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Brutality in the Fiction of Estrella D. Alfon

Estrella D. Alfon is one of the most undervalued writers in the history of Philippine literature in English. Although three of her stories were selected by Leopoldo Yabes and Carlos Bulosan as being among the fifteen best in the period 1925-1940¹, Yabes grouped Alfon with authors "who have no vision or not enough of it to avoid being merely a craftsman" (Manliclic 97). Although "she was considered the best Filipino writer in pre-war days" (Manliclic 114), critics identified flaws in her fiction. Manuel A. Viray, for instance, surely the ranking authority at the time², cited "a tendency to sprawl by including irrelevant details and she seldom rewrites or revises her work" (Manliclic 114). Her achievements were almost immediately recognized: "She was 'discovered' by Alfredo Elfren Litiatco, literary editor of the *Graphic* which published her first story, 'Gray Confetti,' in 1935" and "her collection of short stories won a prize in the first Commonwealth Literary Contests in 1940" (Manliclic 114). Yet so justly respected a critic as N. V. M. Gonzalez detected a downturn in quality in her later work (Manliclic 115).

Support for this judgment is found in the pattern of anthologization, which early found her stories being selected and later being by-passed. In the 1950s, her "Water from the Well" appeared in *Philippine Cross-Section; Philippine Writing* includes "Magnificence." But the 1960s collections *Philippine PEN Anthology of Short Stories 1962* and *New Writing from the Philippines* contain no Alfon short stories, although Casper (57-59) does devote more space to her in the "Critique" section than he devotes to Arturo Rotor, D. Paulo Dizon, Alejandro Roces, or Gilda Cordero-Fernando.

Similarly, although "Servant Girl" was selected among the best stories of 1938 by Edward J. O'Brien (Manliclic 97), she did not even place in the Palanca Memorial Awards between 1950 and 1968, and in the annual *Philippines Free Press* competition she had only one award, a second place in 1957-58 for "Man With a Camera" (Castillo 223-30).

Other critical assessments have also reinforced Gonzalez's opinion. Yates's letter to Hartendorp, in the October, 1937 issue of *Philippine Magazine*, reflects the stories' early impact: "'Of course I don't have to tell you what perfect splendid piece of writing [sic] it is'" (Hosillos 117). But critical attention has waned since Manliclic's 1955 article. For instance, although Hosillos's book on Philippine short fiction in English focuses on a narrow, twenty-year time corridor at a very active phase of Alfon's literary career, *Magnificence and Other Stories* is not among the collections chosen for detailed examination.

However, it is not a decline in quality, but instead an unappreciated thematic emphasis—a concern for the brutalized condition of women—which explains the apparently changed character of her work. Because the qualities for which critics initially lauded her work were muted, the critics assumed that the quality of her work had deteriorated and thus did not look closely enough at what had emerged. At first, as I. V. Mallari has indicated, she was known for "her choice of words which in general showed distinguishing traits as texture and color producing nuances and rhythm pleasing to her readers" (Manliclic 114). In short, she was perceived as a local colorist, a perception which persisted for decades. Abaya³, for instance, praises *Magnificence and Other Stories* (hereafter *MOS*) for their "amazing verisimilitude, enhanced by an accuracy of detail, to say nothing of the charming touch of local color" (115). A number of *MOS* stories do, certainly, have affinities to the local color tradition. In "English," for example, Marco works at a bodega, whose odoriferousness produces the atmospheric effects of the local color story:

Marco ought to have been used to the stifle of the bodega, its dust, its tang of the sea that rose from the maguey, the spoiled, moldy odor of copra, and the smell of sweat from bodies unwashed; but every once in a while, he still had to leave his place at the weighing scales to go out and gasp his fill of air in the alley that ran by the bodega. (*MOS* 33)

It is certainly tempting to see the relegation of Alfon to the local color tradition as an all too palpable instance of phallic criticism, the much-

discussed tendency of male critics to "ignore many female writers altogether" (Register 8). And this may be so, though that is not the thesis that this essay pursues. While I hope that this essay will do at least something to counteract what Showalter describes as "'the massive silence' of feminist criticism about black and Third World women writers" (244), I consider the thematic ballast of *MOS* to be more squarely in the context of Brownmiller's perspective: "the gut knowledge that we and our bodies are being stripped, exposed, and contorted" (531-32). I do not see *MOS* stylistically as *écriture féminine*, however, and, though certainly "gynocentric" at least in the broadest sense of the term, this essay does part company with American empirical feminism. Perhaps the nearest critical neighbor is the English feminist tradition, but stripped of Marxist presuppositions and conclusions.

The type of atmospheric effect represented in the *MOS* stories certainly differentiates the local color of Alfon from the local color of, say, Arguilla, Bret Harte, Mark Twain, or O. Henry, as the example of a "charming touch of local color" which Abaya (115) selects forcefully reminds us: "'We played volleyball until the light grew dim, and even then quit only because the ball fell plunk on to a cake of carabao dung'" (*MOS* 100). This is at best local color in black and white. If taken straightforwardly, this incident quite literally epitomizes the quality of the "perfect day" it is part of. But it is difficult to take the story straightforwardly. Entitled not just "Perfect Day," but, rapturously, "O Perfect Day," the story throughout undercuts this tone. Its details are maddeningly trivial, even meaningless:

We drank lemonade and ate some cookies. And then the girls went into Inday's room. We smeared our lips with her lipstick, slapped our faces with her powder, draped ourselves with her dresses. And then my brother Nene said, "Hey cats! come on out." (*MOS* 95)⁴

I remember how one night, with some friends of my mother, we went to Talisay in our car with mother driving. I was a girl of twelve and I sat beside Mother in the driver's seat. The other matrons in the seat behind us were very gay, and I joined in with their laughter. (*MOS* 101)

The fact that the narrator is a twelve-year-old does not matter to a determination of what is trivial, even meaningless, since the story is the product of an adult author and has been culled from numerous stories in periodical publications for inclusion in *MOS*.

The concluding explanation of what is "perfect" about this "perfect day" is, if cogent at all, only so as irony:

Inday leads the singing, "Another perfect day has gone away." What peace that song breathes . . .

Today was perfect not just because it held laughter; but because like every other today, there were yesterdays to remember, to cry about and to be glad about; and tomorrows to look forward to in fear and hope. (*MOS* 107)

The first part of this conclusion claims that the song brings peace, even though "Another perfect day has gone away" should bring regret or at least nostalgia, not peace. The lyric concerns mutability and thus has an *ubi sunt* overlay. The second part of the conclusion is an enthymeme with a self-annihilating conclusion: "Today was perfect because there were yesterdays to be recalled and tomorrows to anticipate." The conclusion, obviously, is that "every day is perfect." This removes any meaning whatsoever from "perfect day," unless a derived analytic proposition such as "Today is the current perfect day" is squeezed from it. But even if such a permutation were generously ruled to justify the story thematically, the phrases "to cry about" and "in fear" strip "perfect" of even that much informative value. "Perfect" evaporates utterly, leaving behind only the tautology "Today is today." The only plausible explanation for this reductive conclusion is that it is brutally ironic, effectively stating that "perfection" is simply "whatever happens." In sum, if "O Perfect Day" is a description of a day both typical and perfect, then every day has equally what this day has, no matter what specific events transpire. This is a depressing prospect, considering that not only is most of the story concerned with the most mundane activities, but also that there are ominous portions:

There was still that chilled terror with me, but I gritted my teeth and bent my knees so that my head was covered by the water. I was in the shallow end, yet somehow, with my head under the water and my breath held, I had a sudden feeling I was alone in the world, in the pool, that I was near to drowning and must hurry to save myself. I had only to stand up, and my head would be out of the water, but some unreasonable panic possessed me, and I thrashed my arms widely [*sic*] about and opened my mouth to shout, but I only drank in quantities of water; and then I managed to stand up at last, and I was breathing in hungry gasps of the cold air. There were my mother⁵ and the others, out at the deep end, and they were laughing, and

telling stories, and daring each other to dive. But the feeling of being all alone would not leave me, the feeling of danger from the water stayed with me, and I grasped the iron railing that ran around the entire tank, swung myself out of the water, and changed hurriedly into my clothes. But the chillingness never left me. I wrapped myself in some towels, but I could not drive away that awful feeling of fear. All that night, I dreamed I was in the water, and my mother woke me up once because I was screaming, and then in the morning, I was sick, and the doctor said it was my lungs.

That was so long ago. Here it was dark and it was cold, and I was, I realized, afraid again. I poured some dippers full of the water over myself. I imagined bogey men in the trees that clustered on the banks, and when some chance winds made the bamboos creak, I thought it would be someone calling to me, someone of the evil creatures that hide themselves and prey on humans, like vampires, like witches—I stood up quickly, left the well, and ran to the others in the cottage. (*MOS* 102-103)

How alone the narrator feels, isolated and even alienated, is suggested by the comma density⁶. This is partly the by-product of the interrupters ("with my head under the water and my breath held," "in the pool," "out at the deep end," and "I realized") and items in a series ("laughing and telling stories, and daring each other to dive," "the feeling of being all alone would not leave me, that feeling of danger from the water stayed with me, and I grasped the iron railing that ran around the entire tank, swung myself out of the water, and changed hurriedly into my clothes," and "I stood up quickly, left the well, and ran to the others in the cottage." But there are a number of commas that are not ordinarily called for: ". . . stand up, and my head . . .," "All that night, I dreamed I was in the water," "in the morning, and I was sick . . .," and the syntax is weighted heavily in favor of coordinate constructions, calling, of course, for commas before the respective coordinating conjunctions.

The most unsettling aspect of this immersion, however, is its function of symbolic initiation into womanhood, a process that can indeed leave a young person feeling alienated and alone. The pool is, transparently, a female symbol. The narrator, at age twelve, is "in the shallow end," just entering adulthood; her mother is "at the deep end." The newness of the narrator's adult stirrings causes the experience to be ambiguous for her: "As soon as my body was wholly in the water, with just my head out, I felt suddenly afraid, yet somehow, I didn't want to get out" (*MOS* 102). The budding sexual awareness of the narrator is sketched in the following

sentence: "Someone stood on the diving board, a slim mestiza in a bathing suit that for those days was very daring because it was white and molded her body like a sheath." That the narrator is making the transition from childhood to adulthood is evident in other contexts as well: "We smeared our lips with her lipstick, slapped our faces with her powder, draped ourselves with her dresses" (*MOS* 95). Still, the degrading connotations of the verbs "smeared," "slapped," and "draped" do not suggest that womanhood is a condition to look forward to.

Yet mundane, even banal, may be as close to perfect as Estrella Alfon's female protagonists can hope to be, since they inhabit a brutalizing, humiliating, sexist environment. The mildest manifestation of this tendency is in "O Perfect Day," when Nene calls to the girls, "'Hey, you skirts, come out!'" (*MOS* 95). In other stories abuse takes the form of child molestation, physical beatings, near-rape, voyeurism, abandonment, infidelity, impregnation, taking a newborn away from its mother, and incest⁷. The thematic graininess may well be what prompted Arcellana (vii) to remark that "When I say that these stories are powerful as stories I mean they are compelling. They are told with urgency. They make you think of the Ancient Mariner." This is a happy comparison, in any case, for these *MOS* stories do depict a universe nightmarish in its disproportionately violent and contemptuous treatment of women, although Arcellana's remark primarily alludes to the Ancient Mariner's compulsive need to tell his tale.

Manlicic (115) seconds Arcellana's idea about the need to narrate: "Her principal concern has been the telling of her stories in the most compulsive, the most compelled—not the most compelling—manner." Their compulsive quality emanates from the first person point of view and from the resultant proximity of narrator and reader. As Abaya (116) has reported, Alfon has decisively indicated that "I do not write stories, I tell them'." Abaya (112) views this narrative stance as "an autobiographical matter . . . rendered fully and justifiably by an autobiographical manner." In particular, he thinks that the style of narration imbues *MOS* with coherence:

Magnificence and Other Stories have a firmer excuse for being together. By accident or design, the collection has an undercurrent theme at once united and unifying. The unifying theme seems to be this: the wilfulness of life and the helplessness of the persons who live it. This is like fatalism in that the quirks and turns which a person is subjected to are not entirely or directly of his own making, and yet it is unlike it in that there is in the characters of *Magnificence and Other Stories* no sense of despair.

That there is unity I agree, though I think it is achieved at least as much by theme as by tone. The remark that there is "no sense of despair" is surely applicable only to the characters' perspective, not to the readers', as Abaya (113) acknowledges: "It is this pervading note of hope, tempered by cautiousness, among characters who remain cheerfully serious in spite of past hopes dashed, that makes for tonal unity in *Magnificence and Other Stories*." Abaya, however, sees in *MOS* an authorial acceptance, even a condoning, of the occurrences in her stories. I do not share Abaya's view in this respect, since I think it can be held only at the expense of downplaying the savagely cutting, if understated, irony that so pervades the collection. As Abaya (114-15) has it,

All she does is to define, and perhaps discover the reasons for, the inexorable quirks and turns that life imposes on helpless people, and to understand these people's magnificent reaction to that imposition. She does this with a restraint that bars maudlin sentimentality from suffusing genuine sentiment, with a bit of humor that is biting and to the point, and with a language that goes into life in its simplicity, economy, and rhythm ("... behind it stretched the sands of the beach, and coconut palms, and fishing boats in their cradles on the strand"). And always she does this with a spectator's detachment and yet with a participant's compassion and understanding.

The detachment, Abaya observes, is partly a function of not permitting characters to present themselves: "In none of *Magnificence and Other Stories* is there any dialogue through the use of direct quotations. Some semblance of it is portrayed but through indirect quotations" (111). The balance which Abaya sees between authorial engagement and authorial detachment is no mean achievement, since

Each story is heaped with much of the stuff of actuality; its sights, sounds, and smells are real enough sights, sounds, and smells to make reading it like an act of living itself. Each stuff of actuality is concrete and particular, immediate and infectious. . . . Alfon's pictorial sense is astonishing in its keenness, as in "Water from the Well." Her portrayal of the other senses[sic]—of smell, and of sound—are so accurate they give urgency to the real. (110, 111)

Yet the unity achieved through narrative artistry does not detract from the individual importance of each story: "It is important for these stories to

convey an effect that is powerful in its singularity because each one tackles just an ironic quirk or some funny turn of life's many-splendored quirks and turns" (Abaya 109). "Ironic quirk" and "some funny turn," however, give a far too light-hearted, even casual impression of the tone of these stories. They are deadly serious; their apparent inconsequence is a result of narrative "detachment" reflective of ennui, not amused or sardonic observation. To be fair to Abaya, it should be noted that he does appreciate the significance of the apparently insignificant, the seriousness of the apparently offhand: "Each story is a tissue of life that can almost be taken for granted for its insignificance. It takes a perceptive writer like Estrella D. Alfon to see through the apparent triviality and render it in a literary capsule that adumbrates life in its large manifestations" (110). The seriousness of the Alfon narrative stance is reflected in another consistent quality of her stories: ". . . the absence of humor. She has touched on almost all human emotions ranging from joy and hope, sorrow and despair, hatred and bitterness but humor she has little or nothing to do with" (Manliclic 113).

The depiction of women's plight is, perhaps, what impelled Manliclic (113) to remark that "She has a partial attitude towards women for her principal characters." Yet she has not yielded to the temptation to use her stories as a vehicle for social or political commentary. As Manliclic (113) correctly says, "She has never sounded didactic; instead she has always presented her characters with deep compassion and human understanding." Alfon has successfully promulgated a theme without promoting a cause because, as Manliclic long ago pointed out, Alfon deftly blends the universal and the personal:

The writer has a remarkable imaginative ability which is coupled with profound intensity and sincerity of feeling. . . . her stories . . . have given glimpses of life and death, time and change, love and hatred. . . . If one would consider these stories as a dialogue with herself, then what she has revealed might be enough to make her readers know that these stories have a stamp wholly hers and nobody else's. (Manliclic 113)

But Alfon goes far beyond merely favoring female characters. "Magnificence," for instance, straightforwardly deals with the intended abuse of a little girl. Vicente gradually worms his way into her favor by bringing her gifts, the most symbolically telling of which is "the biggest pencil he could find" (*MOS* 3). The obviously phallic character of this gift is shortly evident: ". . . the third pencil, a jumbo sized pencil really, was white, and

had been sharpened . . ." (*MOS* 4). When the girl's mother surprises Vicente holding the little girl on his lap, she drives him out of her house. The utter sleaziness of this situation is driven home by the narrative note that "She had been witness, watching through the shutters of a window that overlooked the stairs, to a picture of magnificence her mother made as she slapped the man down the stairs and out into the dark night" (*MOS* 10). Although it is a critical commonplace to read this passage and the title literally, I cannot see how irony could be more explicit; *this* is magnificent?

The title character in "The Photographed Beggar" had a "favorite pastime" of "looking at young girls against the sun, so that their legs showed through their clothes, revealed to him by sun's glare" (*MOS* 25). This is the vicarious version of the intended intrusion of Vicente into private parts in "Magnificence" and is a theme which Alfon introduces in several other stories. The mirror image of "The Photographed Beggar" is the immediately preceding "Man with a Camera." The latter involves no female characters, but it does portray man as utterly degenerate (one is reminded of Caliban in *The Tempest*) in the case of the beggar and man as degradedly searching for degeneracy and then skylining it in the case of the photographer:

What a hypocrite he had been, when even as he took those other pictures of beauty and loveliness and sweetness and sunshine, he had all the while really been looking for the look of evil, the ugliness in the face of the beggar he had portrayed. He had haunted churchyards and street corners in his search for the look on the face of the beggars. (*MOS* 14)

Men like these are the principal hazard in the lives of the Alfon stories' female characters.

The mirror motif is present in Alfon's prose fiction since of course the mirror is itself the counterpart to the penetration of the eye and the camera. The most extensive use of the mirror is in "Mama," not part of *MOS*, which begins "There's a woman in the mirror, fat, her face lined" (32) and ends "I do not see anyone in the mirror but myself" (37) and only changes focus when the narrator briefly reminisces about various events from her past. But within *MOS* mirror images appear. The eyes of the little girl in "Magnificence" are "dark pools of wonder and fear and question" (*MOS* 7), "pools" of course suggesting "reflecting pools" as well as being a female symbol. In "Those That Love Us," "Lily went to a big mirror, stood before it, and started to comb waves into her hair" (*MOS* 42) and "Imping sat down on a

chair near them, listening to Ria's chatter while the child admired herself in the mirror" (*MOS* 47).

In "O Perfect Day," ". . . women are clustering about individual wells that they have scooped out, into which, when they are deep enough, the water comes bubbling, a little muddy at first, and then growing clearer and clearer and clearer until it mirrors the morning clouds" (*MOS* 99); "I leaned over Bingbing's shoulder and watched my face among the clouds reflected in the water. . . . while we watched one star glimmered in the well. . . . Bingbing threw her head down and bent over so that her wet hair hung into the well, and drops dripped from it and disturbed the image of the solitary stars in the water" (*MOS* 101); ". . . the coconut palms around the tank cast shadows of their leaves on the water" (*MOS* 102). In "Anguish" ". . . the next morning he dressed, and looked at himself in the mirror" (*MOS* 158-59). In "Alan's Piano Lesson" the narrator reports that "When I was little child, I used to stand before a big mirror on a huge narra aparador . . ." (*MOS* 238).

More menacing intrusion occurs in "Servant Girl" where Rosa, having just walked out of her mistress's house, "felt the swish of something almost brushing against her. She looked up angrily at the cochero's laughing remark about his whip missing her beautiful bust" (*MOS* 88). Even a man who acted as kindly as the cochero Pedro had when he rubbed her ankle, "even he could flick his whip at a girl almost alone on the road" (*MOS* 89). The sexual connotations of "flick his whip" add to the ominousness of this insensitive act.

That sometimes, rather than resulting from male intrusion, the exposure of private areas is accidental, opportunistic, or fanciful does not change its character as intrusion. For instance, in "Water from the Well": ". . . framed like a picture within his oblong, I saw twin mountain peaks, perfectly proportioned and spaced. It was as though Earth had bared her bosom, revealing to my enamored eyes the lovely bareness of pointed breasts" (*MOS* 66-67). Rosa, the title character in "Servant Girl," injures her foot in a fall and then "Still struggling to get up, she noticed that her wrap had been loosened and had bared her breasts" (*MOS* 79). On another occasion Rosa strikes her foot on a sharp stone and bends over to examine it; because "Her dress had a wide, deep neck . . . it must have hung away from her body when she bent. Anyway, she had looked up to find Sancho looking into the neck of her dress" (*MOS* 85). Immediately afterward they continue

homeward, but he pauses to pick up a twig: "With deft strokes he had drawn twin sharp peaks on the ground" (*MOS* 85-86).

Even "O Perfect Day" has its version of intrusiveness, in this case bantering and purely verbal, but intrusive nonetheless:

Mother cut off the paws of the pig, gave one to Ansiang, and told her it was a disgrace that she had been married one whole year almost, and there was still no one to cry in the night. (*MOS* 96)

That the intrusion is here undertaken by a female does not lessen its effects on the female recipient; if anything, in fact, the unwitting cooperation of females with acts of male intrusiveness is a wellspring of deepened concern for the readers. The same conclusion applies to the occasional situation in which the female is the aggressor, as in "Anguish": "First, the eldest son got married to a girl who insisted on sleeping with him" (*MOS* 153).

This does not, of course, imply that "aggressive" always need equate with "intrusive," though at times it does. In "Compostela" ". . . I spoke to a fallow woman, who was already mother of eleven, telling her to turn an obdurate back around when her husband woke her up at night. Her straightfaced answer [was] that it was she who woke him up" (*MOS* 216). But Andika, the loud, pushy, unfaithful wife of Mr. Crow in "Espeleta," has the audacity not only to take on a lover but even to have him eat meals with the family and stay the night while her blind, usually drunken, husband is in a neighboring room.

Alfon's most celebrated story of intrusion is "Low Wall," the title referring to the bathroom walls of the barong-barong of the narrator. The plot is simply that the fourteen-year-old peeping Tom, "his feet bare, his eyes sullen, downcast but rebellious" (*MOS* 228), is too pathetic a figure to bother punishing. That the narrator's annoyance about the boy's behavior is not mere prudishness is made clear early:

We're a fairly modern family. We go about in shorts, and sometimes in bathing suits. Bare thighs and bare shoulders and bare midriffs do not send any of us into hysterical oohs and ahs. And the young of the family have always been allowed to watch their elders dressing and undressing so that they could look upon the human body, ask what questions they wished, and feel no abnormal curiosity. (*MOS* 224)

The abuses suffered by Alfon's female characters, however, do go well beyond voyeurism; intrusion into their privacy takes such severe forms as whipping, seduction, and abandonment. "The Gentle Rain," with its viciously ironic title and even more viciously ironic narrative comment ("I like to think of a God who is merciful"—*MOS* 132), could well furnish material for the American soap opera *Knots Landing*. Maring patiently suffers on the scale of Job. Her series of calamities begins when she is fourteen, with the death of her mother. In less than six months her father brings home a new wife who "would get into abusive rage and scold the children. She would not let Maring play on the piano" [which her father had given her—*MOS* 117-18]. Maring is soon seduced by a ship's captain (after inviting her into his home to play on his piano), who is scheduled to sail the next day. He promises to return (naturally he doesn't and in any case it turns out that he is married). When her father finds out that she is in the family way, he whips her. She escapes to an aunt's house only when her stepmother apprises her of her father's intention to whip her to death. Her father throws some of her clothes to her brother Ramon, who delivers them to her aunt's house. The son Maring bears is immediately taken from her and brought up by her aunt's daughter. The aunt's daughter dies in childbirth and her husband, who has been making sheep's eyes at Maring before his wife's death, now seriously pursues Maring. In a delirium just before death, the aunt's daughter accuses Maring of, among other sins, having slept with her husband. Maring's aunt believes this false accusation and says that Maring killed the aunt's daughter by "causing her grief" (*MOS* 122). In the meantime, her brother Ramon has gone to America permanently "'because a girl he had wronged was trying to induce him to marry her'" (*MOS* 124), thus depriving her of her one constant friend and companion. She falls in love with a man in Leyte, whom she meets on an excursion to try to recover her health. She gives him most of the money sent to her by Ramon, money she badly needs, and buys him shoes and silk shirts. He promptly marries someone else. Her father is eventually reconciled, but he lets everyone know that, although he forgives her, he is "sorry for her sins to God" (*MOS* 110). It is not long before she contracts leprosy. Her aunt informs her that her leprosy is punishment for her sins. Her father dispatches her to Consolacion (itself an ironic name), the Leprosarium, and announces his generosity in paying the taxi fare to transport her. En route, in a daze, she jumps from the taxi, which brings her back. Her father's remark, as he sits

with his dying daughter, is "'You have increased your sin to God'" (*MOS* 130).

As if this weren't enough, as a girl Maring was expelled from a convent school because the janitor was making eyes at her. She has always worn unstylish dresses. Once she ventured to attend a dance. The narrator gives her a tray, on the assumption that Maring is a serving girl. The narrator, meeting her after some years and telling us Maring's story, pompously moralizes that "'People are very thoughtless in their happiness. And selfish. . . . The one who gave you the tray, Maring, must not even have known you'." Maring gently reminds the narrator that "'You were the one who gave me the tray'" (*MOS* 126). In the next paragraph we discover that whereas everyone else was coaxed into singing, the group did not implore Maring to attempt it. Maring, in sum, is the Filipino Patient Grizelda.

"The Woman on the Steeple" is an excruciating tale of a mother so traumatized by her son's death that she climbs the cross atop San Nicholas's Church. Her posture is symbolically significant, from a psychological perspective especially: ". . . she stood up, and taking hold of the head of the cross, placed her legs on its arms. . . . And then . . . she took her hands away from their hold on the head of the cross, and flung them upwards to heaven . . . her arms were doubled in passionate fists" (*MOS* 140-41).

This is, on one level, protest as well as imprecation, rebellion against the treatment she receives from a male authority figure, God the Father. It is the woman's husband (another male authority figure) who tacitly secures the approval of the priest (another male authority figure) to summon a policeman (another male authority figure): "Everyone thought that was a bright idea, and so everybody said, I will look for a policeman, but it was only the husband who finally went off, saying to the priest as though for permission, I will get a policeman" (*MOS* 139-40). When the policeman arrives, he sends for a rope, with which he ties the woman's legs, after knocking her out by means of a blow to the head. She is then removed from the cross. The symbolic domination acts are subtly reinforced by the narrator's intertwined reminiscences about an excursion into the church belfry when she was a child:

But the boys with us kept twitting us about being so afraid, and we had grimly scaled these stairs in spite of the quaking of our knees. (*MOS* 136)

One boy had flung his leg over a window ledge, and we girls screamed, and as one we made for the hole in the floor that led to the stairs, and as one also, gripped these bannisters tight, and despite trembling knees made our winding way down. The boys shouted at us, and called us sissy names, but we made faces at them from the comparative safety of the choir gallery and promised them their mothers would lick them after we had told what we had to tell. (MOS 137)

The social and political overtones of this incident implicate the church as a vehicle of male domination and female repression, an implication intensified by the possibly sexually significant posture of the woman on the cross and the use of the rope to tie the woman's legs. Any possible doubt about the repressive role of the church should be removed by the ironic bendback on the story of Christ, which of course the church represents. The story is set on Christmas Day; the anguished woman's lamentation over her child's death on the day of the baby Jesus's birth is intensified by the slicing bitterness of the ending, a bitterness as visible as, say, Blake's "Chimney Sweeper" from the *Songs of Innocence*, which in tone it quite resembles: "And like a signal, the ukuleles and the guitars gave forth strains of Silent Night, Holy Night. And feeling very contented and very happy about everything in the world, our voices took up the song" (MOS 147).

"Mill of the Gods" is concerned with the consequences of the adultery of the father of the central protagonist, Martha. One night she is awakened by a fight between her parents. When she reaches her parents' bedroom, she sees her mother holding a kitchen knife which, at the behest of her father, she takes from her mother and throws out the window. Her mother then tells Martha what her father has done. Several years later, he dies on the operating table from three bullet wounds inflicted by the husband of the woman with whom Martha's father has been committing adultery. In these events the typical male chauvinist scenario is played out. One female does not have sufficient physical strength to kill Martha's father; another female disarms the mother; between the attempted knifing and the homicide, Martha takes up nursing, a nurturing profession, and is at work with the doctor who tries to save her father. Clearly, we should disapprove of this typecast characterization/action.

Martha, though made aware of the untrustworthy nature of male character, is deceived by a man pretending to be a suitor. He puts off her suggestions about getting married with "charming little evasions" (MOS 166). Finally, after his absences from her have become more prolonged and

more frequent, she hears that he has married another girl. She then falls in love with a doctor who, to his credit, informs her that he is married (though of course the doctor is betraying his wife in the process, thus abusing a woman) and thus that his love would have to remain hidden. Ironically, therefore, Martha does exactly what "that other woman" has done to Martha's mother.

As was the case in "The Woman on the Steeple," there is an implied criticism of the church. It is after Martha has turned religious (for motives of revenge, not piety) that she becomes involved with the married physician. And the closing paragraph informs us that

in Martha's room there hung a crucifix. Upon the crossed wood agonized Christ. His eyes soft and deep and tender, even in his agony. But as Martha knelt, and lighted her candles, and prayed, in her eyes was no softness, and on her lips no words appealing for pity for those who had died. There was only the glitter of a justice meted out at last, and the thankfulness for a punishment fulfilled. So she gave thanks. Very fervent thanks. For now, she hoped, she would cease to pay. (*MOS* 173-74)

To give thanks before the symbol of the crucified Christ for her father's agonizing death is, of course, a reversal of the spirit of Christ and may suggest the substitution of her father for Christ in her own symbolic nexus.

"Espeleta" is another sordid tale focused on an adulterous affair. Like "Mill of the Gods," it involves a man who patiently waits for just the right moment to get revenge on his wife's lover. Blind, he is able to wrap the offending man in his arms and wait for the police to arrive. When they do, Mr. Crow announces that he has caught a burglar, and so the adulterer is carted off to incarceration. Here another betraying, abusing male, the adulterer, is portrayed.

All in all, *MOS* depicts very vividly the abuses that its female characters patiently suffer, the vividness intensified certainly by a twist of real-life irony: the charge of obscenity brought against Alfon:

One woman writer has achieved the ambiguous distinction of having been accused and convicted of writing obscenity. Miss Estrella Alfon wrote a story, published in one of the weekly magazines, to which the Holy Name Society took exception. The matter was brought to court, and the judge ruled that the story in question was in fact obscene. A fine was imposed on writer, editor and publisher. (Bernad 83)

Although not every story is a canvas on which such a scene is rendered⁸, we behold in *MOS* an environment of degradation, an ironic refutation of the elevation of the human spirit which the title *Magnificence and Other Stories* implies. The thematic issues are serious and biting: the female inhabits a nightmare universe more subject to the irrational intrusion of brutality than anything the Ancient Mariner's nightmares hold⁹.

NOTES

1. The stories were "Servant Girl," "One Day and the Next," and "O Perfect Day." They were retained among the 66 published in *Philippine Short Stories 1925-1940*.
2. See my "Modern Philippine Poetry in the Formative Years: 1920-1950" for details.
3. Whose review of *Magnificence and Other Stories* is among the best book reviews ever published in the Philippines. It is both insightful and comprehensive, retaining its value as literary criticism more than two decades after it was published.
4. The utterly boring tone is not significantly relieved even at points containing picturesque, concrete details:

Guadalupe is a place of flowers running riot with their color and their fragrance. Guadalupe is where the birds sing and the brook is clear. The trees bear fruit and the women wash their clothes there. The little girls grow their hair long and knot it, and they look far too wise and old for their years. Guadalupe is where they sell *babingka* hot from the coals. The road stretches wide and white, and the church stands at the very end of it. (*MOS* 98)

The strikingly Hemingwayesque qualities of this passage (e.g., the cumulative parallelism of "Guadalupe is . . .," the clear brook, the wide, white road, and the *babingka* hot from the coals), in fact, connote the value negation so frequent in Hemingway's fiction.

5. The capitalization is situational. When the narrator is riding next to her mother (in control, driving), she feels a solidarity that "Mother" conveys. When the narrator is in one end of the pool, with her mother distanced from her, "mother" is appropriate.
6. This stylistic device is a constant in Alfon's short stories—unsurprisingly, since all her narrators feel this sense of isolation and alienation.
7. Casper notes the "harsh or even savage" situations of the stories.
8. "English," though a story about futility and mockery, does not involve the degradation of women. The same is true of "Those That Love Us," which concerns a girlhood excursion to confession; "Water from the Well" concludes with Tesiang's announcement that she is pregnant, but this is her wish. "Anguish" is the pathetic account of a tailor's family suffering the misfortune of having two sons contract leprosy. "Compostela," a story of the Japanese Occupation, does lean toward depicting men as boasting and cowardly, but the bravery of at least some is mentioned. "Alan's Piano Lesson" is a purely domestic vignette and "Chump" an oddity featuring a "tough guy" tone especially noticeable in uncharacteristic, even colloquial, diction: "I hate the big bum" (*MOS* 241); "I love the big lug" (*MOS* 242); "The most the poor guy managed was a draw" (*MOS* 244); "The big baboon!" (*MOS* 246); "You damn fool!" (*MOS* 246); "He was a clumsy bum, a palooka . . ." (*MOS* 249); and "Rematch, nuts!" (*MOS* 250).

9. Assuming, of course, that the Ancient Mariner's universe is, in fact, irrational and nightmarish, a not-universally-accepted conclusion. Cf., my "Coleridge's Scientific and Philosophical Insights."

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