happy ending:

*i love too beautifully today,
as if tomorrow i will die.
i even tie my hair from cliff to cliff
and invite tightrope dancers.*

(ibid.)

At first, I told myself that I was just a different voice, that's all - and that there was nothing wrong with me. However, there were times when I felt like an absolute outsider to the general feminist discourse, especially when some feminists would kid me about my wanting to marry, have children, or my being 'sweet', or my romantic escapades - about my wish for happy endings. In her new book, Fire With Fire, Naomi Wolf echoes my discomfort: "'Don't tell the sisterhood" or "Promise you won't turn me in to the purity police?" we often joke uncomfortably, when we are about to confide some romantic foolishness or unsanctioned sexual longing or "frivolous" concern about clothes or vulnerability or men.' ('93:50)

The worst times would be when the jokes (this time from a powerful sister) would be laced with condescension - towards me as a less-enlightened political neophyte. The pointed bantering would hurt. I remember a time when somebody labelled my writing in the sense that it was quite predictable: 'That's so like Merlin.' I even heard myself described, along with other women poets, as the feminine feminist. In effect, the sisterhood was also naming/categorising my difference. But I wanted to be like them so much, to be a true feminist. Should I have more gutsy metaphors then? Should I be angrier? I never told anyone that there were times when I wondered whether ours was true feminism (as it implicitly prescribed a mode of behaviour as much as the

patriarchy), except my younger blood-sister, who wisely counselled me against absolute doctrines.

In the midst of all this, I published my first book *Rituals*, which was a collection of early poems, most of them written before I became a feminist. During its launch, a male poet remarked about how erotic my verses were. I was embarrassed - how the traditional female suddenly displaces the avowed feminist in instances like this. That traditional image was needlessly underlined in a review of my book by poet Alfred Yuson. His comments flattered me back then. But now, as I re-read them, I realise that, while Yuson complimented my poetry, he could not help titillating the reader with an image of a rather prudish female whose poetry 'unveils with sophistication and sensuousness of imagery':

... Merlinda was as straitlaced and as *Catolico cerrado* as any woman poet could get. I still remember her shock at seeing one of the workshop panelists, the heretic Cesar Ruiz Aquino, let go one mirthful night at a disco to engage in some acrobatic breakdancing.

Bobis's poems break like fine glass, in large shards of poise and thought, before reassembling themselves with painstaking clarity. She is unquestionably Woman in her "I" poems, hurling challenges and deference with only the slightest hint of coyness.

('90:19)

I felt I could not win even with my feminist position. Among the male literati, I would always be the 'woman poet' (Yuson's words), who will first be a woman, then a writer. My voice would always be appraised in terms of my gender. On the other hand, among my feminist friends, whom I continue to regard with much respect, there were some who judged me - in a disparaging tone - as 'feminine' and assessed my work in those terms. This is not to say that all the feminists then were tough and burning with anger. In fact, there were those among them who carved out their own space in literature as voices *beyond* angry and rigid feminism.

Perhaps, my disappointment at some comments about my work had more to do with me trying too hard to belong to 'the coven' (as we called ourselves) and giving too much power to an ideology. As a new believer in the movement, I was too keen to please all the sisters, thus any dissenting opinion about my feminism and my poetry always disheartened me. I look back to that time now and think: Indeed, I had surrendered my consciousness to an ideology. Most of us do, especially at a certain point in our life when we most need an anchor. The good thing though is this psychological anchoring eventually ends - usually at a time when we find another source of inspiration or angst.

IN ANOTHER VOICE

In 1989, a Filipino novelist said (of my English poems) that I did not sound Filipino anymore. As well, in a critical tone, a European visiting lecturer asked, 'Why are you writing in English?' Prior to any post-colonial assessment, my choice of medium did not bother me at all. However, after it was questioned, I also started asking myself: 'Why English, really? Why not Filipino?' This doubt culminated in a poetry reading of the best Filipina poet writing in the native tongue - Ruth Elynia Mabanglo became my idol. I wanted to be like her. To my mind, she was the true feminist with her native gut-language.

Inspired by her works, my poetry took on a different texture. I began to seriously write in Filipino. I emulated the gut-level anger which I had so admired in my feminist friends. One of my early works in the language sounded so much like their poems, which I cited earlier, and which I thought I could never write:

*bida raw ako, tanyag na kandungan,
kamang uliran, bangong amoy-prito
parausan ng malas sa bawat uwian,
lahat ng iyong talo'y bawi sigurado.*

(*Pangalawang Awit*', Ang Lipad
Ay Awit Sa Apar Na Hangin, '90:50)

(so i am the heroine, the famed lap,
the exemplary bed, the scent of frying,
your body's relief from bad luck at every homecoming.
all your losses will surely be earned back.)

When this was written, I was more conscious of ungendering thus engendering language towards liberation. While some Philippine writers idealistically claimed that there is no sexism in *Tagalog* (Arriola:13), Elynia Mabanglo, who became a good friend and mentor, reminded us in a workshop that, as far as sexist language is concerned, *Filipino* (or *Tagalog*) is no exception. To a great extent, Elynia shaped my new voice away from the colonial (Western/patriarchal) influence.

At that time, I started looking out of myself, and even attempted to write about issues which concerned the nation in a Filipino language which used colloquialisms. My usual lyricism was still there, but it was already reined in by my effort to pick up the language of the streets. All the romanticism in my early English poems became set against a more cynical view of the world. This created a tension, which Elynia writes about in her introduction to my second book Ang Lipad Ay Awit Sa apat Na Hangin ('Flight Is Song On Four Winds' - a collection of poems in Filipino):

Tinulaan din ni Merlin ang mga suliraning pampulitika at panlipunan. Ngunit gaya ng mahahagod sa kanyang mga taludturan, personal iyon at pamilyar.

Hindi dapat kalimutang kabilang sa mga katangian ng pagtula ni Merlin ang likas at mahusay na manipulasyon ng mga salita para maabot ang kinakailangang salungatan o tagisan ng mga imahen, kaisipan, tunog at damdamin. May drama ang kanyang taludturan. Yaong dramang nanunulay sa karahasan at pagsuyo ng mga salita at parirala.

(op cit: *Introduksyon*)

(Merlin also wrote about political and social problems. But similar to what is evident in her lines, such writing is personal and familiar.

We should not forget that among the qualities of Merlin's poetics is the intrinsic and expert manipulation of the words in order to reach a necessary opposition or tension in the images, insight, sound and feeling. There is drama in her lines. A drama that treads on the violence and tenderness of the words and phrases.)

This and an appraisal (by Alfred Yuson) of my Filipino collection began to make me feel confident that my poetry was already being taken more seriously by the Manila literary circle. Yuson, the poet who reviewed my English collection, did not make the pointed comments about my being a prudish or 'coy' female. Was it because I did something else other than, to quote him, 'celebrate womanhood?' Because the rest of my poems 'owed no obligations to favored liaisons, rather to a personal sourcing that goes philosophically public?' ('91:10)

For a writer, it is a boon to be accepted - more so, to be considered relevant and politically acceptable. Nonetheless, I know now that among my Filipino poems in my second book, the least resolved were those that self-consciously tried to sound politically relevant - that begged for acceptance, so to speak. But there was no turning back. Something had happened to my voice. Whenever I wrote in English from then on, I could not sound like my old self anymore. I started weaving both voices, Filipino and English, with newly found subjects. I became more politicised. I knew that my poetry would never be the same again.

Before this full-blown engagement with politics, I had enjoyed an almost apolitical lull. When I discovered that I could shift between English and Filipino in my writing, I became enamoured with tongue-tripping which was not hinged on feminism or post-colonial issues on language. For a short while, language was just a repository of pure sound and joy. This was the season when the volcano re-surfaced in my consciousness. Once again, Mt. Mayon

inspired me - this time, to finish the poem, which I had set aside earlier, via the process of translation from the original English version to Filipino and back to English (This will be discussed further in Chapter 9).

From then on, I became bilingual. My new voice resulted into the cross-pollination and thus hybridising of my two languages. My English began to change and my Filipino turned out to be distinct from other writers using the language, as a poet friend observed. Some Filipinists also found my Filipino different from that of the Tagalogs, the native users of the language. (See Chapter 5) The editor of my Filipino collection even remarked that my Filipino was 'classical.' To these comments, I answered that, as I am a Bikolana with a different dialect, Filipino is as much of my second language as English. I can never use Filipino the way native Tagalogs do.

At that time, I also began writing poetry in Bikol, because I wanted to test the shifting of languages between three tongues. I wanted to experience how languages can merge in one consciousness, even in the writing of one poem. Be that as it may, I was never able to pursue my Bikol writing actively, because I was deeply engrossed with honing my metaphors in Filipino. However, my preference for Filipino over Bikol did not bother me at all. I did not get too concerned with the idea of Filipino (Tagalog) as a colonising language.

This brief spurt of Bikol poetry came in mid-1989. It was also the time when my poem about the volcano, in which I celebrate gaze and 'the beautiful one' was resolved. While I was finishing and translating the unfinished poem in English into Filipino, I was also revising its original theme. The unconscious desire to question the beauty myth and break the gaze, when it was first written, became a consciously wrought theme: unnamings or freeing the Self from inhibiting labels. When I went home to my region for the holidays, I conjured such a theme as I became almost obsessed with the volcano.

In one summer holiday, this mountain took on a different significance. I stared at it for days and nights. It was like seeing it

for the first time. Then, I wondered why I had never stared that hard before. I would have understood that patriarchy, feminism and any prescribing language or tradition can, like the gaze, also be broken. Each 'staring' day, a truth about the mountain also stared me on the face. I realised how much we, the proud Bikolanos, have made precious Mt. Mayon's nearly perfect cone and its fantastic eruptions, which provided a breath-taking visual display - so like political or ideological eruptions/catharses to which I have attributed talismanic properties in my dealing with feminism.

However, the mountain, by its very nature, refuses to become a fetish, as it cannot even be fixed into a particular identity. It is life-giving, but death-dealing. Perfectly shaped from a distance, yet wounded up close. Calm and still, yet promising fire. Lush with vegetation at one time, yet burnt and dry at another. Nurturing life on its slopes, yet threatening that same life in an eruption. It embodied the *yin-yang*, the unfixed thus non-inhibiting human principle, which I thought can also be adapted by feminism. The calm mountain reminded me that feminist gut-anger, like volcanic fire, has its own season which is not perennial. As well, in its duality, the mountain was an allegory for my newly found bilingualism - a forked tongue emerging from one throat.

RE-INTERPRETING THE ANCIENT

*What wisdom in tradition
that can kill.*

Chapter II, Magayon

We must re-wind time by leaps and bounds in this documentation. On the surface, it might seem that we will commence our travel in 1987, when I wrote the first lines of the epic, then finish in 1993, when I made the final corrections on my manuscript. However, like in all writing processes, the first word actually germinates long before it is ever written - and not quite consciously, so it is impossible to pin down exact dates. In my particular case, this supposed time of germination is also linked with a much earlier period, pre-colonial Philippines, which is the setting of my epic's narrative.

Even as I refuted the speculations on political power among pre-colonial women, I also longed for that idyllic time. As I speculated in Chapters 2 and 3, such a time of our history was probably still *his-story* - but then, how can one ever be sure? The only thing we can be certain about is that we want a better alternative to the present - so we re-interpret the past according to our desires and projections. This was what I did in my epic: I fused pre-colonial Bikol history and folklore with my current feminist perspective.

There are two important considerations in understanding my epic. One, while the epic is written within a contemporary feminist framework, its story and storytelling mode is actually as old as the pre-colonial tradition. Two, I am a daughter of many wars, thus my epic's war - while seemingly confined to an inter-tribal conflict of pre-colonial Bikol - draws images from the collective oppression and struggle (in war as well as in peace) experienced by women throughout Philippine history. For our understanding of this national history, I have constructed a rough chronology of events:

PERIOD	EVENTS
Pre-colonial	Inter-tribal wars
	<i>Women chanted epics about heroic exploits in war</i>

PERIOD	EVENTS
	<i>The mythical time of Daragang Magayon</i>
1521 - 1896	Spanish Conquest and Colonisation The Philippine Revolution
1902 - 1941	US Occupation The Filipino-American War
1941 - 1944	Japanese Occupation Second World War
1945 - 1966	Self Government Peasant uprisings against the oppressive agrarian system
1966 - 1986	Marcos Administration Political oppression and human rights violations The rise of the New People's Army (NPA), the communist rebel group of the Philippines
1987 - 1992	Aquino Administration Militarisation/'Total War' against the NPA -----
1987	<i>I wrote the beginning of a poem about Mayon Volcano</i>

1990

I decided to extend the poem into an epic that revises the story of Daragang Magayon

1991 - 1993

I wrote and performed my epic

From this historical outline, it is clear that while my epic is new, it is also as old as the women epic-chanters of ancient times. 'The story began long ago ... it is old. Older than my body, my mother's, my grandmother's.' (Minh-ha, op cit:2) It is as old as the mythical time of Daragang Magayon.

DARAGANG MAGAYON MYTH

The Bikol folk story about the mountain - which we are still circling - is a cause for protest. While it is about pre-colonial Bikol, it obviously mirrors present conditions of female disempowerment. This myth, which has several variants, echoes the gender hierarchy and our contemporary myths which make a fetish of beauty and maidenhood. In order to make this point clear, I have included here the most popular variant of the volcano myth (based on the version of Bikol folklorist Merito Espinas), which clearly illustrates the binary oppositions *brave hero/beautiful heroine* and *evil male antagonist/good female victim*.

Long ago, there lived in Ibalong the Chief Makusog of Rawis who had an only daughter, Daragang Magayon. Her mother Dawani died shortly after giving birth to the girl. Magayon grew up to be so beautiful, that many young men vied for her affection, but she was indifferent to all of them - even to the great hunter and powerful Chief Pagtuga, who showered her father with gifts of gold, pearls, and trophies of the hunt.

However, Magayon had a change of heart when Ulap arrived in Rawis. He was the brave son of Chief Karilaya of the Tagalog Region. He had come a long way on foot to see for himself the celebrated beauty of Daragang Magayon.

After an unusually rainy night, Magayon went to bathe in Yawa, but she slipped into the chilly water. In a flash, Ulap was at her side. He brought the trembling maiden safely to dry land. The frightened women-in-waiting could only gape at them stupefied.

Prince and Princess fell in love. Eventually, Ulap asked for Magayon's hand in marriage. She could only blush and cast her eyes down. Fortunately, her father offered no objection. Thus, Ulap went home to tell his people to prepare the wedding provisions.

Pagtuga was furious on hearing the happy news. He laid in wait for Chief Makusog to hunt, took him captive, and sent word to Magayon that unless she agreed to marry him, her father must die, and that a war would be waged against her people.

Magayon accepted Pagtuga's proposal. However, during their wedding ceremony, Ulap arrived, and a skirmish followed - Pagtuga was slain by Ulap. The joyous Magayon, rushing to embrace Ulap, was hit by a stray arrow. Linog, a burly henchman of Pagtuga, killed Ulap as well.

The lovers were buried in the same tomb. It grew into a volcano, which is now named Mayon after Magayon. When it erupts, the old folk believe that Pagtuga, aided by Linog, is agitating the volcano to get back the gifts which, following an ancient custom, were buried with Magayon.

('83:135-7)

As mentioned, this story has other variants, which I learned about only after interviewing some old folk in my region. Indeed, as Italian mythologist Roberto Calasso writes, 'no sooner have you grabbed hold of it than a myth opens out into a fan of a thousand segments ... And in each of these diverging stories all the others are reflected, all brush by as like fold of the same plot.' (in Lawton'93:51) However, the variants of the volcano myth do not diverge much from each other. In one, Magayon dies from a spear

which hits her as she shields Ulap. In another, she commits suicide after Ulap is killed. A third one creates a new tyrant in her father, who favours the belligerent suitor. These are very minor differences. Basically, all the variants have the plot of the popular version: Strong man oppresses or saves the beautiful maiden whose tomb becomes an active volcano which is named after her (the word Magayon contracts to 'Mayon'). Magayon (Beautiful) becomes Mt. Mayon.

The name Daragang Magayon means 'Beautiful Maiden.' Her most important feature, beauty, and the other qualities that portray a virtuous maiden, present a token heroine who is mere *sight* and *cause or focus of action*. In contrast to the active men who 'do', she is mostly 'done to', either by men or by her environment. Such a characterisation is alien to the nature of an active volcano, which now bears her name. But it is certainly very familiar to the Bikolano consciousness which, as I had mentioned earlier, regards the volcano more as the beautiful rather than the fiery or deadly mountain.

Daragang Magayon/Beautiful Maiden is a traditional myth which fans out into two contemporary myths: the beauty myth, and the myth of the virgin. Affirming the beauty myth, which translates the female body into a visual and sexual object alone, is our Philippine culture's love for *pagarayonan* (beauty contests), where young women and even children compete on the cat walk. The myth of maidenhood, on the other hand, prescribes virginity/chastity/modesty as the prized virtues of a Catholic woman. In our culture, men expect women to be virgins when they get married and to behave modestly at all times. (see Chapter 2)

The myth of Daragang Magayon, in the traditional and the contemporary sense, fixates on beauty and maidenhood. These requirements for ideal womanhood subjugate women in a system which is male-determined. The *brave hero* is always ready to protect the powerless *beautiful and virtuous heroine* from the *evil male antagonist*. This model of power relations is echoed in the gender schema of Philippine culture. (see Chapter 2) It is also typified in our indigenous epics. (see Chapter 3) It is an oppressive

theme, which women have inherited from myth and reality, and which we need to revise, if we are to enjoy a truly humane existence.

RE-TELLING THE MYTH

'The use of myths (transformed, remade, inverted) is ... the keystone of a methodology of female self-discovery and self-expression, of rebirth, recovery, rewriting.' (Cixous in Sankovitch, '81:129) Filipino fiction-writer Lilia Santiago puts it aptly (in *Ang Pinakahuling Kuwento ni Huli* [The Final Story of Huli]): '*A, lilikha siyang muli ng istorya ... pabubulaanan ang mga alamat ... Pabubulaanan niya ang lahat ng mga nilubid na istoryang humubog at patuloy na humuhubog sa kanyang pagkatao.* ['Aye, she will create another story ... she will disprove all the myths ... She will disprove all the woven stories that shaped, and continuously shapes her 'self.'] (in *Ani*, '88:74) And these are stories about the past and the present which are told about her as an individual and in relation to the larger social order.

In 1990, I decided to disprove the myth about Bikol's Beautiful Maiden. At first, I was more concerned with re-telling this tale only as a woman's battle towards personal liberation. However, as I began to visualise my heroine, she was inevitably re-contextualised against the larger picture of what was then an active nationalist struggle in the Philippines. My initial plan was to offer an alternative to the heroine of the volcano myth - to displace the passive icon of the Beautiful Maiden with an empowered female protagonist. Having decided that she would not become a war booty (as is the case with the traditional story), and that she herself would go to war, I came to identify her with the contemporary Filipina guerilla of the revolutionary left (National People's Army). This female freedom-fighter, popularly known as the *amazona*, provided a perfect model for my new heroine. Thus, my warrior woman was born and, with the vested interests of the writer in search of a hero, I began to turn my attention towards our national struggle.

Under the then incumbent President Corazon Aquino, the years 1989 and 1990 were a period of 'militarisation.' This counter-

insurgency measure of the administration (against the NPA) resulted to gross human rights violation - women and children were not spared. Thus, I who have never really been politicised in nationalist terms began to realise that Philippine feminism needed to engage the country's political struggle. As a late arrival at this realisation, I understood the necessity to extend my vision beyond the individual woman's pain. This was the time when I decided that I would write an epic about a warrior woman - an *amazona* contextualised against pre-colonial Bikol, yet embodying the current political turmoil. Of course, mine could only be a middle-class response: anguish, protest and write about the struggle, in order to comfort one's conscience everytime a mass grave of nameless victims is dug up or when women activists are raped, or civilians killed and rendered homeless.

In 1991, this fortunate middle-class academic was given the chance to pursue a doctorate in Australia. At that time, I was certain about my plan to write an epic about the warrior woman for my degree - but first, I had to know the real thing. So, like a predator who uses her art as an excuse, I arranged a meeting with a former *amazona*. The encounter was an eye-opener. It shattered my romantic notion about the brave warrior woman. It was a painful and embarrassing experience, one that determined the nature of my epic's protagonist, which I shall explain in the next chapter.

In a dilapidated house in Sorsogon (a province of Bikol), the former *amazona* lived with her husband and almost a dozen children (the eldest was around 15 years of age), some of them babies who could have seen better nourishment. Vicky (not her real name) would have been in her early forties, yet she looked older. There was a profound tiredness about her. She became animated only when she spoke about the situation of the armed women in the mountains, about death, and how she was captured twice when she was pregnant. With her husband, who joined us during the interview, she spoke passionately about equality among women and men in the hills. She wished she could go back to 'the movement', but, of course, there were the children to look after.

She apologised that she could not offer us a meal, because there was not enough food in the house. She, however, asked one of her children to buy some biscuits and Coke in the cornerstore. In front of her husband, she kept up the stories about gender equality in 'the movement'. However, when she led me out, she helplessly complained about a health problem probably caused by, what she described as, her husband's 'insatiable sexual appetite'. This unfortunate warrior woman could not even say 'no' to her husband in bed.

I, the fortunate voyeur, had of course the luxury to be indignant. I was about to leave for a scholarship in a first world country. I was off to intellectualise the disempowerment of a poor ex-female guerilla and write about it. 'Artistic cannibalism' must come to pass. I left that house with a realisation which was fodder for my epic: The woman's individual issue is still as important and urgent as the national struggle. The warrior woman cannot leave her personal cause behind, even when she goes to war. After that encounter with the *amazona*, I was convinced that disproving the Daragang Magayon myth means merging the woman's personal cause with the bigger picture of the national political order - and that both aspects should be given equal importance.

It became clearer then that re-inventing the past entailed weaving it with the present, in order to re-tell the female story. Thus, I decided that the nationalist struggle, the past and present tales about female disempowerment, the heroic epic stories and the traditional myth about the volcano - all must be gathered together into a new narrative. It was the best way to recast the Daragang Magayon myth, the only way to disprove all the oppressive stories which shaped, and continuously shapes the female self.

RE-WEAVING MYTH, HISTORY AND THE PRESENT

In early 1991, I left the Philippines for Australia with the resolve to create a warrior woman who could answer the needs of the present, both as a female and as a political leader. She had to be set in the pre-colonial past for two reasons: Firstly, the Daragang Magayon myth and the indigenous epics about warriorhood are set

at that time; secondly, that past has always been a rich ground for speculations on women's power. With these in mind, I began to read about Bikol ancient history and folklore. My major references were Bikol historian Danny Gerona's From Epic To History A Brief Introduction to Bicol History and Bikol folklorist Merito Espinas' Bikol Voices.

I wanted basic readings on Bikol which could inspire a partly historical and partly fictional setting for my warrior woman. I deliberately researched on my culture, in order not to confront any future question on authenticity, which our *Ibalong* epic has suffered. (see Chapter 4) I imagined an epic which we Bikolanos could call our own, because it would be based on our roots. Such roots would be merged with our present condition - albeit re-told into a new tale - in order to shape my epic's narrative. Based on the Daragang Magayon myth, my new tale has the following storyline:

Daragang Magayon, daughter of Datu Makusog of the Rawis tribe, grows up in the care of her nurse Sirangan. Datu Pagtuga, the belligerent chief who attempts to assault her twice, offers to marry her, but she refuses him. However, after Pagtuga helps Rawis defeat its enemy pirates, he is promised Magayon in a betrothal arranged by her father Makusog and his Elders. This betrothal is eventually broken, when - in attempting to rape Magayon for the second time - Pagtuga kills Sirangan. In order to pressure Rawis to restore the marriage arrangement, however, Pagtuga abducts Makusog and threatens Rawis with war. In the end, Magayon engages Pagtuga in a battle.

This plot comes alive in my re-told world of Daragang Magayon. Such a world is rich with mythological and historical references, as this following discussion will disclose. My understandings of contemporary women's issues of the '90's are enriched by my readings on pre-colonial Bikol history and folklore. Myth, history and present reality are woven together into the epic's six chapters: Bakonawa, Magayon, Pagtuga, Sirangan, Ulap, and Warang Pangaran.

1. BAKONAWA, a dragon-like creature of Bikol mythology, swallows the moon, thus causing a lunar eclipse. According to Gerona, such a phenomenon is prevented by the *halea/halya*, an ancient ritual in which the natives create much noise to scare the monster away. This ritual is also celebrated to adore the moon.(Gerona,'88:32)

Here, I employ both myth and ritual literally and allegorically. On the eve of Daragang Magayon's battle with Pagtuga, there is a lunar eclipse - a portent of war and sexual violence. I liken Bakonawa to the villain Pagtuga, the moon to the womb, and the act of swallowing it to sexual assault. The phenomenon of rape is drawn into the Bakonawa metaphor. The struggle towards female empowerment is translated into the *halya*, the women's moon-ritual. This ritual also serves as a setting of conflicts arising from class and colour differences - during the *halya* in the epic, Daragang Magayon refuses to dance with her slaves who are, as she says, 'dark like night.' (Kantada:15)

I wanted the *halya* to be a showcase of the discrimination (generated by class and ethnic differences) among women who are supposed to be 'dancing' towards the same goal of liberation from the monstrous patriarchy. Incidentally, this class and colour distinction has some bearing on our history. Tribal Philippines had three classes of people - nobility, free people and slaves. The original Filipinos were the *Agtas*, a dark-skinned people, who were driven to the hinterlands by waves of migration and colonisation. During the Spanish times, they were discriminated against by a society that became self-conscious about skin colour. (Gerona:6-17)

This racism, together with snobbery born of class distinctions, is illustrated during the *halya* and even after it through a pre-colonial Bikol sumptuary rule: the *pohong*. The women in my epic observe this social edict, which, according to Gerona, 'forbids lower classes to drink from cups or eat on plates for principals; if anyone breaks the rule, his/her stomach would swell.' (ibid:17) Though set in ancient times, this instance of class and colour distinction, can easily be a reflection of our present condition. I

come from a poor country where it is ordinary to build plush mausoleum-bungalows for the dead and shanties for the living. As well, we are also a people for whom, by virtue of their skin colour, the *mestizo/as* (the fair-skinned Eurasians and Amerasians) are more blessed than the *moreno/as* (the darker-skinned natives). Our visual/mental palette arranges its hierarchy based on lightness of colour.

In my epic, the *halya* is also a means to display two other Bikol indigenous practices, the *tagay* (drinking spree) and the *tigsikan* (versifying during the toasts). (Espinas,'83:68) However, unlike the real *tagay*, it is not the men but the women in my story who drink and toast in verse. During this toast, I employ two traditional *tigsiks* in the Bikol dialect. One is supposed to have a sexual undertone, which I erase by re-contextualising the toast against a social issue:

*Tinigsik ko ining mga linalang.
Saradit ki darakul, pararehong sukol.
Darakul ki saradit, pararehong gamit.*

I toast to all humanity.
Small and big, the same measure.
Big and small, the same use.

(Kantada:25,24)

This *tigsik* loses its bawdiness, because, in the epic, I replace 'measure' with 'worth' and use the verse almost like a moral, in order to resolve Daragang Magayon's doubts about class and colour differentiation.

2. MAGAYON, meaning 'beautiful', is baptised through what Espinas explains as 'the old practice of calling out names of ancestors upon the birth of the child, and adopting the name that was called out as the infant stopped crying.' (ibid:223)

I present this ritual as the symbolic naming of the female child based on tradition which may oppressively shape her consciousness. In my epic, this supposition is metaphorically affirmed through the ancient practice of artificial cranial

deformation. Based on an archaeological find of skulls, it was speculated that the heads of newborn babies in pre-colonial Bikol were intentionally deformed, because, as Gerona writes, 'a flattened but elongated head was considered a special mark of beauty.' (op cit:14-5) I liken this ancient practice to a dangerous trick of cosmetology forced upon the infant Magayon, in order to suggest the vicious imposition of the beauty myth.

In this second chapter of the epic, I contextualise Rawis against pre-colonial Bikol. While there is an actual Rawis locality now at the foot of Mayon Volcano, my Rawis in the epic is still based on the ancient political unit. This tribe is headed by a *dato/datu*, a chief who is advised by the *Matanda* or the Elders. (ibid:18) In this mythical Rawis, I illustrate the patriarchal system, based on my earlier speculation that such a system had probably begun even before the coming of the white man, and based, too, on the existing male order in my region at present. Having observed the authority of the father and the preference for sons in a typical Bikol family, I create a Rawis which pressures its *Datu* to have warrior-sons who will succeed him - the Elders maintain that Magayon must not be allowed to head the tribe.

However, in order to argue the case of succession in favour of his daughter, *Datu* Makusog cites the mythical/real women leaders in ancient Philippines: the matriarchal ruler *Sima* and the warrior-princess *Urduja*. These rulers are considered by Philippine feminists as proof of political power among our ancient women. While there have been findings that reveal Princess Urduja as Indo-Chinese and Queen Sima as Javanese, Mangahas, nonetheless, argues that the strength inspired by these characters is more significant than their debatable origins. ('93:20) Feria writes that the fact that we can imagine these women confirms our real capacity to lead and even take up arms. ('91:64) With a similar belief, I consciously mention these female leaders in my epic, in order to offer an alternative to the male-premised politics of the Rawis tribe.

Another current women's issue, which I present through an ancient tradition, is that of reproductive choice. Because the Elders persist with their demand for sons, the *Datu's* concubines

celebrate the ritual of fertility. They adore the *linggam* (the stone phallus), which is believed to have been worshipped by the native Bikols. (Gerona:10) The deaths of all the firstborns, however, drive the concubines to reject fertility. They defy the men and resort to birth control which, according to Mangahas, was actually practiced by our pre-colonial women. (Interview,'93) In incorporating the issue of reproductive choice in my epic, I mean to protest against the Catholic Church which, in the name of the Almighty Father, has usurped our right to control our own bodies.

The assault of our bodies in the hands of a vicious patriarch is illustrated through the hunt - prehistoric Bikol was a hunting-gathering region. In the epic, I use hunting as a parallel to the sexual hunt of the male aggressor for the female prey. According to Gerona, in an actual hunt in pre-colonial Bikol, Okot - the Pan-like forest spirit or god of the hunt - is invoked by the native hunter. (op cit:27) In the same manner, Pagtuga, who, in the epic, attempts to rape Magayon, asks Okot to gift him the *amid*, the wildcat. Pagtuga likens Magayon to this animal, which, as Espinas claims, used to roam the forests of Mayon Volcano. (loc cit)

3. PAGTUGA is the villain in the traditional myth about the volcano. He is the war machine delighting in combat, whether against an animal prey in the forest or an enemy warrior in the battlefield.

In this third episode, I characterise Pagtuga based on certain practices among our pre-colonial men. Pagtuga has a large harem and forty offspring, which was the case with the *Datu* of Burias (one of the ancient tribes of Bikol) who had 49 children from various women. (Gerona:18) In my story, Pagtuga prefers young virgins, which, of course, is more of a contemporary reality. Against my pre-colonial setting in the epic, such a characterisation of the villain might be considered unusual for an obvious reason. It has always been speculated that the fixation on virginity was brought by Catholicism. In fact, as I had stated in Chapter 2, there is even a recorded existence of a the ancient professional ravisher who deflowered the bride before the wedding.

Nevertheless, the odd preference of Pagtuga for young virgins has some grounding in Bikol folklore. According to Espinas, an old practice required that brides go through a test for virginity. The Bikolanos used the 'macerated leaves of *kadlum*' ... as a hair tonic on the newly bathed would-be bride ... The woman [was] a virgin if the fragrance of the leaves last[ed] for three days.' (Espinas:229) This could be nothing more than a mythical speculation, but I included it in my epic, if only to balance the fact about professional ravishers, which I acknowledged as well. And to further play safe, so to speak, I cast Pagtuga as the odd male native who, as a hunter in the sexual game, wants to deal the first blow and cause the first wound.

In pursuit of the female prey (Magayon) as well as honour in the battlefield, Pagtuga establishes an arm alliance with Makusog through the *Sandugo*, the ancient practice of ceremonial blood-letting and drinking in the name of brotherhood. (Gerona:19) Both *datus* agree that, in exchange for Magayon, Pagtuga will fight alongside Makusog against the pirates who plunder Rawis and abduct its women. Piracy is a historical fact - the coastal tribes of Bikol were constantly attacked by pirates, either from the South of the Philippines or from Borneo. As well, between feuding tribes, there was the *gnayao*, 'a form of piracy which [meant] robbing and plundering villages of enemies.' Commonly, women and children became the spoils of war as slaves and concubines. (ibid.)

4. SIRANGAN is a character whom I created - she is not part of the traditional myth. Her name means 'where the sun rises.' In pre-colonial Bikol though, the real Sirangan was a male chief. (ibid:18)

In the epic, I deliberately break not only the gender specificity of Sirangan, but also of the sun. The common oppositional model is Sun/Moon = Male/Female. In the epic, however, I let the moon symbolise the womb in the Bakonawa Chapter, yet, at the same time, attribute the sun to a wise woman. Sirangan ('Where The Sun Rises') enlightens Magayon about human worth outside of class or colour distinctions. Sirangan is clearly the *babaylan*, the

ancient priestess. (see Chapter 2) In my epic, she initiates a ritual which helps the victims of war recover their selfhood, if not their disappeared loved ones. The phenomenon of the disappeared, which is the tragic effect of militarisation under the Marcos and Aquino governments, figures largely in this chapter.

Sirangan is also portrayed as the *katambay* of Magayon. In Bikol folk tradition, this *katambay* is, as Espinas writes, 'the spirit assigned to individuals to protect them from both natural and supernatural enemies.' (op cit:225) Magayon solicits Sirangan's protection and guidance, even when she is already dead. As the wise healer, however, Sirangan refuses to be privileged as a messiah. I intentionally made her take this stand, in order to comment against feminist or leftist advocates who consider themselves as the leader of victims. Sirangan, in fact, shatters the icon of victimhood in the ritual of self-touching: It is not the healer who touches the victim with her magic hand; rather, it is the victim who touches herself in order to peel off her victimhood. This act of touching is inspired by the *haplos* ('touch'), a folk practice of treating the sick among the Bikolanos. (ibid:28-9)

Sirangan is killed by Linog. She is buried through a ritual, not of mourning, as in the ancient tradition of the Bikolanos, but of healing, which frees her spirit (and other's) from pain. The healers, rather than the mourners, sing the *katumba*, which I transform from the ancient deathsong (Gerona:23) into a liberating lifesong. Afterwards, in another act of liberation, Daragang Magayon removes the silk cloth around her head - it is usually tafetta worn by the ancient Bikolanas as part of their native gear. (ibid:14) In my story, however, I use it not only as an ordinary accessory, but as a mark of nobility, which Magayon denounces.

At the end of this chapter, Magayon also cuts her hair in the ritual of the *sanggol*. This practice, which sometimes includes the removal of the eyebrows, was an ancient ritual for mourning.(ibid:33) In my narrative, however, it symbolises instead Magayon's rejection of the beauty myth, which has caused her and her tribe so much pain.

5. ULAP is only a supporting character, far from the heroic protagonist who saves Daragang Magayon in the traditional myth.

This chapter, which focuses on Daragang Magayon's initiation to desire by her own choice, attempts to re-locate power from the male to the female character, without disempowering the man. To illustrate, after a violent encounter with Pagtuga, Ulap is rescued and nursed back to health by Magayon, a clear departure from that original myth, where Ulap saves Magayon from drowning. In my epic, he eventually becomes Magayon's friend and sexual partner by their mutual choice. This is my re-writing of the erotic from the woman's point of view: Her body is beautiful, because she is brave.

On the shore where Magayon finds Ulap, Sirangan is buried in a jar beside Dawani, Magayon's mother. This event is faithful to the ancient Bikol practice of jar-burial on (says Gerona) the 'headlands overlooking the sea.' (ibid:34) But at the same time, the manner of jar-burial in my epic breaks the ancient tradition of class distinction even in death - burying a slave with the wife of the *Datu* would have been taboo in the past, as it is unthinkable even to this day. Such a conscious negation of a real practice is my protest against the class-conscious status quo. On the other hand, my metaphor of the jar as different colours - 'red, almost brown, almost black' - echoes the intermingling of different skin-tones, which obviously resolves the issue of racism.

6. WARANG PANGARAN meaning 'Nameless One' is the new character of the heroine.

Several ancient practices are included in this episode. My heroine's relationship with Ulap, who was a freed slave - a *natimauwa*, as the ancient Bikols would call the lucky person (ibid:17) - is questioned by the tribe. Magayon's affair with Ulap is a sexual taboo. Such a taboo 'maintain[s] the class system. Any *maguino* [nobility] who married or had sexual relations with those of the lower classes, particularly slaves, was looked down upon his kinsmen. His act was called *otay*.' (ibid.)

I also employ divination in this chapter - 'the interpretation of movements of nature', in order to foretell the future, was a common practice among ancient Bikolanos. To them, 'the song of the bird *saya-saya* was a bad omen' (ibid:30) - as it is for the lovers in my epic. Such soothsaying was also done consciously in the past. The natives believed that the *kibang*, for instance, could answer a significant query, which determined a future action. Using the *kalasag* (native shield) or the *korosong* (hat made of palm leaves), the natives sat perfectly still on the *baroto*, a boat without outriggers, and asked their questions. The anitos were expected to reply by rocking the boat. (ibid.)

Magayon employs the *kibang*, as advised by the tribe, to determine whether she must marry Pagtuga. Such a ritual takes her to a subterranean encounter with *Magindara*, the mythical siren who aids fishermen in Bikol folklore. (ibid:27) In my epic, however, *Magindara* transforms from this predictable siren-character into an androgynous and unnameable being through her black stone-navel, which I created as a symbol for everyone's dark Other. By swallowing this stone, she turns into the different mythical monsters of Bikol folklore: the man with a horse face, the *Tambaluslus*; the half-snake, half-woman *Oryol*; the unseen *Tawong-lipod*; and the dwarf *Luwok*, which is said to live in *Sirob*. (ibid:223-4) This spectacular re-inventing of Self, which I created to concretely culminate my thesis on namelessness, happens in the kingdom of *Sirob*.

According to Espinas, folklore has it that *Sirob* can be found in the belly of the volcano. 'A green river flows in this kingdom where the *Tambaluslus* bathes to restore its invisibility and natural form.' This belly of the volcano is also said to have three lakes of various colours - red, green and blue. (ibid) This spectacle is woven into my epic as a setting for Magayon's transformation into 'The Nameless One Who Is All Names'. Such a transformation happens after she answers a folk riddle: *Ano an sira na dai minasabat sa sulog?* What fish does not swim against the current? The answer *sira na tigbak*, a dead fish, (ibid:73) is a Bikolano's condemnation of anyone who has no *disposisyon*

(personal determination and integrity). I echo this censure in my epic, but, at the same time, present 'dead fish' as a grim reminder of the tribe's ironically fated choice to take up arms.

The last ancient ritual in the epic is the *sakom*, in which a *babaylan* recalls the wandering soul through incantations. (Gerona:29) This ritual brings back Daragang Magayon (now *Warang Pangaran Na Kagsadiri Kang Gabos Na Pangaran*) into the world of the living, so she can prepare for war. At this juncture, I also return us to the reality that we are still en route to the other side of the mountain. Lengthy though it was, the journey within pre-colonial Bikol history and folklore was necessary, in order to shed light to our present condition. As well, such a journey clarifies the manner in which the historical and the mythical past were re-woven with a contemporary perspective, in order to tell a new story of female empowerment.

RE-INVENTING THE EPIC



*We are self-spun
in our waterlooms,
bodies weaving "once upon a time"
and "now", refusing to be told
how or when or where to flow.*

Chapter II, Magayon

The best thing about this mountain, which we are circling, is that it is not *terra firma*. Its instability of terrain and temperament challenges the traveler to re-invent her way and choose new roads. Similarly, the most rewarding gift from writing and performing my epic was the freedom to create content and form, which need not conform to a genre, as epic itself, by its very magnitude, embraces various possibilities. In the course of exploring new avenues of expression, I have mutated the traditional epic in content and form and in both its written and oral text.

At the end of my creative road, I find an old-new poem, in which most of the qualities of the traditional genre are rendered in a different voice. In certain aspects of my work, I have subverted tradition; in others, I have borrowed its strength. To illustrate these points, I will compare my own poem to the epic conventions which I have dealt with in Chapters 3 and 4. I will discuss how I re-created the features of the ethno-epics using my contemporary perception of the world. For this purpose, I refer to what Wendy Doniger calls the 'fixed' and the 'fluid' text - the written and the oral or performed text (in Flueckiger and Sears:4).

THE FIXED TEXT

My epic is a long narrative poem. It is about serious subjects - war and the healing process, which are both personal and cosmic. Written in an elevated style, my epic's language has been described as archaic and mythical. Its hero is a warrior woman set against the natural and supernatural world drawn from history and myth. On her actions depend the fate of a tribe. She also expresses the current feelings about war of a large number of people, especially women. These features affirm most of the traditional epic conventions (see Chapter 4). However, my poem is not a clone of tradition. Its theme of war and heroism, as well as its epic hero and form embody a self-opposing character - a Self-vs-Other nature - which is distinct from the conventional epic.

Contrary to the epic tradition, which portrays heroism in combat, I protest against war and yet take my hero to war. Such an

ambivalent attitude towards war actually began as a complete distaste for violence. While I was beginning to write my poem here in Australia, I had deplored Amnesty International's accounts on militarisation under the Aquino administration - the disappeared, the dispossession of homes, the strafing, the summary executions, and the abuse of women and children.

What kept on playing in my mind then was the story of Badette, a Filipina guerilla whom I interviewed when I went back to the Philippines, in order to research further on militarisation. Badette had miscarried while she was politically detained. She raised this question when I met her: 'Who likes war? I am not used to war. I remember my father used to tuck me in with a warm blanket.' (Interview, Dec.'92) Unfortunately, there is also a depersonalised father who pulls the strings and the trigger.

Mythologist Joseph Campbell writes: 'many are exhilarated by battle and turn warfare into exercises in bravura.' ('85:137) This masculinist view of war is clearly illustrated in the traditional epics, which affirm anthropologist Julian Burger's statement: 'For all warriors, the personal aim in fighting is to display their courage and skill, and so receive status and prestige ... warfare is also about power.' ('90:58-60) As well, it could be about revenge or punishment, in which women become primary targets. Referring to the Filipino-American wars in the early 1900, for instance, US General Hughes said: 'The women and children are part of the family, and where you wish to inflict a punishment you can punish the man probably worse in that way than in any other.' (in Constantino,'78:106)

In many respects, women become the victims of war, because of the power games of men. The Trojan women in Homer's epic as well as most of the women in the Philippine indigenous epics attest to this victimisation in the name of war. My protagonist has to go to battle; however, she does so not as an aggressor like the epic heroes Labaw Donggon (from *Darangen*) or Achilles or Aeneas. Hers is a war in the name of defense against men who glorify war. Nevertheless, she still had to overcome her quandary to fight or not to fight, before she takes up arms. In six chapters in my epic, she

justifies her decision to fight. Incidentally, I realise now that my anti-war position as author and person, is most evident in the fact that I end my story before the combat begins. Not only because I do not know anything about actual battle, but probably because I do not wish to know anything about it.

Escape or self-preservation of the spirit - whatever it is - my feeling about war is as clear as my heroine's when she hears the enemy arriving. She looks to the west with the tragic clarity of a warrior's eye:

Ay, but what a day to die -
this half-light is too beautiful for war!

*Kayhirap sugatan ng unang liwanag
na nakahalik sa laman!*

[It is difficult to wound the first light
kissing the flesh!]

(Kantada:116,132)

Like Arjuna in the Hindu story *Bhagavad Gita*, Daragang Magayon - re-named as Warang Pangaran Na Kagsadiri Kang Gabos Na Pangaran - is caught in a heart-wrenching dilemma: to fight or not to fight. This dilemma is what makes my hero different from many epic protagonists. I use the word *hero* this time, because *heroine*, says writer Suzette Henke, usually suggests the stereotype of the beautiful woman. (typescript,'91) Such is the usual characterisation of the heroine in traditional epics. In these tales, the hero and 'the heroic' in war are always attributed to a man, while the heroine - usually the man's reason for heroism - is often a powerless woman. In fact, in the mythology of the heroic, a woman, says Campbell, 'represents the totality of what can be known. The hero [who is male] is the one who comes to know.' ('75:103)

I contest this gender distinction in my own epic by creating a female hero modelled from characters in Philippine history. From the *babaylan* of pre-colonial Philippines to the *amazona* of contemporary times, we have a tradition of warrior women who led their own epic lives. The female guerillas, peasant

revolutionaries and union organisers - who have defied the Spaniards, Americans, Japanese, and Filipino politicians and military up until now - can easily replace the masculine model of the epic hero. In fact, one of the country's celebrated heroes Gabriela Silang, who fought against the Spaniards in 1700 (Arriola:31), became my major inspiration. Incidentally, I finished the epilogue of my epic while I lived on the street named after her.

I did more than replace the male epic hero. I attempted to re-write the concept of the 'heroic.' In my poem, heroism does not only mean courage in battle, which is true of traditional epics, but also courage after the battle. A whole chapter of my work lauds the heroism (unacknowledged in history) after every war. The warriors who have fought or died in battle are the ones immortalised in the great books. The women who keep the nation alive while the men are away - and who must live with their losses after the war - are barely visible in these documents. When the blades are buried, history, of course, hails the male leaders who get the nation back to its feet.

In an alternative perspective, my epic's chapter on post-war Rawis pays tribute to all female survivors who rehabilitate themselves the way a war-torn nation rises from its broken haunches, but without the political aplomb. These women test their bodies and the ground for the old firmness - *terra firma* once again! Such is another heroism which I want recognised in my epic, a heroism that includes a public statement against war. The woman, who has been a victim of war, can no longer be marginalised in discussions about it. She now tells about the other battle - the consequent struggle to heal - not for recognition of honour, but of voice which protests against violence. Unlike the traditional epic hero, whose exploits in war are narrated by a bard, my hero tells her own and other women's stories about the struggles before, during and after the battle.

The epic begins by establishing that the warrior is also the bard telling the story. This beginning is patterned from the opening of the traditional epic: in *medias res*, in the middle of the preparation for battle. In this respect, my epic is again similar to

the *Bhagavad Gita*, in which Krishna lectures Arjuna, who suffers from qualms of conscience before combat, about the necessity of taking up arms. (Campbell,'85:156) Before establishing this pre-war setting in my own epic, however, I already have another action - a 'war' of ideas - progressing in the prologue. This is my version of the invocation in the traditional epic.

The temper of my prologue contrasts with the usual epic invocation. In the Homeric and traditional Philippine epics, invocations are basically supplicatory in nature (see Chapter 4). The invoking voice has a subservient tone as it addresses the Muse, the storyteller or the spirits. In contrast to this tone, the two voices (mountain vs. viewer) in my prologue are contrapuntally juxtaposed - their argument being 'to name or not to name the mountain.' Such a 'battle of ideas' is replicated in the conflicting attitudes of Daragang Magayon towards war: condemnation of violence vs. justification of war as a necessity. At the end of my epic, an epilogue affirms such a dilemma and at the same time resolves the prologue's debate.

My epic employs a vast amount of the traditional epic's repetitions, parallelisms and extended similes. These features echo the theme: death vs. life/life vs. death. Again, we see the perennial war of ideas in these conflicting images:

volcano	destroyer/nurturer erupting volcano/volcano as breast fire/water monsters/lush life of the deep
hero	fighting/healing anger, grief/unbearable wholeness and lightness of being
dance	warrior dance/celebration of the body
song	war chant/life-affirming chant
colours	red-brown-black/blue-grey-green

These self-oppositional metaphors are, however, established in a narrative structure that deviates from the

traditional epic which is pure narrative. My own work is not only a narrative, because its telling is supported by dramatic flashbacks. In fact, my first draft of the opening scene even had directorial elements, as I will explain in the next chapter. Such a movement into poetic drama plus my hero's personal voice - which can be attributed to the lyric - makes my epic form quite ambiguous. In a manner of speaking, 'a war of forms' is embodied in my one poem: Is it epic? Dramatic? Lyric? Roger Sworder, Australian authority in classical literatures, made a note of my work's ambivalences:

What you were doing was realising something more than epic - more like drama. But it is not truly *dramatic*, because you have only one actor. And because the dimensions of personality that you are exploring are not personal at all, it is not *lyric* either, although it is revelatory of the innermost feelings of the character. There is nothing particular about your warrior woman. She is the personification of 'the female.' The fact that your work is about 'the female/feminine' rather than 'this female' is probably what gives it its *epic* spirit.

(Interview, Aug.'93)

To clarify this comment, I cite James Joyce's statement (in Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man) which distinguishes the three literary forms (the epic, dramatic and lyric) from each other: The form is lyrical if the 'artist presents [her] his image in immediate relation to [her/]himself; epical, if such an image is 'in mediate relation to [her/]himself and to others' [mediated by the narrative]; and dramatic, if it is 'in immediate relation to others [interactive].' ('60:218-219) In this connection, Sworder points out that since my poem has all these three features, which seem to cancel out each other, it cannot be categorised absolutely.

THE FLUID TEXT

My experience with critics categorising or labelling my epic had unsettled me much, especially during the early stages of my writing and performing. Australian poet John Scott said that, as a written text, my first draft of my first chapter would probably be unreachable by an Anglo audience, as they do not have my cultural

background. Seeing that the work had elements of theatre, he advised that I perform it, so it could be understood by Australians. Even as I took his advice seriously, I felt that I was being asked to conform - to hand over my work to the West. To seek their acceptance, if not approval, according to their own terms.

Prior to my decision to personally perform the epic, part of it (the early poem which later became the prologue) was produced (in early 1991) in mixed media - ballet, music and poetry reading - at the Cultural Center of the Philippines. I did not see the production, as I was already in Australia. Ballet critic Tita Radaic observed that the performance was 'a total theatre experience.' ('91:10) It hardly occurred to me then that I would eventually create total theatre at that same venue and at other places in the Philippines and here in Australia. To date, I have done seventeen performances of the epic. (see Appendix and video tape.) These productions coincide with the basic aspects of indigenous epic performances: Singing/chanting (or reciting) the tale from memory, dance and spectacle.

In late 1991 here in Australia, I learned about oral epic performance from Filipina art curator and writer Marian Pastor Roces. I had mentioned to her that I was writing and planning to perform an epic and she remarked that I was actually replicating a tradition. This instance became the turning point in my creative process. I decided to consciously write my epic for performance and eventually perform it myself in the tradition of epic chanting. However, away from the Philippines, I did not have the resources from which to draw materials. I had never seen epic chanting. I did not know how to chant. And I was not a professional ethnic dancer.

Under these circumstances, my performances of the epic, especially the earlier ones, were inspired but did not draw directly from the oral tradition. I created my own version of epic performance based on my available resources. It was only later, after several productions, when I attempted to pattern my work from indigenous material. Even so, it is certainly not a 'photocopy' of the oral epic tradition. I am aware that my performance is a

contemporary form - poetry recitation, music and dance woven together. Here is the story of this weaving of forms.

Before I came to Australia, I had been publicly reading the early drafts of the prologue of my epic. Almost in a subconscious preparation for my performances, I had also composed a tune for one of my poems, which later became the song for the moon-ritual. As well, I had asked a friend to teach me some basic figures of ethnic dance, which might be handy for socialising in Australia. This dabbling in footwork turned out to be an intense exercise, in fact a necessity, during my first year in this country. Ethnic dance became my means of coping with the typical loneliness of an expatriate.

Each night for almost a year, I played Filipino music and danced alone for hours. Every time I felt desperately homesick, I danced. It was like carving the emptiness of my lounge room and multiplying myself into many companions through movement. My dancing, however, was not simply a copying of traditional movements. Alone in my flat, I could 'freak out' and experiment. I reworked some of the soft and graceful folk movements along sharper and stronger lines. It was as if I were already choreographing the vision of my epic. The whole repetitive exercise seemed like a ritual towards personal empowerment. I danced literally for strength and, when loneliness was at its extreme, for sanity.

It is no wonder then that I always have this peculiar sense of an empowering ritual in my performances now. I tune in to my pulse and heartbeat. I even go through a process of psychological transformation. Especially after the warrior dance, I am exhilarated, purged, exhausted - yet very strong, as if I could fight an army. My limbs feel strange, as if, while going through the motions of the beings in my epic, I become all of them - that I touch my 'fish-ness or bird-ness or stone-ness or brine-ness.' That I become the empowered Other to my sometimes apologetic and uncertain Self.

On my very first performance at the Wollongong City Gallery (16June'92), I knew that my uncertain Self could be fractured, then made, as my epic says, 'whole as stone.' Nevertheless, even while I embodied a sense of powerful wholeness

in all my performances, I cannot say the same thing about the events backstage. Behind my Warrior Woman was my insecure Self wanting to please or needing to be accepted by the critic. For instance, after my second major performance with a theatre group of Filipinos and Australians at the Philippine Studies International Conference in Canberra (2July'92), my confidence on my work was shaken. Simply because Manila critic Isagani Cruz said, 'You have already been co-opted into the West. The West should have perceived your performance as Other. But they appreciated and easily understood it. Theoretically, they should not be able to make sense of it, because their words are too limited to understand the Other.' (In retrospect, this to me seems an extraordinary inverse cultural chauvinism, as though to say: 'if Westerners can understand the work, it is not 'authentic'.')

Raul Pertierra, president of the Philippine-Australian Studies Association, expressed a broader opinion: 'I do not see it [the performance], however, as being contained only within this [Philippine] tradition since it clearly addresses wider transcultural themes ... 'Daragang Magayon' is as appropriate in Australia as it would be in the Philippines ... 'Daragang Magayon' also illustrated the contemporary development of a national cultural discovering.' (letter, Aug.'92) But I was not appeased with his commendation. I was frantic for an alternative production, which could keep me from being Other-ed by my own culture. I refused to be found guilty of what writer Mary Louise Pratt calls as 'autoethnographic expression, an instance in which the colonized subject[s] undertake[s] to represent [herself] in ways that engage with the colonizer's own terms.' ('92:7) I remembered then why I had initially decided to perform, *precisely in order to* make myself understood by the West.

When I returned to the Philippines in late 1992, I began looking for indigenous forms of performance which could be Other to the West. This move was spurred by guilt and the need to be politically correct. However, because I had little time for thorough field research, all I discovered were, as Philippine authorities on indigenous dance Obusan and Villaruz describe them, 'neo-ethnic [forms] ... indigenous rites and dances for the contemporary stage.'

(CCP typescript:17) My region Bikol, having been thoroughly hispanised, had very few indigenous performance forms to offer.

After my failed search for the 'truly ethnic', I began to feel like an impostor. As I am no indigene, I felt like a pseudo-ethnic hiding behind the mask of political rectitude. In hoping to 'un-westernise' myself, I was presuming that I could become the native. Only then did I remember that I was not really interested in borrowing the pure form of the oral epic tradition - that I wrote my own epic my way and, in fact, deliberately departed from the tradition in the process. So, how was it that I was desperate to become traditional again? I started to argue against flaunting my Other-ness.

As Rana Kabbani writes, the 'Orient becomes a pretext for self-dramatisation and differentness; it is the malleable theatrical space in which can be played out the egocentric fantasies of romanticism.' ('86:11) I take this remark not only as an inditement of the West and its romantic notions about the Orient, as it was originally intended. I turn this concept around as a reminder to myself that I was overacting my Eastern *difference*. That I had forgotten the fact that I am also and undeniably in part a product of the West. Like all cultures, I am, as Said says, a 'hybrid.' (Hughes, June,'93:66)

The hybridisation of the Self and its creative output could have easily been the riposte to the comment about my work from a disapproving Frenchman: 'It is not aboriginal.' Before my performance was included in the Philippine-France Festival (for Paris, May 1994), the planning committee of the Festival had debated my participation, because my work was not 'aboriginal'. Fe Mangahas, the producer of the Philippine productions of my epic successfully argued against the French in favour of my work: 'Why do you still keep thinking of us as aboriginals? We have grown. This is a contemporary form now.'

Such an argument is echoed by art curator Victoria Lynn in her essay introducing the Australia art exhibition India Songs - Multiple Streams in Contemporary Indian Art: 'This preoccupation with authentic identity is seen as a denial of the temporality of

forms and a lack of engagement with content.' She adds that, in fact, 'artists have developed their own language in response to both western and Indian trends.' ('93:5-7) a similar position is shared by musician Sheila Chandra, the first Asian woman to hit top 10 charts in Britain in 1982; her work, she says, is 'a fusion of Asian music and western influences.' (Sparerib, '92:7) Similarly, the art of alternative Philippine musician Grace Nono blends ethnic and western forms.

Black American performance poet Ntozake Shange infuses the English language with black rhythms. American-Chinese novelist Maxine Hong-Kingston re-contextualises her Chinese Warrior Woman within Amerasian aspirations. Indeed the works of the artists drawing voices from the East and the West always emerge non-pure, yet richer. As Dutch-Indonesian textile artist Marianne Hulsbosch writes in her story about a Eurasian female artist: 'She will create her own world, a blend of East and West. She will be rich, richer than the Sultan's daughter, richer than the Queen of Holland, because she can be them both, at the same time.' ('91:7)

RE-DREAMING THE VOICE



*Watch my mouth then
swallowing the dark
and spitting redly the sun*

Chapter VI, Warang Pangaran

While circling the mountain, sometimes I imagined that I actually heard its voice - that, as Australian filmmaker Ross Gibson writes, its 'country had entered [my] bone and tissue.' ('93:6) At those rare moments in writing the epic, my sense of earth became palpable - its rhythms became my breathing. There was no laboured deliberation in my use of language; so that I wondered whether, by a gift of chance, I had re-dreamt my voice beyond the mundane conflicts of ideologies. Somehow, my timbre reminded me of a common village ditty sung among our old folk waiting for shadows to grow longer.

In this chapter, I shall take you to that time when I thought that my poetry happened as a course of nature, rather than as a demand of discordant politics. I shall take you through the different voices which I tried to harmonise in my epic. Unlike the previous chapter, which focused on oppositional dynamics, this discussion will illustrate my attempt to synthesise conflicting voices in the written text of my epic. I will explain how language can eventually surmount the Self-vs-Other scheme which arises from an inhibiting political correctness - and how possible it is for language to become pure sound and image, pure joy. Ironically, I probably had this perception of language for a brief time even in the midst of my political conversion to feminism.

TRANSLATION: TWO VOICES

In 1990, when I translated the very first fragment of my early volcano poem from English to Filipino, I had the sense of language as pure sound and image, not hinged on any political doctrine or debate. When I first discovered the joy in shifting between two tongues, I set aside my self-conscious politics, but only for a very brief time. I was overwhelmed by the sense of novelty and wonder at the two voices exchanging metaphors in my head. In my initial discovery that I could shuttle between these voices, I probably thought that I was a bridge not so much between two separate cultures, but between two repositories of sound and image.

My paper on the nature of translation (*Scaling Daragang Magayon: The Bilingual Poet Translating Herself* - presented at the

University of Hong Kong in 1990) presents Filipino and English as two sources of joy, hybridising each other in the process of translation: 'The texture of the original word is lost in the new tongue, but a new texture is found, and maybe found more exciting. The old image is displaced by an image that may not be its perfect equivalent, but this inexact image may strike you as 'more exact' in the new language. The old metaphor dies, but a novelty may be born. The impact of the poet's old sensibility gets distorted ... but "the new distorted sensibility" may metaphor more palpably in a new tongue. The original vision dims because the old intention does not get across fully and accurately, but the new vision may become the new intention.' (in Chan and Harris,'91:56) Some of these textual transformations are illustrated in the following example from an early fragment of the epic:

(From the English original)

Here, you shall know me in the years
you have spent, those tossing of days
that deepened gashes into grooves,
into wounds you call mine alone.

(To the new version in Filipino)

*Makikilala mo ako
sa mga taong ika'y nangarap.
Sa lambitin ng mga araw
na nagnasang umakyat,
sa pukpok-pintig ng bawat minutong
nagpalalim ng uka,
hanggang ito'y bumigay na bangin,
sugat na di lang ako ang may angkin.*

(Which now means -)

You will know me
in the years you dreamt.
In the tossing of days
that desired to rise,
in the hit-beat of each minute

that deepened grooves into gashes,
into wounds not mine alone.

(ibid:60)

In this process of transforming rather than translating the English lines into Filipino, I found that, as I wrote in my paper on translation, 'the text [became] too volatile - changes [broke] out suddenly and inevitably at all points. I [felt] overwhelmed by the new language and its own powers and eccentricities.' (ibid:62) Apparently, I was more interested in the power of language *per se*, rather than in relation to its cultural source. Perhaps, my attention was diverted from my self-conscious politics by the pleasure of a newly discovered language game. I felt powerful as both author and translator writing another poem each time I translated a poem. As the example above illustrates, my translations were very different from the original versions. They were new poems in themselves. This realisation encouraged me to experiment with shuttling between Filipino and English and back, even in writing one poem, knowing that I would most likely finish with two texts.

My translation technique is in a way similar to that of Afrikaner novelist Andre Brink who (says Pico Iyer), 'devised a new way of writing novels in both his first and second tongues, coming up with some scenes - or characters - in Afrikaans, some in English, translating back and forth, and ending up with two versions of the same novel. ('93:59) However, I did not have Brink's political motivation to subvert a system which banned his novel in Afrikaans. The language debates in the Philippines and the issues on postcoloniality (which I discussed in chapter 5) did not make so much impression on me up until I decided to write the epic. So, during that almost apolitical lull, I had an exciting time in which I was more concerned with the power of language, rather than the pressure of their cultural contexts.

At the height of my language fever, it even occurred to me that, as I wrote in my paper on translation three years ago, 'I will probably be shuttling forever from language to language even in the writing of a single poem', enjoying this 'losing-discovering that comes with tongue-tripping. ... I prefer that sometimes I stand at

the brink of a word not yet thought out, but certainly there, to feel quite helpless and mute with longing for that other voice singing somewhere in my consciousness, that part where I can sing, but cannot hear, or where I can hear, but cannot sing - not yet.' (ibid:62-63) Such was my pleasure in translation. It was like travelling towards, says Barthes, 'an unknown [yet known] language, of which I nonetheless grasp[ed] the respiration, the emotive aeration.' ('82:9)

In 1990, I became more prolific in Filipino, and friends and critics alike said that I had found my 'true voice' - that Filipino was my better language. As I mentioned earlier, that year I published a collection of poems in Filipino, with English translations. Despite my conscious shift to the national language, I could not disregard my newly discovered bilingualism. There was always a part of me which unconsciously moved back and forth Filipino and English, even when I was supposed to be writing a poem only in one language - that part which believed not in two voices but in a two-timbred voice.

BILINGUALISM : THE TWO-TIMBRED VOICE

Nobel Laureate novelist Nadine Gordimer explains that cultural identity in the literature and politics of South Africa is 'nothing more nor less than the mean between selfhood and otherness ...' ('74:226) Similarly, I think of the essence of bilingualism as my possible and comfortable half-way home between Filipino and English. However, this was not to be the case when I arrived in Australia in February 1991. There was something ambivalent about the state of my poetic consciousness at that time. My voice was two-timbred, yet always splitting into two voices. Unconsciously, perhaps, I was quite comfortable with my shifting between two tongues, but, on the conscious level, I laboured the issue. I checked myself everytime I used English more than Filipino.

This may have been the result of the expatriate's loneliness or guilt at having a leisurely life while her country was in political upheaval, or my other dogmatic voice which preached political correctness, or my self-indulgent angst. The following record of my journal (which I reproduce faithfully) will reveal any

of these possibilities and also shed some light to my uncertainty between two languages on the first year of writing the epic. In my early journals, even my sentimental doodles reveal the division in my consciousness: two voices, two cultures.

Wollongong, April 4, 1991

*naalala ko na naman ang aking bayan. ano ba ang
ginagawa ko dito? ano ang masasabi mo kay magayon?
paano ka makakapagsalita gayong dagat na dagat ka?*

(i remember my country again. what am I doing here?
what can you say to *magayon*? how can you speak when
you are all ocean?)

I was asking how the sea could say anything to Magayon (to the mountain or to my planned epic), considering their different natures. Literally, how could I write about a mountain when I was beside the ocean? Or, how could I write about the Philippines in Australia? It occurs to me now that such was the metaphor of the duality of my voice - mountain vs. ocean, Filipino vs. English, East vs. West. This duality is revealed in other entries in my journal, in which I continuously shift between the two languages. To illustrate, after three days of questioning the ocean in Filipino, I wrote one of my first metaphors in English here in Australia.

April 7, 1991

*grief is smooth
as stone*

The bilingual writer who is (says writer and Filipinist Buenaventura Medina) 'trained in English is more prone to code-switching - s/he usually thinks in English, but simultaneously translates this [into Filipino] when circumstances demand.' This is not necessarily true, because many times during my first months here in Australia, metaphors came to me in Filipino first. Then, I code-switched to English, as evidenced by the following journal entry:

April 10, 1991

*ang kirot na sumasambulat
sa sanlaksang salitang
walang bibig*

pain that shatters
into a thousand words
without mouth

Note that this is a bilingual journal entry, which, from then on, became my consistent pattern of writing. This bilingualism was in fact literally *embodied* in my dancing nightly, which I spoke about in the previous chapter. There were instances when I broke the monotony of dancing for weeks to Filipino music by dancing to Beethoven or Grieg instead - and in Filipino ethnic movements! This odd combination was parallel to my need to blend two languages and cultures. In another journal entry, I speak about this aspired-for synthesis in one of my dance figures:

*umiikot ang likod ng aking kamay
sa kabila kong palad
sariling galaw
iisang buhay*

(the back of my hand
curves on my palm
my own dance
one life)

It seems, as I re-read this journal entry now, that my *synthesis of languages* was also echoed by my *synthesis of hands*: back of one hand curving on the palm of the other in my own dance of one life. This illustrates my concept of the two-timbred voice. The voices are different, yet they belong to one hand or one body. And as such, the preferred language at any moment was not a conscious choice at all. It depended more on the source of stimulus. For instance, when I met one of my very first Australian friends poet Debbie Westbury, I wrote about her voice in English, only because I remembered her voice speaking her own language.

Automatically, however, I shifted to Filipino. It was almost like:
'Quick! Let's test it in the other tongue!'

June 4, 1991

voice that breaks
tenderly
not like glass
i could easily close my hands around it

pagbasag ng boses
nang di basag-salamin
maaari kong ikuyom sa palad

As Nayarana Rao says, 'when we are speaking in English, a ready-made translation creeps in naturally and almost spontaneously. ... [This is] called untranslated translation.' ('75:189) Such a perspective is affirmed by Raja Rao who writes that those who have two languages 'are all instinctively bilingual.' ('38) This instinctive bilingualism could have been my endless game for the whole year of 1991, except that I had work to do - write my epic. But the writing could not commence. All I was hearing from my two-timbred voice were bits of lines. So, from June onwards, I began fretting about what I called as 'my incomplete voice.'

During that same month, I was attending a post-colonial course at the university. I had also begun socialising with Australians, so I was constantly speaking English. I even began dreaming in English. My journal entries overflowed with metaphors in English, while in the post-colonial class, we took the language of the coloniser to task. Under these circumstances, I was ripe for a deluge of political correctness. I became frantic: 'What happened to my Filipino? I should be writing in Filipino. In this post-colonial setting, I cannot displace my native tongue with the language of the centre!' Today, I laugh and even cringe at that precious panic. However, at that time, it was a serious matter. I lost my voice altogether. I could not write. Even the occasional lines ran out. I considered going home, thinking that Australia was not the place to write about my country. Away from home, I felt like a 'half-word.'

16 July, 1991

i am a flying trapeze always swinging. the other syllable
swings towards me. i am a halfword. always swinging to
meet the other half and always missing

Eventually, I was able to diagnose my 'half-wordness.' In
these consecutive journal entries written in July 1991, I diagnosed
the reason for my writer's block.

probably the reason why my wordpipe clogged was i was
too preoccupied with being correct.

the politics can go hang. i should like to listen to the
poem, not the political discourse.

'PC' was the scourge - 'politically correct and the
patriotically correct,' as Robert Hughes puts it. ('92:84) It was my
bane for nearly a year. At the end of 1991, however, it did not
matter anymore whether it was English or Filipino which came to
my mind first. Or, whether I was privileging the language of the
Other. By then, I had already formulated my own argument against
the language scare. In my paper *The Bilingual Poet Translating
Herself*, (which had developed by leaps and bounds away from my
Hong Kong paper), that I delivered at a postgraduate conference at
Wollongong University, I explained my personal resolution to the
language conflict.

The first heart's tongue is silence. This found concrete
voice in the first primal grunt of the prehistoric person. A
sound that was eventually finely tuned in different
soundstations, thus breeding the different languages. That
I am born to a particular soundstation is accidental. It does
not deny me birthright to that first primal sound. I am
born with the timbre of the first sound. Thus, I am bound
by kinship to all the languages it has bred. And when I

tune in myself to any soundstation and know it by ear and heart, the language it has bred becomes mine.

(typescript,'91:10)

To my pacified mind then, English - like Filipino and all other languages - was just a hybrid of the first grunt which was fine-tuned in a specific cultural soundstation. Hence, no one could say that I was borrowing or appropriating any foreign language. Just Like Filipino, English was also mine. Once I had accepted this argument in my mind, I was able to make peace with my two voices. Soon enough, I began writing my epic in two versions: Filipino and English.

THE BILINGUAL EPIC

Most of the metaphors from my journal eventually became parts of my epic, so, as a friend assured me, I did not have a writer's block at all. I was actually writing, even when I feared that I was not. Be that as it may, the real continuous flow of words came in early December 1991. It is most interesting to note that my first rough draft then was written in both Filipino and English. Except for the inserted translations, the following text is a direct reproduction of the draft.

Opening Ritual - *Halya* (Daragang magayon soliloquy before impending battle; it is *daramlagon* [midnight]; she recounts the tale of bakonawa; relates it to pagtuga; he will not feed on wombs - then remembers the *halya* during her teens, when she was in the care of her nurse, Sirangan)

DM: *Walang matutulog ngayon.* (No one sleeps tonight.

<i>Nangungulit ang dilim</i>	The dark insists
<i>na manatiling bukas</i>	our palmwings stay open
<i>ang ating mga paladpakpak</i>	and flap in the weave
<i>at mamayagpag sa habi</i>	of nightsounds
<i>ng mga huning gabi,</i>	to shatter the drowsy still
<i>nang mabasag ang antok</i>	in each quiver.
<i>sa bawat galaw.</i>	A, the answer of shard,
<i>A, may sagot na bubog,</i>	the sting in the pupil.)
<i>kirot sa balintataw.</i>	

(*Tunog ng mga tambol mula sa malayo at ang paulit-ulit na sigaw ng mga lalaki.* [Sound of drums from afar and the continuous cry of men.])

From this first draft, I shall proceed to a discussion of the 'bi-languaging' of the epic. This draft illustrates my pattern of work for the first 12 pages of my manuscript, in which I wrote the text in Filipino first, then translated it into English after every stanza was finished. In putting the different versions side by side in the computer, I pitted the two languages against each other, so to speak, and enriched both of them in the process. As I explained earlier, translation changes the original text - so, if ever the new version surpassed the original, I reworked that original version based on the translation. Thus, I shuttled back and forth between the two texts, wondering which could yield the better line, image or metaphor.

In this battle of languages, I was consciously bent on not privileging either of my voices. So, after indulging in a Filipino-first policy, I decided to give English a fair chance as well. From page 13 to 15, I wrote in English and proceeded to translate into Filipino. But it was not a very successful exercise. I felt that the lines wanted to be written in Filipino first, so from page 16 to 23, I again wrote first in my insistent native tongue. This time, however, I did not bother to translate each stanza immediately after it was finished. It was only when I had the whole first chapter, *Bakonawa* (in Filipino) when I translated everything into English. In this later process of tongue-shifting, I also reworked the Filipino version, whenever the English translation yielded a better line. But this cross-pollination between the two languages went on for too long. As I was enamoured with the exercise, I kept moving at a snail's pace.

Australian poet Ron Pretty (my doctoral supervisor) suggested that I write the whole English version first, then translate everything into Filipino. This seemed to be the wisest solution to my self-indulgent tongue-tripping. In the first place, I was just beginning to create my narrative then, and did not have a Filipino critic who could feedback immediately on my Filipino text. With an Anglo thesis supervisor, English was obviously the practical

language to use. Besides, had I continued writing in the two languages every bit of the way, I would probably still be writing it today. It was an epic, not a short poem, that I had to finish. I could not afford to get stuck in a language game, which seemed like a positive Russian roulette in its exciting urgency. The only difference was there were two bullets: Which language would 'insist' this time?

On hindsight, I am thankful that Bikol did not vie for primacy as well. It would have been a linguistic ordeal trying to appease three voices. I remember being told later though by a Bikolano that I should have written the epic in our Bikol dialect instead of Filipino. This brings to mind the argument which accuses Filipino as a colonising language (see Chapter 5). I had to explain to that skeptical Bikolano that, in the process of writing in Filipino and English, I was actually bringing our ethnic culture to a wider audience. I further clarified that I did use Bikol words in the Filipino version, thus, in a way, allowing our dialect to take part in developing Filipino into a truly national language.

Much later, the language question - Filipino or Tagalog - was also raised in my use of the national language. After Filipinoist Ben Medina edited my Filipino version of the epic for publication purposes, Manila critic Isagani Cruz advised me to disregard Medina's corrections, because, as Cruz pointed out, they were based on the grammar of *Tagalog*. He explained that, because I was already writing in *Filipino*, my 'mis-use' of *Tagalog* should not be considered as errors. (See Chapter 5) I did not heed his advise. I had had enough of the language debates. Now, I sometimes wonder what other debates might have sprung had the linguists known that the original text of the epic was written in English.

I was certain, even while writing in English, that my Filipino version would be the more resonant voice. The spirit of my culture would be beautifully wrought in its own language. Thus, in my urgent desire to word the native sounds, which I was already beginning to hear, I tried to rush through the writing of my English text; then, to re-voice it at once into home-grown syllables. This I did with great satisfaction. True to its promise, the process of

translating the epic from English into Filipino happened like pure joy. It was such a pleasure to sense the surprise flush on the nape, the lump in the throat, the utter breathlessness at coming to an old-new word. It was like good sex and its afterglow. In certain instances, it was almost like my protagonist's initiation to desire:

<i>May mga gabi noong</i>	There were nights
<i>umaalon ang dagat</i>	when the sea ripples
<i>sa aking mga hita't</i>	in my thighs
<i>kinikilig na isda</i>	and my nipples
<i>ang aking mga utong</i>	become urgent fishes

(epic draft,'92:55)

VOICE OF THE EARTH

Three years ago, I would have never celebrated my sexuality with the bravado of such lines and with no sense of Catholic guilt or embarrassment. Having broken the barriers of language fetishes, I feel as if I have come to the voice of desire with a wholeness of being. I realise now that my journey away from prescribed languages is closely linked to my departure from the voice or the voicelessness imposed on women. Writing the epic has, as Marjorie Evasco says, 'taught the tongue how to unknot the Great Grand silence of the Centuries and the many kinds of silences women had kept behind their eyes, throats, knuckles, knees, breasts, womb, thighs, in every crack and crevice of her.' ('90:3)

Even the gender aspect of language was resolved for me in the course of writing the epic. The inhibited language expected of the traditional Catholic Asian woman, and the rigid feminist argument delineating the female and the male voice, were eventually fractured in the course of writing my epic. As a woman writer, I cannot be penned-in by the language of desire of the patriarchy or by the demands of rigid feminism, because I am also a writer languaging desire and individuality. I resist inhibition by any signification, because I am also a creator of signs. I can be my protagonist who defines herself and underscores the fact that she is her own signifier:

*Lupa. ako'y itim at maapoy
sa tag-init, at higit na madilim
kapag basa ng ulan.
Ako ang kandungan ng mundo,
ang poon ng talampakan.
Itinuturo ko ang bawat yapak
at ang pagbawi ng yapak.*

Earth. I am black and warm
in heat, and drenched darker
in rain. I am the lap of the world
and the master of soles.
I teach step and unstep.

(Kantada:100, 89)

My protagonist lays down her own signs of herself. She is after all the 'master of soles' who teaches 'step and unstep'. Such a capacity to 'step and unstep' is a constant reminder for her and for me that every act can be un-acted, every sign can be un-signed - that language is not absolute. Gendering the use of language in absolute terms is, for me, out of the question. I even argue now against Doris Lessing's identification of the male vs. the female mode of writing. Control, courage and reason cannot be identified as only masculine qualities which are pitted against the irrational happiness, sensitivity and pleasure of the supposed-to-be feminine character. (in du Plessis,'80:13) After all, it is obvious that Woolf, Rushdie, Hong-Kingston, Garcia Marquez, Okri, Allende, Ondaatje, Winterson and all writers who make a difference - regardless of sex, race or ethnic background - create literature across the gamut of contradictory states of being, including irrationality and control, reason and pleasure.

As Trinh Minh-ha says, 'There is truly no narrow experience [either for a woman or a man], only narrow representation. And narrow representation starts with the necessity of "I am god" or "I am Goddess."' (op cit:28-29) I am not the fountainhead. But I am a woman writer of colour writing in the language of both my Self and the racial or sexual Other, which I also own. I deplore the language fetishes which limit my - and everyone

else's - writing space within the parameters of gender or ethnicity; that load the word with ideologies which keep it from even taking off from the mouth. I am currently caught in a whirl of political correctness, and need to move past this contemporary affliction. To go back to the time of the ancients who attribute the word not to themselves but to another power: the *duende*, which the great Andalusian artist Manuel Torres translates as the 'creative blood.'

Here is another poetics, though not forwarded as such, which rises above all the ideologically correct voices, because, as Torres says, '*the duende* is not in the throat, the *duende* comes up from inside, up from the very soles of the feet.' (in Lorca,'55:154-5) In the Philippines, the old folk tell their version of stories about the *duende*, the dwarf living in a mound of earth - everything seems to fit perfectly into the picture. I must have heard the *duende* of the mountain! After writing the epic through the political wranglings which involve language, I find myself exorcising the conflicts, so that language became pure sound and image again, pure joy. This must be a gift from the *duende* who, just when I was about to conclude my epic, made me realise that my poem was not really 'mine.'

In June 1992, I had just written a chapter rich in sea images, and my choreographer friend Zsuzsi was giving me some *reiki* healing. She passed her hand above my body and started listening to its energies. What she heard were the sea images in my poem. It was as if by some process of osmosis, the sea was seeping out of my skin, and she was grasping it with her hands. I had to explain the phenomenon to myself: Probably, as Zsuzsi heard my poem, I must have only heard it, too. Perhaps, indeed, I had only heard the *duende* of the mountain while I was circling it. Thus, I was able to imagine my voice beyond the mundane conflicts of ideologies - and imagine that, at one rare moment, my timbre echoed a common village ditty sung by old folk waiting for shadows to grow longer.

PART THREE

NAMELESSNESS

NAMELESSNESS (IS CONDITIONAL)



*There is a jar of earthtones.
Red almost brown almost black.
Like several skins flushed
under each other, imagining
how to be all, yet none of each.*

Chapter V, Ulap

In the Bikol region, when the tired traveller asks the native guide where the end of the road is, this guide always assures him or her that 'it is *sa oro-enot-enotan lang*' - 'just a little farther on.' Usually, after having gone 'just a little farther on' several times, the traveller still finds no relief from the journey. It seems that he or she will, after all, never be able to complete the circuit - never be able to circle the mountain, to gather its girth. It appears as if the road keeps on stretching, thus un-shaping the mountain out of its original contours. It seems impossible then for the traveller to know its circumference. In the end, the traveller understands that the mountain cannot be known sufficiently for him or her to give it a name.

It is nameless. But how is it that, at different points of the journey, the mountain yielded an identity? Sometimes, it was 'the rocky one.' At another time, 'the lush one' or 'the dry one' or 'the grooved one.' Once, it was not even a mountain. This variation of names is not a cause for wonder at all. It simply illustrates the inherent diversity of every being - it has many Selves, each distinct from the other. Consequently [Relative to this concept], I have illustrated the interaction among multiple voices in the actual writing of my epic.

I have established earlier my belief that one's Self (especially in one's art and politics) can be named and re-named many times over by one's Self and Others (with a different philosophy or ideology), so that, finally, the Self becomes a conglomeration of various Selves and Others. If this gestalt does not privilege any of its constituents, and operates by its multiplicity, then it cannot be pinned down under one label: It becomes unidentifiable, nameless.

This chapter will deal with this phenomenon of *namelessness in multiplicity*, as illustrated in my epic hero, the dynamics of language and the nature of my epic performance. My hero cannot only be the Warrior Woman, because she has other Selves beyond warriorhood. In a sense, she has a polymorphous identity. Similarly, language, which ascertains identity, is also open-ended. For instance, the language of my performance is not fixed; it

is constantly re-invented by both the performer and the audience. These considerations will be employed to argue that meaning is multiple and that the Self is fluid, polymorphous. We are, writes Gloria Steinem, 'ever-shifting selves.' ('92:323) "'I" is, itself, infinite layers. (Minh-ha:94) Or, says a noted anthropologist, as native Malayo-polynesian peoples (among others) believe, there are multiple souls in one body. (in Demetrio, '91:99)

WARRIOR WOMAN: JUST ANOTHER NAME

Enfleshing intuitive understanding with dissenting theories probably keeps us farther away from such an old knowledge - as I was kept away. Bent on protesting against the existing order, I re-named the mythical Beautiful Maiden into the Warrior Woman. However, I later realised that warriorhood, momentarily empowering as it is, is itself just another confining identity. Thus, the warrior must also unname herself, possibly unto namelessness, by acknowledging that she has, indeed, many identities which are constantly shifting.

According to an article (*Urban Myths Linger From Ancient Times*) in Sydney Morning Herald, archaeologist Louise Zarmati argues that the Amazon myth is an 'instrument of strong social control.' It shows, she says, how 'wild and fierce' women can be; it also warns against the 'havoc and mayhem' they can cause 'unless they were "tamed" by men.' ('92:10) This possibility hardly occurred to me when I was creating the Warrior Woman in the epic. But now, I wonder whether the 'wild and fierce' demeanor of Daragang Magayon could have inspired Pagtuga to subdue her either in rape or in marriage. In relation to this negative stereotype of wildness and fierceness, British historian Antonia Fraser points out that the Warrior Woman myth is also aligned with what she calls as the 'tomboy syndrome.' Fraser writes: 'The Warrior Queen in youth, all unknowing of her martial destiny, is depicted as unconsciously eschewing dolls in favour of soldiers, domestic pursuits in favour of hunting.' ('88:12)

Similarly, in my epic, the young Daragang Magayon is almost de-feminised. As a thirteen year old, she hides her breasts and womb, in order to become a hunter, but only to protect herself

for a time. When she grows older, however, her femaleness is joyously celebrated. In fact, her sexuality and nurturing capacity are given as much prominence as her warriorhood. This portrayal of a nurturing and desiring Warrior Woman keeps my character from being fixed in an absolute definition. Daragang Magayon is also feminine, a quality which is often scoffed at by doctrinal feminism. Considered as anathema to warriorhood, the feminine is often associated with the soft, gentle, tender, and even flirtatious qualities of women. Added to these traits is the desire to marry and have children which is, according to Philippine feminist Delia Aguilar, also a component of 'feminismo.' ('88:393)

One writer notes that 'sexually liberated women frequently equate maternal consciousness with false consciousness, viewing it as a "passive submission to a massive male-chauvinist conspiracy to enslave them".' (in Porter:38) The nurturing mothers in my epic establish that I take strong issue with this argument. I understand that motherhood, once made 'precious' either by a man or a woman, can certainly be oppressive. Nevertheless, rejecting it - because it means surrendering to the 'male-chauvinist conspirators' - is clearly a case of self-betrayal. As feminist Arlene Eisen writes: 'Women achieve liberation [only] when they have won control over their bodies, including the freedom to enjoy or reject motherhood ... [and] when society's popular culture [including its feminist advocates] respects 'feminine' qualities, rather than assuming they are inferior, weak or "good only for certain things".' ('84:9)

But how does the 'feminine' sit with the reality of combat? 'The idea that political equality for women should include the right and duty to bear arms appears puzzling to some for it sits incongruously with traditional ideas and ideals of femininity.' (Lloyd,'86:64) Besides, war is basically seen as a male game. As writer Elisabeth Porter argues, against the right to combat: There is a 'probability that women will be induced to accept the most negative definitions of ideal masculinity, that is, definitions of brute strength, aggression, abstract objectification and, ultimately, masculine ideals of citizenship.' ('91:189) My fear of this possibility is what probably keeps me affirming the 'feminine', so that 'breast' and womb' almost becomes fetishised throughout the epic. I need

to offset the looming image of the death-dealer with that of the life-giver.

In the final chapter the tension between 'the feminine' and 'the right to combat' is resolved. Because it bothers me that 'Warrior Woman' is just another label, I push my hero towards the ultimate possibility - transcending all names. She is eventually re-named into *Warang Pangaran Na Kagsadiri Kang Gabos Na Pangaran* (The Nameless One Who Is All Names). This concluding baptism of the female is not a novelty. Many feminists have already written either about the namelessness or the plurality of the female body and consciousness. For instance, critic Susan Hiller writes that in woman, she sees 'something that cannot be represented, something that is not said, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies.' ('74:46) This state of namelessness is a boon. As Helene Cixous declares: 'The greatest strength is that of being no one, like a rose, of being pure joy before all naming.' ('79:36)

In a similar vision, Clarissa Pinkola Estes (in Women Who Run With The Wolves) says: 'Wild Woman has no name, for she is so vast. But since Wild Woman engenders every important facet of womanliness, here on earth she is named many names, not only to peer into the myriad aspects of her nature but also to hold on to her.' ('92:9) Jeanette Winterson in Sexing The Cherry also focuses on this non-atrophied Self: 'If I have a spirit, a soul, any name will do, then it won't be single, it will be multiple. Its dimension will not be one of confinement but one of space.' ('89:126) Indeed, there are many selves beyond the Warrior Woman. This assuring truth reminds us that everytime we take on an identity, it is only for the moment - it is not absolute. In our many selves, we remain always fluid, undefinable and nameless.

NAMELESSNESS: INTO THE SEMIOTIC

In order to become nameless, Daragang Magayon takes a subterranean journey. She descends from, to use French feminist Julia Kristeva's terms, 'the symbolic' into 'the semiotic.' In a ritual which attempts to make sense of the natural world, Magayon travels into the underworld, where she is re-baptised into The Nameless One Who Is All Names. In this next discussion (which

explains my hero's transformation), I employ Kristeva's notion that the 'symbolic [is] the logic, coherent syntax and rationality of the adult ... [which] places subjects in their position and makes it possible for them to have identities.' On the other hand, the 'semiotic [is] a disorganised prelinguistic flux of movements, gestures, sounds and rhythms ... which remains active beneath the mature linguistic performance of the adult.' (in Selden,'85:83)

For the purposes of this discussion, I equate the opposition *symbolic/semiotic* to that of *language/pre-language*, which can also be extended to *named/nameless*. In her passage through the underworld, my hero travels from the named into a nameless state - from what I call an 'ordered skin' to a 'non-ordered' gamut of blood-vessels and veins. Initially, this epic hero - who echoes my own wish to personally break away from any inhibiting order - is named by the 'symbolic' world of Rawis as *Daragang Magayon* (Beautiful Maiden), *Sadit ni Makusog* (The Young of The Strong One) and *Agomon ni Pagtuga* (Betrothed of Pagtuga). These names become little compartments for her person. In my story, each name is a trap set by the patriarchal tradition. Nonetheless, my hero slips out of her skin into the belly of the mountain, where the sense of order of Rawis is shattered.

In this Other world, it is difficult for our hero to label anything, because all beings in it are not what her consciousness had originally known. In the belly of the mountain, fishes can speak, water is many-coloured and the sea-goddess is of the *young-old face, / the red-green-blue body / dance-shimmering*. To make naming impossible, this dancing being of many Selves and Others changes shape, shifting form and gender in the process, after which s/he declares her ambiguity:

*Higit pa ako sa isda,
kurales, kibot, o bato.
Halimaw din akong lumalamon ng sarili.
Ako'y apoy. Ako'y dilim.
Minamahal mo ako't
kinasisindakan.
Maaari kitang buhayin*

at maaaring patayin.

I am beyond fish, coral,
anemone, or stone.
I am also the beast
swallowing myself.
I am fire. I am darkness.
I am what you love
and what you fear.
I can make you live,
yet I can kill.

(Kantada:111,126)

While this female-male persona denounces a fixed name, s/he still affirms an identity - *I am beyond* all names, and yet *I am* (named) anyway. While s/he rejects all the hero's names imposed by the ordered world, s/he also baptises her with another - *The Nameless One who Is All Names*. In effect, such a state of namelessness is conditional, not in the inhibiting sense, but in a way that the nameless is allowed to explore all possibilities of identity in the cosmos by choice and by need. As we know, when the hero returns to the ordered world, she becomes the Warrior Woman, because of the momentary necessity to take up arms. Her underworld journey has righted the wrongs of the symbolic world.

While the semiotic or the subterranean or the unconscious seems non-ordered, in a sense, it is the ordering (or re-ordering) principle beneath the symbolic. This very act of ordering means that we always return to the symbolic, where social intercourse is carried on in a named world. Parallel to this is the case of the schizophrenic who, psychologist Timothy Golding explains, must ultimately assign an 'executive Self', in order to resolve the conflict for primacy among his/her many Selves. (Interview, Sept.'93) However, if we must maintain our namelessness while having all names, that executive Self should not impose a life-time totalitarian rule. It should not legislate against its other Selves (and Others), such that they are barred from the chance to become 'executives' themselves, when the need arises. To conclude, in order to disempower the oppressive names assigned by the symbolic world,

the Self must connect with the the various Selves and Others in the semiotic, whilst understanding that the Self can become any of these identities according to the need of the moment.

SELF-OTHER IN ONE SELF

Creative energy stems from a need to re-order the world. I suspect there is something messianic about creating a text. However, as a friend argues, unless such an act aims to convert the reader or audience, it could, in fact, only be a 'game-ing' with order. Accordingly, the artist might simply be the child re-arranging its marbles. But messianic or not, as creators of a new text, we always delve into ourselves - into our personal semiotic - in order to re-text the symbolic or the outside world. We wish to 'un-fix' such a world out of, what we may judge, a rigid scheme. Writing, for instance, is often born of a discontent with this status quo; thus, the need to offer an alternative text.

Be that as it may, the very act of writing, which, of course, is the use of language, is always an act of establishing order: 'Language fixes a world that is so much more stable and coherent than what we actually see ...' (Kress and Hodge,'79:5) Language 'names' so that such world can exist. So that we can have a sense of meaning and security. As Australian writer Nick Mansfield explains, 'The name is a destination for writing. ... [It is] 'evoked at a point when writing asserts its authority over the reader by cancelling ambiguity or paradox.' (in Brian,'88:101) However, as a tool of writing, language is ambiguous, a paradox. That which fixes meaning is itself un-fixed. The word is always mobile, easily re-invented and re-cast.

Language which *names* is ironically *nameless*, because of its inherent 'impureness.' No writer believes in what Bakhtin calls the 'myth of monoglossia', which '... assumes that one's language is homogenous, one, free from the play of differences among the various discourse.' (in Clark,'84:289) Every word is coloured, timbred and textured by whoever speaks it, and re-coloured-timbred-textured by the context of the receiver. However, the very fact that it is received could mean that, even before its transfer and by its very heterogeneity, the word had always borne the context of

the receiver/s. In this respect, I envision what Porter describes as 'a synthesis of voices' and 'the removal of the negative attributes associated with stereotypical voices.'

While Porter's argument involves the harmonising of the male and the female voice, her idea of 'a self-in-relations', which, according to her, 'takes into account the self, others, the context, and the contextual self' (op cit:168-70), can apply to all debates which involve differences. Barthes' scenario is certainly very real: 'Within me, every day, several independent languages accumulate, without communicating with each other ... [thus] I am fragmented, riven, dispersed.' ('71:203) But what if I acknowledge the inter-silences between languages or language-bearers as healthy rather than hostile? I might even be able to encourage them to speak to each other. It is after all possible to become many harmonious Selves and Others within a whole Self.

Edward Said sees the necessity to 'think concretely and sympathetically, contrapuntally, about others (rather) than only about us.' (in Cameron,'93:5) Such a necessity is met in the act of writing which does not universalise experience based on one Self alone, but makes every Other experience meaningful to every other Self. In the first place, says writer Hester Eisenstein, 'language is the major means of linking individual selves and creating a culture that transcends our personal limitations by making use of all kinds of differences among users and uses of language.' ('80:164) In doing so, I reiterate that we allow those differences to interactively coalesce in an open-ended and unfixed Self.

PERFORMANCE: SPONTANEOUS AMBIGUITY

The dynamic union of multiple Selves and Others is evident in the language of performance. From my experience, the oral text is an ideal medium for the spontaneous play of differences. In a sense, a spirit of ambiguity or even namelessness hovers about an oral production. Performance is always in transit and changing. It is open-ended, fluid and rich with the unforeseen shiftings of the performer, the audience and the environment. Be that as it may, unlike the spontaneous oral tradition of native peoples, a contemporary performance also sets parameters before it takes

place - for instance, there are castings, directions and rehearsals. Even so, the actual process on stage can never be pre-determined enough. Improvisations and 'accidents', which do not happen in the published written text, cannot be discounted.

Unlike my writing of the epic (in which I had the time and space to carefully calculate the poem's end-effect on the reader) some aspects of my performance of the same poem spring from instinct. It is difficult to intellectualise the body, in order to assure the audience of a definite singular effect. On many occasions, I cannot be certain about the minute details of my ongoing performance. I cannot even name my next movement absolutely. For instance, a turn, which I begin gracefully with open palms, becomes suddenly tensed and sharp-edged. My fingers eventually cut the air then close into a fist. One movement is multiple movements all at once. My performance can take side-trips into meanings, which might not have been intended at all before the bodyword is launched.

The bodyword: the collusion of my ambivalent physical being and the constructed script. My body can, of course, be constructed as well, but, as opposed to a fixed word, the body is unpredictable and has more freedom of movement. No wonder, we often hear the line - 'to break into a song' or 'to break into a dance.' To break the construct of expectations, perhaps - the act is unplanned, spontaneous. Or to break the pace of normalcy - the act intrudes into the predicted scheme of things. In one of my performances, for instance, what I had rehearsed - the named and ascertained oral text - is broken or unnamed by the sudden urge to carve the performance space by gut-feel and, as I would say, 'just let go.' In my writing, I have also given free rein to instinct, but only in my first drafts, knowing that I can retract or correct the movement of a word, if it is not to my liking. However, in actual performance, the actor is in a continuous drafting process.

An ongoing performance is a first *and* final draft, so to speak, bristling with interacting Selves and Others (script, performer, environment, audience, etc.), which cannot co-exist under an absolute label. We can train these differing entities to

behave as we demand during the rehearsals, but they might not necessarily behave the way we trained them during the actual performance. By the very unpredictability of these Selves and Others then, it would be difficult, even presumptuous, to categorise them together under a fixed identity, while the performance is in progress. And even after it, I cannot be certain that my performance was received by the audience in the way that I had carried it out. The same is true of the shift of the written text from author to reader. This is the reason why post-structuralists insist on the inherent multiplicity of all texts (written or oral). The meaning of the text changes at every reading of it.

Without privileging the oral text, my experience establishes that the journey of the text from the author to the reader, is not as long or complicated as the distance covered in the process of transferring/revising the text from the author to the performer to the audience. The fact that I am both the author (even the translator) and the performer of the text does not make the process easy or less complicated. In fact, by the time it is over, the performance is already too multi-dimensional to be even identified (in absolute terms) as my original version of the epic. In this respect, naming the performance as a definite experience becomes almost absurd. I can - as I have - put a name-tag to my performance. Critics can make pronouncements about it. But the fact remains, that we, as name-givers, are only identifying a facet of it (our individual perception of it), which could actually be a prism of unsummarisable differences. Thus, that facet, which we have distinguished by a name, is perhaps only an illusion. In reality, the performance is unnameable: It is nameless.

To illustrate, I forwarded my epic performance as a story and tradition specific to my culture. I named it as a text which is Other to all ethnic or racial groups outside of the Philippine setting. In fact, I rehearsed it as that particular construct. But by the time the performance was over, it had already broken out of its cultural specificity - once, after my performance, a Chilean woman said, 'Yes, I know what you mean.' A German who had escaped the Holocaust cried the first time he heard my text. An Australian woman said, 'You have said everything I always wanted to say, but

cannot say.' Someone from the audience asked, 'Are you Indonesian?' Vietnamese, Czech, Thai and French women, who did not fully understand my English text - as they explained - also connected deeply with the performance.

This consequence cannot always be explained with the argument of universality of experience, because reality is always experienced differently by each individual. I would rather perceive such a consequence as a momentary synchronicity of the different configurations of our experiences. This emotional or psychic coincidence among peoples of different ethnic backgrounds illustrates my contention that, at the end of my performance, it is no longer what I have originally named it to be: a culturally specific story. It has already been owned and named or identified by many Others according to their respective experiences. In considering these various interpretations, the lone performer (myself) may be seen as multiple, fluid, unfixed under one label, and, as such, nameless.

As performer, I may however decide to take on a definite Self in order to communicate with a particular audience - to choose a voice from among my multi-identities in answer to the need of the moment. I perform in Filipino to a Filipino audience and in English to an Australian audience. I take on a specific name or persona or voice, but without privileging it beyond its necessary duration. In the process, I tentatively set aside my other Selves for a while, because I must act in the needed voice of the moment - after all, I perform to communicate. As cultural theorist John Sturrock says, 'any use of language to communicate with others (or even with ourselves) involves us inevitably in the surrender of a portion at least of our uniqueness, since if our language also were unique no one would be able to understand it.' ('79:12)

As uniqueness presupposes a defined identity, which is fixed, I would rather re-interpret Sturrock's concept of communication: It involves the temporal surrender of our other voices which are not called upon by a momentary necessity. If I need not speak in Filipino, I would not do so. If I need not discuss my writing process, I would not argue as the writer of the epic. If I

am explaining my performance, I should not be playing the role of the translator. I have many identities that must shift endlessly, if I am to be The Nameless One Who Is (also) All Names. I travel with various voices. I am of the East and of the West. I am a writer, translator, performer - and I must rise to the need of the occasion. Right now, the need involves concluding my role as documentor of my own creative process. In the next chapter, another need demands yet another identity: the critic/reader of this documentation.

COMING FULL CIRCLE



*I will sing us again and again
till we are levelled
by the passing wind,
so that in such time of plains
when we lie as one flat stillness,
no one shall wonder,
why together we sleep
in a conspiracy of dreams*

Prologue

The day I faxed the final corrections for the epic to my publisher in the Philippines - Babaylan Women's Publishing Collective - Mount Mayon Volcano erupted. 'Geomantic. Earth-magic!' a friend remarked. Or, perhaps, I might add - without being presumptuous - a synchronicity of my text's body and the earth's rhythms. The ending, which I had chosen for my poem, happens to be a prelude to an eruption. Ultimately, I deduced that in such an absurd coincidence, the mountain had spoken the epiphany which humbled me - 'Look, my fire is the *real* epic.' On the day after the eruption, I wrote in my journal:

Real epics can never be reduced into a word. The power can only happen and we who write only approximate it. The power of the word is just borrowed power.

(3Feb.'93)

When I arrived at the other side of the mountain, I understood fully what it had revealed to me earlier - I had only heard its voice. The mountain had only generously lent me its *duende*. In the way that volcanic ash covers the earth into a flat blank landscape, that eruption on the second of February eventually levelled all the arguments which engendered inspiration and protest, tension and frustration, as I was circling the mountain. Its mouth fraught with epic power, its *duende* seemed to say, 'This eruption is not about male domination, feminism, the language debates, the prescriptions of ideologies or institutionalised traditions and your own political statements. While I became your metaphor for all human bickering for power, your politics can never explain, least of all copy, the cosmic power of the earth.'

This conclusion does not need further elucidation. It would be presumptuous of me, and certainly futile, to even attempt to explain the cosmic, as I am no proponent of New Age mysticism. I am simply a writer who, at the end of a major project, is humbled by this absurd turn of events and my own realisations about my work, and the creative process which bore it. These realisations are the only ones which are within my grasp - in this final chapter of

my documentation I will conclude and critique the issues involved in my writing and performing of the epic.

At this end of our trek around the mountain, I am faced with three major concerns: assessing my creative pilgrimage, recapitulating the thesis of my epic and its documentation, and critiquing their basic arguments. These concerns will be explained within the framework of *Fire vs Water* which is my metaphor for *Self vs Other*. This model - which echoes Hegel's dialectic of *thesis vs anti-thesis* - is, as I have previously illustrated, the underlying thread which had woven my journey from naming to unnamings into namelessness.

FROM FIRE TO WATER: TOWARDS A THESIS

Understandably, the progress of my creative journey is parallel to the development of my epic's thesis: from fire to water. The basic intention of my writing process was originally aligned with the mountain's fire, but I concluded with a theme about the fluidity of the Self, about being water. I began with protest against rigidified naming, which encodes a status difference and which enscribes an arbitrary power relationship between opposite genders or beliefs (Self vs Other = Centre vs Margin). Nevertheless, I ended up with a more amicable intent, which proposes namelessness by being all names (Self-and-Other = Multiplicity of Selves).

The epic was initially premised on protest against female disempowerment by the patriarchy - on the need to unname woman out of the labels, definitions, stereotypes and myths which were created and employed by men to colonise her identity. This iconoclastic desire to break names also extended to the other variables which shaped my writing: language and the epic genre, which were determined either by ideology or tradition. However, this spirit of protest, which originally fuelled my creative journey, eventually transformed into a vision of harmony in both the final argument of my epic and in my own current personal politics.

Inspired by the mountain's ambivalent identity (death-dealing/life-giving), I shifted from my adversarial position to this

ultimate realisation: *To struggle against rigidified and oppressive definitions of the Self, I must re-invent my identity in answer to the need of any particular moment; hence, I can become a multitude of beings, always uninhibited and self-empowering.* This thesis (in both the epic and this documentation) embodies the resolution - Self-and-Other in one Self or the multiplicity of Selves - which accounts for the human being's fluid state. If we keep re-inventing our identity, we will never become a fixed Self. We can be as fluid as water.

I engaged fire before I came upon this 'water state.' My major objective for writing the epic was the burning of icons - the patriarchy's language and its construct of my world. Yet iconoclasm is futile without offering alternatives, so I decided to re-tell the patriarchal myth about the volcano, which disempowers woman, into one that empowers her. To metaphor in my own voice, unshackled by the edicts of the supposedly superior gender. And eventually, in rejection of fixed norms or beliefs - to write my new story in poetry of epic length. To write it in Filipino and English, hybridising both tongues in the process. To depart from traditional translation, which privileges one language over the other. Then to perform my epic with the spirit of my mothers who, in pre-colonial Philippines, had chanted heroic tales.

In my epic, these intentions were made flesh in images akin to fire - a Warrior Woman for a hero and a narrative about an impending war and volcanic eruption. All the six chapters of the epic build up into a rage. *On soles that sing of fire, the story endlessly turn[s] in a necessary dance / on the red stone.* Taking the combative stance against female oppression, this tale heralds a morning which *will spit out fishes / that are all eyes of the sun.* (Kantada:115) Despite this prevalent fire-spirit, the whole narrative also weaves into a waterline. From beginning to end, water images abound, affirming the concept of fluidity - of namelessness by being all names. Even in her leap of fire, the Warrior Woman wishes to be transfigured into water:

*Nabubuo, nababasag
nang muling mabuo;*

*pansariling mga kataga
ang lahat ng bubog.
Maaaring magdikit-dikit
hanggang magkahugis,
hugis na maaaring sirain,
hanggang maging bubog muli
kung aking nanaisin.*

Being and breaking and being,
all my fluid shards
all private syllables
to link themselves at will
into shape, then burst apart again
into shapelessness.

(Kantada:29,28)

Despite a seemingly fixed death-dealing role, my Warrior Woman travels into a fluid state and becomes The Nameless One Who Is All Names. Likewise, I journeyed towards a synthesis of the multitude of voices. In this trip, I protested against doctrines or traditions which inhibit humanity or creativity. In fact, at the outset of poetic inspiration, I rejected the voice of the oppressive patriarchy, in order to listen to feminism and warriorhood. However, I found these political positions inadequate as alternatives, thus, I invented my personal story of empowerment. As my creative peregrination progressed, I constantly grappled with various arguments which concern my ethnicity, language and text. Eventually, I made sidetrips into diverse ways of presenting my Self.

While constantly struggling through this ideological maze, I resented the tension, and at most times frustration, caused by the conflicting roads. I felt that my creativity was being fixed or manipulated by prescribing Others. Realising that I was intimidated or emotionally and intellectually swayed by their arguments frustrated me even more. On hindsight now, I am beginning to appreciate those multiple Others that challenged my Self. I realise that everytime they pushed me off my pre-planned road, I was actually able to pave a new one. In effect, they 'fired' my journey.

As an antithesis questioning my thesis every bit of the way, they kept me from becoming complacent.

With such an experience, I understand now that the fire of any antithesis only burns once it is Other-ed as an intruder encroaching upon the Self, either because the Self is undervalued or considered too precious to be subjected to challenge. Critic John Hanrahan writes about this preciousness - 'the invasiveness, the apostolic assurance' of what he calls 'the neo-puritans', who are advocates of ideological absolutism. ('92:2) These neo-puritans are like the victims of a volcanic eruption - as my mother wrote after the eruption of the 2nd of February, 'the flesh [of the victim] does not disintegrate, but if you touch it, you will find that it has become very soft.' (Feb.'93) The absolutist Self appears impregnable, yet it is, in fact, vulnerably petrified.

With my defensiveness in the face of any antithesis (i.e. , criticisms of and prescriptions on my language and vision), I certainly have not, thank God, become an absolutist claiming impregnability or even infallibility. On the contrary, I had questioned my creative integrity, because of every authoritative Other. Be that as it may, after the initial self-doubt, I had also taken this Other on board, probably because it resonated with a similar Other-ness in my Self. In this process of actually 'befriending' or 'selving' the Other, I was able to merge it with my Self, thereby creating a new identity. In the long run, after continually experiencing this conflict-resolution between Self and Other, I feel that, like my Warrior Woman in the epic, I had actually *danced* various entities in the course of my creative journey:

*ang aking dilaw na mga braso
at pulang palikpik,
ang lunting mga buto
at asul na mga daliri,
ang asin-puting utong
at itim na puson,
ang kayumangging mga bagwis.
Sa bawat ikot ko noon,
aking niliyo ang buhangin,*

*niliyong palayo ang hapdi,
hanggang lumusong ako sa tubig.*

Yellow-armed, red-finned,
green-boned, blue-fingered,
saltwhite-nippled, black-bellied,
brown-winged me whirling sand
and whirling off the grief
until I hit water.

(ibid:91-2,81)

Echoing my hero's dance, my whole trek around the mountain was a *whirling off* of disharmonies and uncertainties towards water. It was a coming full circle: From the order of any disempowering status quo - the patriarchy, language fetishes, prescribing ideologies or traditions - to disorder in conflict and protest, then back to an order of empowerment. Such a movement is similar to Renato Constantino's shift in consciousness: 'Counter-consciousness is the reaction against the prevailing consciousness and becomes consciousness when it triumphs.' ('78:32) Perhaps, I did find a new consciousness which is Self-challenging everytime. It has multiple Selves and Others, which counter yet enrich each other within my one Self.

At the end of my journey, I find a thesis and a personal politics which propose resolution rather than antagonistic opposition. While the epic espouses the necessary war against oppression, it also emphasises that warriorhood is just among my hero's many Selves. She cannot be named as the death-dealing Warrior Woman alone who is fixated on her protest. Completely empowered in her multiple identities, she can also be the life-giving *lover, mother, earth, bird, fish* and she can even *close unto herself/ whole as stone*. With her constant shifting of identity, she can become as fluid as water. (Kantada:71) In a sense, she is, in fact, only a space which invites all of life's possibilities to come in and then pass on.

This non-fixed identity and non-fixated consciousness have become my source of inspiration. I now believe in not immediately dismissing or passing judgment on any antithetical

Other and in actually listening to his/her contrariness. I even consider the necessity of a constant dialogue with this dissenting voice. In my feminism, for instance, I have become wary of doctrines which exclude any ideological Other. I agree with Naomi Wolf's plea (in Fire With Fire) for an opening up of the dearly held feminist tenets to debate (among feminists of different visions) without the fear of courting the ire of insiders. ('93:55) As well, I even invite my sexual Other to participate in this free enterprise of ideas. I want to include a humanist perspective into the issue of female empowerment. I now protest against an authoritarian feminist's condemnation of all men, as much as I would against a patriarchal ideologue's oppression of women. After all, the freedom to live with dignity and choice, which all women strive for, applies to both genders.

This move towards harmony is also evident in my current bilingualism. As a writer in three tongues (Bikol, Filipino and English), I now blend rather than pit languages against each other. As a performance poet, I merge the word and the body into a literary/performance genre (epic chanting) which may be made relevant to our present experiences, even if such a genre belongs to an ancient time. As a contemporary writer recovering folklore and history, I explore the possibility of marrying current issues with past traditions in a poem which can be shared by different cultures and ethnic groups. Committed to diversity, I can pursue varied passions. I can flow into multifarious courses all at the same time - just like water, but without losing my fire.

FIRE: A PERSONAL ANTI-THESIS

Being water does not mean killing the fire. Having re-orientated myself towards harmony after a combative stance at the beginning of my writing process does not mean that, at the end of the road, all possibilities of conflict would have disappeared. I can never have room for uncreative complacency. The very fact that I have taken on board multiple Selves and Others, I will always be questioning my current position - as I am now. At the end of the road, I raise two divergent issues against my earlier feminist vision:

One: In the light of my 'humanistic feminism', which does not discriminate between women and men, I ask: If I had decided to unname thus empower woman (i.e., 'Beautiful Maiden' to 'Warrior Woman' to 'The Nameless One Who Is All Names') out of the victim's mould, should I not have unnamed man as well out of the stereotyped role of 'oppressor?' Should I not have created a stronger male alternative (as powerful yet nurturing as the female hero) to Pagtuga, the epic's vicious patriarch? After all, the role of a beastlike oppressor is humanly denigrating.

Two. In my kind of feminism, I propose harmony rather than opposition between genders - that I should not be hasty in my judgment of men and that I should actually invite men in the gender dialogue. I now have reservations about a feminism which blames the patriarchy for all the ills of the world and, thus, always takes a combative stance against the Other. However, is it not that this stance is still necessary, as female oppression is *still* very prevalent? The patriarchy remains as the major despot in many cultures.

My first self-critique, which appears to be 'pro-men', raises this question: Have I been unfair to men in not creating a sympathetic major male character which can be an alternative to the warlike Pagtuga? In this age when feminism is, according to Naomi Wolf, 'ideologically overloaded' (ibid), every man is often suspected as a potential oppressor. Even some feminists have become critical of this male stereotyping. Australian journalist Bettina Arndt, for instance, writes that 'women's critical view of men's private behaviour now totally dominates the cultural dialogue.' ('93:3) Porter also expresses her concern over some feminists' 'common view ... that there are no different types of men, as they are all corrupt.' (op cit:36)

This cultural trend of male condemnation have led even the men who are sympathetic to the cause to protest against feminism. In his article *Feminism Has Little Relevance For Men*, writer Richard Haddad declares: 'I am angry that in the name of

eliminating sex-stereotyping, feminism has reinforced some of the most fundamental and devastating stereotypes of all: the men as predator ... stalking ... powerful ... base and insensitive ... exploitative and untrustworthy ... driven by uncontrollable and animalistic urges ... '(in Thompson,'92:97) Robert Hughes in The Culture of Complaint also criticises this blaming game, saying that white men cop most of the flack as 'the pale, patriarchal penis people.' (op cit:12)

As Porter says, 'sexism involves not only a violation of women's integrity, but also represents the distortion of male humanity.' (op cit:37) This is my apprehension about my portrayal of an irredeemable patriarch in Pagtuga without offering the other positive aspects of humanity in a major male character. True, I do have a non-oppressive Ulap in the epic, but sometimes I feel that he is only a trivial persona who is confined to one chapter in my narrative. I wonder now whether I created him only to portray Daragang Magayon in a relationship with a man, so that I can claim that my female hero has not completely rejected her sexual Other, even if she has taken up arms against him.

While Ulap joins Magayon in combat against injustice, he, as her lover, is not exactly her equal (as she claims him to be). She keeps him in the dark about the conflict in the tribe, which involves her betrothal to Pagtuga. Furthermore, like some touchy feminists, she protests against his singing of her song of empowerment during their first meeting on the beach. This little detail is actually my jibe against feminists who easily accuse men - who publicly sympathise with them - with appropriating the women's issue. It is a fact that there are many feminists who have left out men in the quest for what may basically be a humanist rather than a feminist cause.

When British anti-feminist Neil Lyndon wrote about his experiences involving abortion and children, he was told that, 'The story was not mine to tell. They were also saying that the feelings I had experienced were not mine, did not rightfully belong to me.' He and Punch editor David Thomas (writes Ginny Dougary), '... express a sense of bewildered outrage that women have requisitioned vast territories of the human experience as though they were exclusive

to one gender. The intimate, the personal, the family, even the high moral ground of the oppressed have all somehow become known as women's preserves.' ('92:38-9)

I am aware that some feminist discourses have either damned or dropped men from the over-all picture of humanity. Hoping to bring him back into the fold, I attempted to create an able yet compassionate model of malehood. Nevertheless, I do not think I have been successful enough with Ulap or with Makusog, Daragang Magayon's father. Incidentally, I had tried to portray a nurturing Makusog in my epic. I even attempted to write a whole chapter on him, but it never came to fruition. This alternative Makusog did not sound 'right', both as a literary text and as a real-life character. I wonder now whether such a deficient characterisation was a result of my biased consciousness or the general cultural atmosphere which is anti-male. Or, could it have been caused by a real difficulty to offer the nurturing male as a substitute for the traditional image of the emotionally distanced father, because such a severely masculinist father is still very much around? As Makusog says in that aborted chapter:

*Mahirap maging sinapupunan
ang mga bisig lamang,
at masakit, masakit din
ang pagpilas ng pangalan.*

(Kantada, typescript:'92)

(It is difficult to become a womb
for what is only arms,
and it is painful, also painful,
to rip a name apart.)

How to grow a lap without a womb (Kantada:39). This line illustrates how that unrealised chapter eventually came to be included in the final epic. I created a Makusog who wants and tries to nourish his daughter, but he is a weak man. His strength lies in his name. In a sense, he is also victimised by a society which expects the man to perform, almost heartlessly, in favour of his public status. Hence, should I not have re-written him out of the

victim's role as I had done with his daughter? But, as I was unable to do so, could this not simply indicate my inadequacy to understand the male psyche? Filipino critic Isagani Cruz might have readily answered me with this statement (made not in the context of my work): 'Since feminists have been castigating male authors for presuming to know how women characters think and feel, women authors should also avoid writing as though they understood men.' ('92:19)

Despite my lengthy exposition about my unfairness to men, I also have an opposing interior voice which asks whether my current position (pro-male and anti-doctrinal feminist) is not simply a surrender of the constant struggle against a patriarchy which is still very much alive. Or could it be just a manifestation of American feminist Susan Faludi's 'feminist backlash'? Recently, I discussed such doubts with feminist artist and friend Lynn Brunet. When I complained about how we women have exaggerated our protest against the patriarchy and how we have become language fascists ourselves, she argued that such an extreme position is an inevitable first reaction to centuries of extreme oppression. After all, feminism is still very young compared to the age-old patriarchy.

I agree with Lynn. It occurs to me now that I can already dialogue with men, only because I am in a position of power. I have the necessary language and discourses which are the legacy of the constant struggle of feminists since the seventies. But does this mean that - having been already empowered - I cease to protest against the struggle of the many disempowered women all over the world and of the oppressed Filipinas? Does personal empowerment mean abandoning the battleship and swimming to shore alone - where I can comfortably write a thesis on feminism or an academic paper that will use the still-oppressed women as subjects?

I hate to end up as the self-serving feminist or, on the other hand, the messianic liberationist who takes up the cudgels for all the women of the world. I detest the thought of turning into an individualistic ideologue or a presumptuous self-appointed warrior woman who can right the wrongs of the patriarchy. At the same

time, I am wary of merely slipping into the blaming game against men as their self-righteous Other. I am afraid to fix myself in a role, in which I might ultimately atrophy and become just another prescribing voice. This is probably the main reason why, even when I thought that I had already travelled from fire to water in developing the thesis of my epic, I just cannot douse out the fire. At the end of the road, I find myself criticising my own political position. I am now my fire to my water.

WATER AND FIRE: THE SYNTHESIS

My journey around the mountain was fuelled by questions from critics who were unconvinced by my choice of road. At the end of it, I find that I have, in fact, also kindled my share of doubts about my work. On hindsight, I realise that this contrapuntal dynamics - Self vs Other/Thesis vs Anti-thesis/Fire vs Water - between conflicting perspectives, does not only inspire the progress of creativity. Such a dynamics also contributes to a self-definition or self-clarification. After all, says Sturrock, 'without difference there can be no meaning.' ('79:10) Pushing this argument further, I conclude that my explanation of the epic in this documentation (my Thesis/Self), as distinct from other texts (my Anti-thesis/Other), is simply an attempt to signify my work. When I speak about myself, I inevitably 'Other' all those outside of me - every uttering is, after all, an act of 'Other-ing.'

With this realisation that the Other is necessary in signifying and actualising the Self, the model of Thesis vs Anti-thesis eventually results into this synthesis: Self-and-Other or Fire-and-Water. As fire will not burn water, water will not douse out the fire. Fire and water need each other in order for each one to have meaning. Fire-water is an ambiguous and unfixed identity - thus a nameless one who is all names - which opens up to all possibilities of insight and creativity. Metaphorically, this fact is illustrated in my epic hero's first oracular vision - 'water-fire' where talking fishes swim - as she sinks towards her subterranean adventure. Such an adventure eventually affirms her 'neither-ness', her namelessness. (Kantada:106)

This 'neitherness' or namelessness does not mean a drab existence where the opposite parties of one's multiple identities are forced to sell-out to each other or are eventually co-opted into a single rigidified framework. My critique (in this last chapter) of my own beliefs establishes that this, says Porter, 'philosophy of synthesis does not remove the idea of difference, distinction, or even tension, but rather of opposition and antagonism.' (op cit:46-51) Such a synthesis only creates a personal system of checks and balances, which keeps the consciousness from stagnating. In the cross fertilisation between the opposite genders - and I would like to add, in all conflicting entities or ideas - we actually become, (as H.L. Mencken said), 'capable of the highest reaches of human endeavour.' (in Adams,'91)

Bearing this positive regard towards differences, which have been synthesised into a wholeness of Self (without being anaesthetised from the dynamics of Self-and-Other), I can now accept the tension caused by other voices (gender and language debates or discordant ideologies and traditions) within and outside me. These other voices remind me that I and the world are not fixed - that namelessness is indeed possible, as we are endlessly named and unnamed by countless Selves and Others. These various voices continuously clarify or revise meanings, in order to make our existence more fecund and meaningful. In the first place, because of these multiple voices - which I had encountered in my creative journey - I came to write my epic and this documentation on it. In effect, all these voices share authorship of my texts.

In my epic, I have re-invented an old story, which has been told and re-told by various tellers before me; hence, it does not only embody my story, but the synthesis of varied stories. In this documentation, my arguments were shaped by conflicting voices. Truly, my two texts, like all others, do not have a stable identity or origin. (Spivak in Derrida,'77:xxii). In fact, they could easily be revised or re-told by anyone who reads them. Hence, now that we have concluded our re-tracing of my creative journey, how can I claim that I have taken you around the mountain? Throughout our trek, you could have been reading this

documentation against the road which I have set. Circling the mountain with me, you could have mapped your own meanings of my text. As your own cartographer, you could have told my story in your own fashion; thus, the road is not wholly mine.

Such a fact of unfixed ownership might have been known to the mountain all along. Its most recent eruption was perhaps intended to remind me of this reality. Just when I felt the exhilarating accomplishment in arrival at its other side, it decided to erupt. Just when I thought I had understood its grooves, it chose to re-shape itself. To spit fire in order to furrow new paths which fluidly cleaved with the old. So why, in the first place, did I ever presume that I could come full circle into a resolution of the road? As Filipino poet Jose Garcia Villa once wrote, 'Perfect arrival is in not arriving at all.' The way will always be re-invented - will always be in transition - thus, my story can never completely arrive. In which case, our last step now at the end of the journey is only the first, as the tale of the sole-keeper is always new.

The mountain has always thought so, because it is wise. And generous as well. It has lent me its wisdom. Do you remember that at the beginning of our journey, I said that I would circle - not scale - the mountain? That I would gather it? I may have fulfilled my intention if I base my act of 'gathering' on Marian Pastor Roces' definition: 'Gathering' is 'not collecting, not amassing, not foreclosing, not harvesting, not a lusting after, not "social gathering" (the bourgeois institution), not the creation of a defined collective ... *it might be a keen-ness towards concealed knowledge.*' [italics mine] ('93:2)

When Mayon Volcano erupted at the time when I finished the epic, it probably meant to reveal this humbling thought: Writing is simply gathering, and gathering is not an act of possessing, but of listening, not only to my Self, but to various Others, including the voice of the mountain.

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APPENDIX

**APPENDIX: PERFORMANCES OF THE EPIC POEM
KANTADA NG BABAING MANDIRIGMA
CANTATA OF THE WARRIOR WOMAN DARAGANG MAGAYON**

1994

Philippines-France Festival, Paris. (28 May)

Cultural Center of the Philippines, Manila (18, 21 - 23 Feb.)

1993

Stables Theatre, Sydney (24 Oct.)

Women in Asia Conference, Melbourne University (1 Oct.)

Spring Writing, NSW Writing Centre, Sydney (19 Sept.)

Cultural Center of the Philippines, Manila (7 Sept.)

Bicol University Theatre, Legaspi City, Philippines (30 Aug.)

School of Creative Arts, Wollongong University (28, 30 July)

Regional Poetry Festival, Wollongong City Gallery (12 June)

Sydney Writers Festival, NSW Library, Sydney (25 Jan.)

Faculty of Arts & Letters, University of Santo Tomas , Manila (9 Jan.)

1992

Intercontinental Hotel, Manila (19 Dec.)

Conference of Folk Healers, Batangas, Philippines (7 Dec.)

Art of Lunch, School of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong (29 Oct.)

Writers In the Park, Harold Park Hotel, Sydney (8 Sept.)

Postgraduate Open Day, University of Wollongong (14 Aug.)

Philippine Studies International Conference, ANU, Canberra (2 July)

Wollongong City Gallery (16 June)