

The Figure of the Filipino Exile in the Poem “Here” by Conchitina Cruz

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In an essay by critic J. Neil Garcia entitled *English and the Filipino Imagination: A Critique of Gemino H. Abad's Poetics of Filipino poetry in English*, he unpacks and discusses the controversial essay by Gemino Abad (*One Hundred Years of Filipino Poetry from English: Language as Site of Nationhood*) which purportedly serves as a cartography of Philippine literature in English, and in which, it is stated that the current phase of literary production in the Philippines has reached the point where it can already be called an “open clearing” because “poets from this period follow the structures of the New Critical poem less, finding themselves becoming increasingly interested in other issues: social and political realities, semiotic theories etc.”¹ The problematic thing however, and Garcia is quick to point this out, is that Abad argues rather absurdly that this turn in the logic of production and aesthetics of Filipino poets, this negation of New Criticism as a mode of poetic practice via subscription to more theoretical discourses, is something that happened out of the poet’s inner curiosity and not because of outside factors that influenced her/him, privileging therefore the poet’s artistic autonomy. Adding another blow to his already searing criticism of Abad, Garcia states that this discourse of Abad is just a “refunctioning” of Almario’s nativist discursive agenda in which the latter essentializes “Filipino language as sui generis and pronouncing the culture that this language represents as fundamentally incomparable.” Abad’s theory, therefore, is just a copycat of Almario’s with just a few minor tweaks.

In this review essay, I will try to discuss Conchitina Cruz’ poem “Here” (from the collection *There is no emergency*),

¹ J. Neil Garcia’s critique appears in his book, “Postcolonialism and Filipino Poetics” published by the University of the Philippines Press.

specifically, I will attempt to show how this poem, produced in this era of the “open clearing,” is reflective of Abad’s diagnosis that poets today are increasingly becoming interested with social and political realities and theories to the point of making them the subject of their poetry—but veering away from Abad’s reductive and essentialist posture that effectively rejects the notion of ideology and the *socius* in its assertion of the primacy of the poet’s will and autonomy over external contingencies, I will argue that this turn is not a product of poet’s autonomous mind as Abad ignorantly believes but something that is influenced by a worldwide trend, particularly the intellectual trend of continental philosophy in Europe, something that Abad, I believe, is not aware of. Also, I will attempt to show how the figure of the exile manifests in Cruz’ poem.

The poem, “Here,” is a poem of journey, of the unconscious exile of a wanderer, of identity loss. The persona in the poem perpetually moves from one place to another, a city, a room—she transitions and drifts like a speck in the air, in this line she’s in Chicago, she’s in Makati in the next. She is never transfixed in one place. I remember this specific essay by one of my favorite theorists of exile, Andre Aciman (novelist and currently, chair of the literature department of NYU) in which he mentions that there are two types of exiles, those who are uprooted and those who are derooted, and if I remember it correctly, this is the difference between the two: those who are uprooted, can be planted to other lands, meaning, even if they were removed from their motherlands, they will thrive on other lands—this is not the case with derooted exiles, as the word suggests, these exiles have their root totally cut off, they cannot grow on other lands. I mentioned this because I believe this is the case in the poem, we have a persona who is grappling with the notion of her identity, a notion of identity that is inextricably linked with the spaces she has been to, a kind of identity that is arbitrary: in one line she says “*In Bangkok, I am addressed in Chinese*” and in another, “*In Los Angeles, I am thought to be Mexican.*” She has been in transition from one place to another, but she never feels alright in these places, she never feels at home, she never feels herself whoever that is—if I remember it correctly, Garcia says in another one of his essays (and almost all the postcolonial theorists says the similar thing for that matter), that the preoccupation of the postcolonial artist or intellectual is to help in the struggle for the reclamation of the collective/national identity, this I believe is also the project of this specific poem, and if not, at least it exposes the dilemma of the exiled soul.

The most poignant line in the poem, for me, is the last line: “*In Los Banos, I am told to keep my voice down.*” Of course an intellectual/artist finds her comfort in her home, because presumably, this specific locus is where she grew up, and hence, this is where she is most comfortable with because familiar—so it is okay to be rejected in other places by other people, to be mistaken for somebody else in unfamiliar territories, but imagine the metaphysical violence of being considered an alien even in your own place.

Conchitina Cruz, who received her PhD in English from State University of New York (Albany), is one of our finest poet and not only that, she is also one of our finest critics as well, in a short essay, *The Filipino Author as a producer* (note the use of producer instead of creator), she shows an expert knowledge of some of the most famous theories and discursive practices in the West, in her critique on Charlie Veric’s poetics, she says: “...*the professionalized poet, whose poetry is, by default, unfree, and who nevertheless reaps professional gains from his unfreedom.*” This sounds very much like Adorno in his seminal book *Aesthetic Theory*: “*For absolute freedom in art, always limited to a particular, comes into contradiction with the perennial unfreedom of the whole.*” This practically means that, those who claim the possibility of absolute freedom, at least in the field of aesthetics, are ignoring the fact that while there can be relative freedom in it, this goes in contrast with the “perennial unfreedom” of the fields beyond aesthetics.

To call the poetry of Cruz and her contemporaries who express similar political and ideological positions as merely a break from earlier forms of poetic practices, but without the proper explanations, is simply wrong. This break from New Criticism and the poetic practices before it is necessary in the development of the literary tradition of the Philippines, if we remained New Critical until now (a lot still are), we will just be proving what Bakhtin has believed all along—that poetry is a genre devoid of potentialities.

About the Author

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