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A Postcolonial Reading of Merlinda Bobis' *Fish Hair Woman*[1]

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Abstract

The paper attempted to uncover the postcolonial underpinnings of *Merlinda Bobis' Fish Hair Woman* (2012) – using Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) – by considering the novel's characterization, narrative technique, and significations. A phenomenological type of research was employed, particularly the descriptive-analytical approach in interpreting the novel under study. After careful evaluation and analysis, the study found that the novel may be read and analyzed using postcolonial lenses as mirrored by its characterization, narrative technique, and signification. Further, the study recommends that the novel be further evaluated using diaspora and cultural lenses, and that other diaspora novel written by Filipinos be read using postcolonial perspectives.

Keywords: *Diaspora, postcolonial, literary criticism, characterization, signification*

Introduction

Owing to their desire to roam the vast open spaces and brave the uncharted seas, human beings have become "vagabonds" on the run. Writers and philosophers of different schools and temperaments have given various labels to this restlessness: search for identity, search for truth, search for freedom, search for meaning, or search for happiness. In a postmodern setting where technology makes everything seem possible, this restlessness, which manifests itself in different forms and in different degrees to different people at different times, stems from human beings' unconscious struggling to escape from a land of exile and regain a lost paradise, or find for themselves a new home. Many tribes of the world have travelled far and wide, voluntarily or forcedly leaving "paradise" in search of a new home. Usually these tribes equate the good and ideal life with imported goods, the lost paradise with foreign shores — all in the hope of establishing a home, yet a home, which turns into an exile. Hence, there is a dichotomy of the home and exile, which consequently, are the two opposing forces in postcolonial literature.

The new land may be paradise — but yet it is not home. The "vagabond" leaves a home that has seemingly vanished, in search of a home which sooner or later, he finds out is not there. A good number of Filipinos may have gone through this mental exercise in an effort to convince themselves and others that they have indeed found the good life that they sought in America or other countries that promised better lives. At one time or another, they too, may have been forced to admit that what had appeared to them to be "a ball of gold in the sky" turned out to be otherwise. Depending on the angle one chooses to look at things, the new land may be home, but it is not paradise. Or the new land may be paradise, but it is not home. It may neither be home nor paradise, but just another place to make a living; it may even be a land of exile, from where there can be no escaping.

And while a great number of Filipinos in America and other countries of opportunities are immigrants, naturalized citizens, and even citizens by birth, they are not altogether alien to the exilic experience. In fact, they may be exiles twice over, for the identity crisis that plagues Filipinos in the homeland is compounded for Filipinos in the countries where they now reside. As one writer has said about Filipino-Americans: "Filipino Americans are 'divided children' who unwisely have chosen to split themselves between two motherlands while belonging to neither." For all their pretensions at being westernized and/or assuming a new identity, Filipinos cannot escape their identity. Equally, all the pretensions at being Filipino cannot hide the traces of "westernization." This is the dilemma of Filipinos who reside in another country of opportunity, for that matter – they are trapped between two worlds, the inter-world, or non-world, of the Filipino "expatriate."

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For many years since Filipinos have flocked to other countries, their authors have written and continue to write about their diasporic experiences. Galang (1999), in the essay *Her Wild American Self*, writes about an adolescent's struggles with the conflicts around her and captures the dilemma of teenagers wanting to create their own space, a world only theirs, private and mysterious, away from the prying eyes of the society where they live, including their families.

Filipino-American poet Fred Cordova (1988), as quoted by Campomanes (1992), relates the sentiments of the Filipino expatriate in America in his poem entitled *Ang Kundiman ng mga Niyog sa Amerika*: *The Lament of Seven Hundred Seventy-Four Thousand Six Hundred and Forty Coconuts*. The poem reads in part:

> "We say we are Filipino; we say we are American, so who are we;
> more so what we are; brown or white; or are we still the 'other'?"

The dilemma of the Filipino-American exile is likewise summed up by Bienvenido Santos in his short stories, among them *Scent of Apples* and *The Day the Dancers Came*, and his novel The *Man Who Thought He Looked like Robert Taylor*. Campomanes (1992) likewise describes these Fil-Ams, calling them "twice-blessed and twice-cursed." She says, describing the tug-of-war in the heart of the Filipino:

> "Fil-Ams … are twice blessed. They have a future that can be bright or dim, depending on how they face it. And they have a wide range of options on how to live their lives. (In contrast, their counterparts in the Philippines may be limited by their economic situation or political environment.)
> Yet, Fil-Ams are also twice cursed. Not quite Filipinos, they struggle with their parents' insistence on observing "Filipino values" on one hand, while on the other, they are being pushed into the mainstream of US society" (pp. 34-35).

While Filipino expatriates most of the time may feel inclined to identify with the dominant culture they now live in, at one time or the other, they may be driven by an overwhelming compulsion to stop deceiving themselves and do an Alex Hailey. Overpowered by the urge to confront their true identity, they will go in search of their roots and return to the land of their forebears, though not necessarily making the physical journey. The need for self-identification is great, for unless one knows where he comes from, he will have no idea where he is going or where he wants to go. There needs to be a point of reference, a home. Unless a home is identified, a person is lost and becomes a floating mass of flesh and bones in the vast sea of humanity.

Such experiences and ideas can be referred to as postcolonial experiences. In their work *The Empire Writes Back to the Center* (1989), Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin argued that postcolonial experience covers all cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. Postcolonial literature emerged in its present form out of the experiences of colonization. This literature has brought to the fore tensions with the imperial power, and has emphasized the differences noted from the assumptions held at the imperial center.

Post-colonialism focuses on quite a number of issues, the most relevant being how gender, race, and class functioned in colonial and postcolonial discourses. Colonized groups articulate their experiences of the politics of oppression. Postcolonial theorists believe that one's own colonial position will inevitably affect the sentiments expressed in the production of the text.

Post-colonialism literally means after colonialism (Davis & Schleifer, 1989). However, such a definition is too restrictive and limiting, for it implies only political independence. Post-colonial writing focuses on the significance of language and writing in the construction of experience through use of disruptive strategies, mimicry, parody, and irony. Post-colonialism means only one thing – the revisiting and reconsideration of previous, recent, and current historical materials in countries that were colonized and/or are still experiencing the aftermaths of colonization in all modes of existence (culture, society, politics and economics). Said (1978) indicated that postcolonial writings emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization, and asserted themselves by highlighting the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing the differences in assumptions coming from the

imperial center. Consequently, postcolonial literature does not simply consist of writings produced after colonization, because it also covers works resulting from the interaction between the imperial culture and the complex of indigenous practices. Contemporary art, philosophy, and literature produced by post-colonial societies are in no sense continuations or simple adaptations of the colonizer's models. Indeed, the process of literary decolonization has involved a radical dismantling of the colonizer's codes and a post-colonial disruption and appropriation of the dominant colonialist discourses (Coombes, 1987).

This dismantling frequently has been accompanied by the demand for an entirely new or wholly recovered pre-colonial reality. Given the nature of relationships between the colonizer and colonized, and colonial social brutality and cultural denigration, this approach is perfectly comprehensible, yet cannot be achieved fully. Post-colonial culture is inevitably a hybridized phenomenon involving a logical discussion of ideas about the relationship between grafted colonialist's cultural systems and an indigenous ontology, with its impulse to create or recreate an independent local identity. Such construction or reconstruction only occurs as a dynamic interaction between the colonizer's dominant systems and peripheral subversions of them. It is not possible to return to, or even to rediscover wholly, the elements of pre-colonial cultural purity, nor is it possible to create national or regional formations entirely independent of the colonial enterprise.

Hence, it has been the aim of post-colonial writing to interrogate colonial discourses and discursive strategies from its position within and between two worlds. Another goal has been to investigate the means by which the colonizer imposed and maintained its codes, and achieved colonial domination of so much of the rest of the world. Thus, the rereading and rewriting of the colonizer's historical and sometimes fictional record is a vital and inescapable task at the heart of the post-colonial enterprise. These disruptive maneuvers, rather than the construction of essentially national or regional alternatives, are the characteristic features of post-colonial texts.

Since they have been subjected to years of colonization, how do Filipinos then, chronicle their post-colonial experience? Do they totally exclude themselves from their home, and write only about the land of their exile, or do they write about both? How do they confront their post-colonial experiences? Do they desire to go home, or to just stay in the land of exile and be totally cut off from all connections with their native land? How about their identities? Do they maintain the native traits they were born with, or do they view themselves differently? It is in this light that this study has been conceived. The researcher, hoping to find the similarities and differences faced by Filipinos around the globe who migrate to other lands, attempted to understand how a Filipino writer, particularly a novelist, essayed the postcolonial experience in one of her novels.

Methodology

The researcher used the descriptive-analytical approach defined by McMillan and Schumacher (1993) as "primarily an inductive process of organizing data into categories and identifying patterns (relationships) among categories" in interpreting the novel under study. The instruments used in this study found their basis in Hirsch's theory that "makes it possible to speak of the validity of interpretation" (Hoy, 1978, p. 12). The interpreter's primary task is to reproduce the author's logic, attitudes, cultural givens – in short, the author's world (Hirsch, 1967). The study then sought to unravel how Bobis recreated and/or interrogated the postcolonial experience in her novel *Fish-Hair Woman* (2013) through analysis and close reading of the novel's characterization, narrative technique, and conveying of meaning with the tenets of Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin's book, *The Empire Writes Back to the Center*, as its theoretical basis. The study aimed to present how a novelist coming from a colonized country depicted, recognized problems, and recreated and/or interrogated the postcolonial experience. While analyzing the novel, the researcher particularly focused on how it represented the postcolonial experience through evaluation of its characterization, narrative technique and conveying of meaning.

Result and Discussion

After a close reading and analysis of the text guided by Aschcroft et al.'s (1989) *The Empire Writes Back*, the researcher found a number of post-colonial underpinnings of the novel. How and why such underpinnings are postcolonial in nature are seen through an analysis of the novel's characterization, narrative technique and significations. These findings follow.

Characterization

Characterization refers to the representation of persons (or other beings or creatures) in narrative and dramatic works of art. This representation may include direct methods like the attribution of qualities in description or commentary, and indirect (or "dramatic") methods inviting readers to infer qualities from a characters' actions, dialogue, or appearance (Aston & Savona, 1991). Hence, it pertains to how characters think, speak, or act. The post-colonial experience may be observed through how the characters think, speak, or act in the novel, since they "live" in the novel and seemingly 'breathe" the very core of the post-colonial experience.

In *Fish-Hair Woman*, for instance, Bobis creates characters who go from their native lands, seeking shelter in foreign lands, only to find out later that the land of refuge is not really a refuge at all, but a land of doom (Barayuga, 1998). As a result, the characters' past is altered, their humanity tested, and their future held at stake. Davis and Schleifer (1989) again justify this stance, since an opposition always arises in literary creations that are politically engaged. Authors try to question inequalities within power structures, and seek to discover models for restructuring relationships between dominant and lower status, or minority discourses.

Such an observation is represented by Estrella in Bobis' novel. Growing up in Iraya (a province on the island of Mindoro, Philippines), she goes to the city, and then on to Hawaii, a movement that has paved many changes in the protagonist's life. Changing her name to Estella because of events that happened in her life, she opts to alter her past by assuming a different aura, a different personality. Tried by her conscience at times, she resorts to using opium, exchanging heated arguments with her father each time. To make matters worse, she rewrites the story of her sister (Pilar), claiming the part played by Pilar as her own, and reconstructing the story to suit her purpose and to make herself as the protagonist, when in fact she plays the part of an antagonist. These conflicts make her a post-colonial subject, an exilic character.

Estrella then is straddling – better yet – negotiating between two worlds in her quest for identity. The seemingly schizophrenic post-colonial conditions turn more vivid in the clash of words (the bantering between her and Pilar, and between her and her father), and in the fusing of news clippings apart from the use of native expressions in the novel (the use of Bicolano words like *Ay! padaba, mamay, pay, uragon, duma, dita,* etc.).

Luke McIntyre, too, evokes such actuality. Wanting to know the story beyond the longest love letter (he thinks it involves his mother or father), which in turn holds the mystery behind his identity as a person, he leaves Australia and comes to Manila. Warmly received by Don Kiko Alvarado, he soon realizes that the love letter is neither his father's nor his mother's; it is Don Kiko's. At the turn of each event, Luke comes to terms with his past, his story, his identity.

Coming not from the Philippines but from Australia, however, Luke counterpoints Estrella's case. If Stella (or Estrella) opts to alter her identity so as to forget her past, Luke, by contrast, unwillingly submits to the turn of events and ultimately finds his real self and his identity as a person in the end. Estrella, too, is born in the Philippines, in Iraya, but goes away because of forces that she keeps away from so she could continue living. Luke, though born in Australia, unwillingly comes home to the Philippines to trace his parents' whereabouts, and ultimately his roots.

Both Estrella and Luke then are exilic or post-colonial characters, as well as Filipinos coming home to the Philippines, but are faced with different consequences. Estrella's coming home to Iraya does not only end her suffering, her want of a home, but – seen on a larger scale – completes her search for identity. Moreover, Stella's becoming Estrella suggests that like some Filipinos who have gone away, change is inevitable. Whether by their personal choice or owing to political reasons, the

sad fact remains that because of the forces around them, Filipinos at some point, will try to forget, as much as erase from memory their origin. Worse still, they may despise their past. This issue was pioneered by Carlos Bulosan in his writings, and carried on by Filipino exiles or Filipinos born in a foreign land (Madsen, 2003).

Moreover, Estrella or Luke cannot identify with just one nation and citizenry; instead, they are *mestizos* (Anzaldua, 1987), or characters who are not absolutely identified with one nation/state, but with two or more as such. *Mestizo* is an important modality in Filipino fiction, since it discusses aspects of identity formation and the issue of standing at the threshold between an old and a new identity – liminality (San Juan, 1994). The presence of *mestizos* in the novel reveals the ambivalence Filipino migrants or diasporic writers feel in a foreign land, or even in the Philippines.

For his part, Luke represents the Filipino who is born abroad yet comes home at some point in his life to gather the pieces of his fragmented past. If Estrella chooses to alter her identity, Luke does not. If Estrella forgets (thanks to her father's machinations and to the numbing effects of opium) her real self, Luke in turn, refines, rebuilds his identity by coming home to trace his roots, an idea supported by Campomanes (1992), quoting Gurr: "the search for identity and construction of a vision of home…."

Also Don Kiko Alvarado, one of the key antagonists in the novel, is an exilic and/or post-colonial character, not only because he left the Philippines for Hawaii, but more so since he tries to construct a "home out of hell", so to speak. Wanting to shield his reputation (even if his activities as both a landlord and politician in Iraya have already leaked), he goes to Hawaii. When he thinks people have forgotten about his "dark" past, he comes home. And to make people believe that he really has changed, he abdicates his Roman Catholic beliefs and decides to be a born-again Christian. Yet what he initially hopes to be a happy reunion turns out to be nightmarish, since Estrella – his bastard daughter – does not seem to heed him. She is his pain in the neck — always wanting to let the hell out of him. To finish the story whose plot he "orchestrated" once, he invites Luke McIntyre, the son of Pilar and Tony, and treats him like a king. But all hell breaks loose when things he expects to be in his favor turns away from him — Luke does not believe him; worse yet, Estrella kills him. Coming home to Iraya, where once in his lifetime he was considered powerful like a god, he is stripped of all the honors a living and a dead man might anticipate. True to his motto, "desperar, despachar, dispensar, descansar" —"despair, dispatch, seek forgiveness, rest. And rest honorably" (p. 106), he suffered the same fate, but now, he plays the role of the victim or the oppressed – neither the perpetrator nor the oppressor. He may have come home, but unlike Estrella and Luke who have – in one way or another, affirmed their identities, he loses everything — identity, honor, respect, power, etc.

Adora, Don Kiko's adopted daughter, who will later become Luke's love interest, is a mute. As the story goes, readers are told that she becomes mute because of a tragic incident she suffered years ago. In a more symbolic plane, Adora's being mute represents those Filipinos who have become deaf and mute to the events that happened to their country. They want to fight and redeem what is right, yet cannot do so because they are handicapped. They are mute, yes, but deep inside them throbs the will to safeguard their nation's identity that was destroyed by many events that have transpired. With the help of some who are able (like Stella and Luke in the story), they will soon fight hand in hand to reclaim what has been lost—the pride and identity which for many years remained elusive, out of reach.

Pay Inyo, the gravedigger, who has witnessed all that has transpired in Iraya, is another symbolic character in the novel. He may have not gone out of Iraya, yet he plays a vital role in the novel, since he seems to connect the dots the story does not feed its readers. Aged ninety at the end of the story, he buries Don Kiko's body. The burial symbolizes how Filipinos want to forget that time when colonizers (herein represented by Don Kiko) set foot on Philippine soil, and make efforts to bury everything that come with it. With Don Kiko now dead and buried, it is tantamount to saying that once again, the "old" Iraya comes back to life, and peace is again restored. It can be concluded, then, that the Philippine nation, after burying the remnants of colonization, can start anew, can reclaim, and even reconstruct that old self, before the coming of the colonizers.

Father Nestor Ibay, too, is another character who has to mitigate his past so that he can move forward and come full circle with himself. Growing up in Iraya and becoming a witness to the events that engulfed not only Estrella's family, but Iraya as a whole, he becomes a seminarian and ultimately a priest in the latter part of the story. Yet, even if he has escaped from the atrocities brought by his childhood in Iraya, he can't seem to find peace of mind. He is haunted by a task he is supposed to accomplish, but has not. He fails to deliver Pilar's letter to Estrella, thinking the letter is subversive in nature. Through the years, he has kept the letter, but has finally delivered it to Estrella years after failing to do so. The letter, it turns out, is not subversive, but mainly an older sister's message to a younger sister. After accomplishing his task, Father Nestor Ibay feels a sense of completeness; soon he has peace of mind.

Father Ibay's action is akin to the experience of a postcolonial character. As long as he keeps something from his colonizer – in this case, the letter – he cannot come to full terms with himself, like Father Ibay. He can only start anew and have that sense of peace of mind – much more, completeness – if he lets go of anything that reminds him of his colonial experience.

By and large, the novelist created characters who must reconcile with their past so as to establish the present, and ultimately embrace the future. All the characters studied reflect this observation. Furthermore, such characters have to leave one place for another at some point in their lives, and then come back to their places of origin in the end. The return-of-the-native motif is not always physical – some are mental homecomings. Yet the novel seems to tell that one needs to come back to his/her place of origin for his/her identity to be complete.

The post-colonial experience is not only manifested through the novel's characterization; it is likewise mirrored though the novel's narrative technique. The way Bobis penned her novel seemingly breathes out both the post-colonial experience and the post-colonial underpinnings of the novel.

Narrative Technique

Narrative technique – also known more narrowly for literary fictional narratives as a literary technique, literary device, or fictional device – is any of several specific methods the creator of a narrative uses to convey what the author wants (Orehovec & Alley, 2003). In other words, it is a strategy used in the making of a narrative to relay information to the audience, and particularly to develop the narrative, usually in order to make it more complete, complicated, or interesting. In *Fish-Hair Woman*, Merlinda Bobis narrates a story caught within the webs of political unrest, unstable village loyalties, and familial and romantic love. Set in the Philippines, with the core of the story focused on the village of Iraya in 1987, the novel depicts a season of civil upheaval. While the government forces fight communist insurgents with privately-controlled armies on the side, the villagers are caught in the middle, struggling to survive under violence dressed as salvation. Both the soldiers and the rebels speak of and fight for this same cause, even as they remain in opposite camps, with the village festered between them. Since the main action takes place in 1987, the timeframe oscillates in 10-year periods (1977, 1987 and 1997), with the story being set mostly from the perspective of 1997. With war as the backdrop, the novel appears less fixed on war than on people – those who are loved and hated; it is also about how manipulated stories can either save or kill and – more pointedly – about collective grieving and collective responsibility.

Fish-Hair Woman is a reflexive novel. Through it, Bobis constructs a story, while at the same time interrogating its construction. As a transnational writer, Bobis tells a story that spans two geographical areas, the Philippines and Australia. The novel then analyzes the yearnings of a migrant – or to some extent the feeling of homelessness, much less ambivalence – significant distinguishing marks of the post-colonial condition (Ashcroft et al., 1989). An expatriate writer herself, Bobis writes her critical views in relation to both countries so that her stance can be viewed in the following dimensions: First, Stella's longest love letter to Tony can be seen as a political and aesthetic strategy. By incorporating the love letter into the core of the novel, Bobis seems to indicate that the West can say that the dead bodies and the war are not theirs, so there is no reason to grieve over them. To negotiate this, Bobis has to implicate the West's own identities in the desire to facilitate empathy. She does it by placing a white man within the actions in Iraya (Tony, the Australian). For some, this is a sign

of colonial discourse, since Tony co-opts the West. Yet, looking back, Bobis does not actually mean this to the fullest extent; moreover, although Tony is unmistakably white, he is not American, but Australian. Both Filipinos and aboriginal Australians have colonial histories, both with English-speaking masters. The Filipino was under the hands of the Americans for fifty years, while Aboriginal Australians were under their English masters for a longer time.

By making Stella (a Filipino) and Luke (an Australian) co-write the story, Bobis makes possible the universality of love, of telling stories, of *pag-ibig at pagkukuwentong nakikipagkapwa sa isa't isa* [love and storytelling with each other] (cf: Lilia Santiago-Quindoza's terminology, 1992). Bobis, however, admits that it has taken her seventeen years to finish the novel; its manuscript too, has been rejected countless times, and she has had to revise it each time. Yet what has propelled her to continue writing is "obsession and survival" (p. 309).

Her struggle as a transnational, much more diasporic writer is echoed in her words: "Napakahirap mangibang bayan" (It is difficult to migrate). She adds that she had never worked so hard, so obsessively in her whole life, until she came to Australia. To write, for her, was to survive. For Bobis then, survival means also the survival of a story. It had been, and will always be, a struggle for her and for many migrants, to publish in Australia. The reason that she had to work hard was to find her own hallmark not only in Philippine literature, but more importantly in migrant literature.

The presence of a "third space" (to borrow Bhabha's term, 1994) is what readers get from this novel. This third space comes in between the writer's home (land of origin) and exile (new land). Further, this sense of third space is untraceable to the two original contexts, but "enables other positions to emerge" (Bhabha, 1994). In support of such contention, one then could say that identity, as portrayed by Bobis, transcends through bicultural politics and appears, therefore, illuminating enough to substantiate the claim that the "project of decolonization is carried forth in the postcolonial site, but may equally be deployed by immigrant and diasporic populations," in the words of Bhabha (1994). The third space then is equated to that space recreated, represented, or even redefined as a result of the post-colonial conditions and experiences to which the novelist has been subjected.

To illustrate, like any expatriate writer, Bobis carries the post-colonial site into the empire's land. Living in Australia, Bobis tries to speak, reclaim, and refigure the self's and nation's histories in the English language. Also in raising the issue of colonial mimicry, Bobis uses English (the language of the colonizer), but repeats it with a difference. She does this by using the language of the colonizer in echoing the sentiments of her characters, while at the same time incorporating native expressions (the presence of *Ay! padaba, gasera, tsokolateng mapoloton, aninipot, tanglad, duma* etc.) and native traditions into the text. Given this method, the text becomes readily hybridized, thus, in effect, taking away the dominance of the English language.

Aschcroft et al. (1989), in their monumental work *The Empire Writes Back*, note that English "was made . . . central to the cultural enterprise of empire" (p. 2). Hence, a post-colonial writer who uses English to re-present his/her reality is engaged, according to Boehmer (1995), in the process of "cleaving from, moving away from colonial definitions, transgressing the boundaries of colonialist discourse; and in order to effect this, cleaving to: borrowing, take over, or appropriating the ideological, linguistic and textual forms of colonial power" (p. 221). This hybrid cleaving results in an anti-colonial mimicry that deals "with a range of differential knowledges and positionalities that both estrange . . ., 'identity' and produce new forms of knowledge, new forms of differentiation, new sites of power" (Bhabha, 1994). Consequently then, to conquer English is to complete the process of making a colonized nation free. And this, Bobis successfully did in *Fish-hair Woman.*

Notably, Bobis' use of English is a hybrid site of creative transformation and appropriation of the language itself. English, as used by Bobis, becomes unintelligible at times to a western reader due to the Filipino transfusions into the language (Boehmer, 1995). Bobis reaffirms her being as an "iba ako" (I'm different) expatriate and privileged writer through writing *Fish-Hair Woman.*

Apart from the love letter, Bobis also makes use of the hair image as one of the central imageries in her novel – although she is not the first one to use this metaphor, since Nick Joaquin had used it much earlier in the story of *Dona Geronima* – a carrying over of the Rapunzel motif. The nuance

of the hair image, however, is difficult to decipher, since it is both magical and real (magical realism), dense and unfolding — a child's creation of wonderment, yet also a visceral net for corpses. The other half (Luke's story) pulls back this hair into realism. However, even in the realistic telling, the magical hair intervenes and subverts the real, making the novel and Bobis return to the folds of reality, the original setting of the story, the native place (Philippines). This observation may be explained by the fact that fiction metaphorizes memory, and as readers and characters alike remember and attempt to recapture things as they happened, they intervene in the plot, and embellish and mythologize it in the process. As in moments of remembering, readers and characters need their superheroes — "the capacity to conjure up that potent left field to help them mourn, survive, and come to grips with helplessness, as well as reality" (Boehmer, 1995). As in Marquez's *Cien Anos de Soledad*, folklore and myth, memory and history, mix and refashion themselves in Bobis' *Fish Hair Woman.*

By "hybridizing the English language, and breaking the rules of linear narration and semantic purity inherent in colonial narratives" (Ashcroft et al., 1989), Bobis transforms English into something other than itself. The very fact that she develops a metafictional plot, coupled with complexity and an obscure style in which clarity is not given much importance – shows that Bobis refuses to be a colonial subject.

Standard American English is further mangled by the inclusion of ruptures brought in by traces of Bicolano, newspaper clippings, myths, and local expressions – some of them nonsensical. Put another way, Bobis' postcolonial English reverberates the very hybridity and confused complexity of the characters whose tales it tells. Being a woman, Bobis blends feminist, historical, and postmodern types of writing with experimental modes of narration, which themselves are sources of creative and oppositional energy (Boehmer, 1995). The experimental style of the novel appears sometimes in the retardation of its narrative, as brought about by the newspaper clippings and the inclusion of portions of the longest love letter – it snakes through the breadth and length of the novel in lyric prose that – from time to time – reach the register or realm of myth. In it, the use of local terms for plants and other natural and culturally specific phenomena flows into the naming of the victims of the Total War, enough to make the novel a *tour de force* in itself.

Lastly, the relation between texts of the novel, a feature of metafiction, affirms and challenges the main text and its construction. Bobis use of 'Beloved', according to her, comes from *Padaba*, which is what her grandmother used to call her. The Dickinson quotes – she adds – happen to be among her favorites and fit the intent of the text, rather than conscious attempts to temper the strangeness of Bicol lore and sensibility. Such intertextuality may then be read as a postcolonial underpinning, the reality of Bobis' imagination. Thus, the novel becomes multiple texts in a continuous conversation with themselves and others – almost an affirmation argumentation. It is intertextual, a Filipino-Australian writing, a transnational novel as a love letter to both Australia and the Philippines**,** with the plea of Emily Dickinson: "This is my love letter to the world/ That never wrote to me . . . For love of her, dear countrymen/ Judge tenderly of me."

Obviously, it can be said now that the novelist under evaluation shares characteristics of how she narrates her tales. First, she situates the novel in a time of civil unrest, revolution, and war as the setting/backdrop of her novel, which makes the novel have a political feel. Setting the novel under study within the backdrop of upheavals the Philippines has seemingly made it more factual, if not historical. Second, the novelist crafted her novel using the language of the colonizer, English. But while she uses English as the medium to convey her thoughts, she does so with revenge; she writes back, she makes the language her own. This observation leads this fledgling critic to the third characteristic shared by the novelist under study — that is, although Bobis uses English, she incorporates words native to the Philippines within the plot myths, legends, and expressions. Such a technique makes the novel breathe a seemingly *Filipino-ness*, let alone decolonization.

Signification

Signification refers to the allegorical perspectives of a novel used to represent (in this study) the postcolonial conditions. Apart from the characterization and narrative techniques, the post-

colonial condition is also seen in the novel's significations or representations. Generally speaking, representation makes use of one thing to stand or substitute for another through some signifying medium. Postcolonial texts, according to Culler (1997), use allegory to signify or represent something. Slemon (1988), as quoted by Turbo (2012), further suggests that allegory is seen as a function of the conditions of post-coloniality – not only because of its being a dominant mode of colonial representation – but because it is a particularly valuable form in which postcolonial literature conducts forms of discourse. The allegorical perspectives of the novels are seen in the significations used by the authors in the texts to signify the postcolonial condition.

In *Fish-Hair Woman*, Bobis makes use of Estrella's alteration of Tony and Pilar's love story. More than viewed as a sense of jealousy, this shows that Estrella wants to change how each character is represented in the story — making the story hers, and not theirs. Viewed from a larger scale, this also means – along with Don Kiko's writing of the longest love letter (to sugarcoat and mislead regarding his crime) – alteration of the glorified past of the characters. Distortion of reality behind the Filipino past – altered by the present and becoming bleak in the future – has occurred all because of forces that seep into his consciousness, thanks to the rebels and militaries (i.e. colonizers) who disturb the peacefulness of the land. This claim is supported by San Juan's idea in his essay *Allegories of Resistance* (1994), in which he claimed that the early historical account of the Philippines shows that it has lost its identity in the surging tides of the colonial era. The main characters' coming in full circle to their place of origin implies a coming back to one's roots, reconciling with the past so the future could be shaped.

The love letter is the driving force behind Luke's coming home to the Philippines. It chronicles not only the love story of Pilar and Tony (Luke's father), but it is Iraya's story, the Philippine's history to be exact, since it echoes the cadences and musicality of a love between a Filipino (Pilar) and a foreigner (Tony), which is the very core of Philippine psyche. Although not implicitly suggested in the novel, the presence of Tony in Iraya may mean that he stands for the colonizer — in that native village of Iraya, it signifies the presence of invaders on a native shore. His presence too, has brought about changes in the lives of the village people; it is the reason for Don Alvarado's being away with him. As a form of vengeance, the latter alters the truth behind the longest love letter, and recreates it according to his own version of the story. This, then, tells that the actual history of Iraya in particular (and of the Philippines in general) has been altered because of the coming of the invaders, and the machinations of people who have access to truth. The alteration, in the wider context, mirrors the loss of identity of Filipinos and the loss suffered historically in the Philippines. And since the love letter appears fictional, so does the Filipino identity, and so as a result, history becomes mythical.

Obviously, the longest love letter is addressed to Tony and Australia, and covertly to Bicol and the Philippines: *sa gabos kong padaba* — "to all my beloved." This may explain that the voices of all the beloved need to be heard in the text. In translating the voices of Iraya to Australia, a tension inescapably arises between the worry about the oriental influence and the need for "truthfulness." Since it would have been impossible for Bobis to translate the local terms into English without losing their cadence, rhythm and nuances, the inflections of speech, intonation, and the sometimes lush poetic phrasing, she opts for the Bicol words. After all, beloved can never be as tender as *padaba,* nor can sweet potato be as sweet earthly as *duma*. In this way, Bobis does not portray Iraya as unusual, but in a way, makes Bicol sensibility non-marginalized in the primarily English text.

The river in the novel, too, is highly metaphorical, or allegorical. Playing a significant role in the novel as the focus of some equally important events, the river represents the Philippines. It serves as the origin and destination of all actions — where dead bodies are trawled, where Pilar and Estrella spend time in sisterly bonding, where villagers get water to sustain them, where they go when looking for missing relatives, where life in Iraya is at its best. The river stands for life, and the fact that the river changes its taste with each significant event of the story means that it pulsates with life, like the Filipino spirit; it is the Philippines. The way it changes its taste with every turn of events in the novel reflects the changes that the country has had to undergo each time colonizers invaded it. It mirrors the adaptations to which the country has been subjected because of the presence of colonizers. The

river then represents not only Iraya, but more so, the Philippines before and after the coming of the colonizers.

Estrella's hair that is used to trawl for dead bodies from the river becomes yet another symbol in the novel. It may seem mythical, for where in the world can one find an 18-meter long tress of hair, except perhaps in Grimm's fairy tale *Rapunzel*. Added to that is its power to salvage dead bodies from the river; even in ability to kill and save persons, it yet plays a vital role in the novel's development. More than just something functioning for the reasons mentioned above, Estrella's hair seems to remind people in Iraya of their adversaries and the changes that have befallen them. Seemingly, her hair tells that it is time for people to salvage the lost past, the peaceful Iraya before the coming of the colonizers, represented here by the rebels and militaries. Yet, like the myth that engulfs the hair, that glorious past also appears mythical in itself already—it remains just a story, a thing of the past, a time which will forever haunt the memory, but will never become real.

The river and the hair then recount the colonization that the Philippines (represented by Iraya) had to undergo under the hands of the colonizers (the rebels and the militaries), which resulted in the diaspora of its sons and daughters (most, if not all the characters have left Iraya), with only a handful left. In the end, however, the characters have to come back to Iraya, not to disengage themselves from it, but to reengage with it, even in the least possible and the least humane way.

Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

After careful analysis and close reading of the novel using Ashcroft et al.'s (1989) postcolonial perspectives, the researcher posits the following:

1. The novel represents the post-colonial experience as seen under the dimensions of narrative technique, characterization, and signification. This postcolonial experience is shown in the characters' leaving (home) for the new land, the place of exile. It does not, however, mean that the new land is always a place abroad; it can be anywhere within the Philippines, but not obviously home or the origin of all actions.
2. The novel's characters feel a sense of ambivalence, of divided loyalty. They are always haunted by the memories of home—the will to go back to their points of origin, which is realized yet in different forms. To illustrate, Bobis' characters are able to come back to Iraya, although their homecoming is marked by tragedy. The novel's setting always involves two opposing yet equally important vicinities—that of the home (the origin of all actions), and the place of exile (the new land). For Bobis, it is Iraya vs Australia.
3. The novel's significations (symbolisms), in one way or the other, stand for the factors affecting the Filipino's postcolonial experience. These symbolisms come in the form of the river and the 12-meter long hair possessed by Estella.
4. The representations in the novel, in one way or the other, relate to Bobis' postcolonial condition. She assumed characters who idealize the post-colonial condition, even accept or negate such condition, or are always haunted by the memories of home and the place of exile—she is Estrella or Stella.
5. The novelist, too, incorporates native traditions and languages in her texts to further make the novel retain its "Filipino-ness." As one reads the novel, s/he may encounter native Filipino expressions, food, flora and fauna, traditions, superstitious beliefs among others. With these, it is safe to assume that the novelist takes away the dominance of the English language; hence, she writes back.
6. Seemingly, the novelist is saying that a Filipino may leave the Philippines and yet s/he is forever connected to it, no matter where s/he goes, almost akin to the universal construct that one may leave the country, but it never leaves her/him.
7. The novelist also seems to indicate that with the coming of the colonizers, the pure Filipino identity has become mythical, if not non-existent. It is, therefore, an identity in the making.

Future literary research may dwell on the following:

1. A study can be made on Filipino literature in English to determine the extent of its Filipino-ness, to find out whether or not there is in these works the ring of a "Filipino voice", and the feel of "Filipino texture".
   1.1 A study comparing the degree of Filipino-ness present in Filipino literature in English as opposed to that written in the vernacular, or in Filipino literature in English and Filipino-American literature.
   1.2 A study on Filipino literature to find out how much of the author's regional identity is incorporated into the work.
2. A comparative study can be done on Filipino literature in English and on Filipino-American literature to determine the extent of the author's American orientation.
   2.1 A study on Filipino literature to determine the extent of foreign influences other than American or the Filipino way of life.
   2.2 A study on the same subject involving literature of other Filipinos who live abroad, but not necessarily America and Australia.
   2.3 A study comparing American literature and second-generation Filipino-American literature to find out significant differences and/or similarities, if any.
   2.4 A study of selected world contemporary novels on the effects of diaspora on certain nationalities.
3. Research on how representative Filipino fictionists revisit/reinterpret Philippine history in their works.

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