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Toward a People's Literature

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Not so much for specific texts but for a whole mode of acting in the world of which his *praxis* of writing is the microcosm, Bulosan (like other committed writers) is today a battlefield of socio-cultural contestation. The recurrent attack on Bulosan by formalists, xenophobic sycophants of the regime today, or by pseudo-Marxists makes Evangelista's book a timely, valuable, and powerful weapon—not just a source of cognitive-aesthetic pleasure, which cannot be an end in itself—in the Filipino (and Third World people's) epic struggle for popular democracy, dignity, and genuine independence.

Epifanio San Juan, Jr.
University of Connecticut, Storrs

TOWARD A PEOPLE'S LITERATURE. By Epifanio San Juan, Jr. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1984.

In his Foreword, Epifanio San Juan Jr. points out the indebtedness of literary criticism in the Philippines to the idealist/formalist theoretical framework. San Juan himself admits to being a practitioner of the formalist method, not in the New Criticism sense, but in the Russian formalist mode. The difference, the critic informs the reader, is that this method has been "recontained and deployed within a materialist/dialectical perspective" (p. x). Elsewhere in the Foreword, San Juan states:

What I hope to illustrate here, through a materialist hermeneutics performing both negative (unmasking ideology) and positive (valorizing the Utopian) functions, is the staging of the process in which we can appropriate most effectively Filipino writers/texts which otherwise would be used and exploited for our collective undoing. (p. xii)

At the outset, we are given the book's particular project, which is to fill in the gaps in the arguments of the author's previous writings. As the critic assures the reader, his earlier works centered on arguments which in retrospect were structured by some interstices and fissures. Indeed, *Toward a People's Literature* cannot be adequately understood without some knowledge of San Juan's other texts such as *The Radical Tradition in Philippine Literature* and *A Preface to Pilipino Literature*, to name a few. Nonetheless, it is still possible to arrive at some conclusions regarding San Juan's critical project based solely on this volume's arguments.

What makes this book interesting is not the kind of materials it has chosen to analyze, for other critics have written on the works of Jose Rizal and Amado V. Hernandez, among others. Nor is its significance derived from its use of a Marxist perspective, since a number of our critics have examined such writings from a socio-historical viewpoint heavily influenced by such Marxists thinkers as Georg Lukacs and Mao Tse Tung. In general, critics contemporaneous with San Juan have demonstrated how deeply committed the

works of Rizal and Hernandez have been to the cause of the oppressed.

What differentiates San Juan's work from those of other historical-minded Filipino Critics is the former's deployment of concepts and categories which have been increasingly utilized in Western literary criticism. The result is a collection of essays written largely from a Marxist perspective but appropriating other modes which have shaped the writings of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, to name a few.

Arranged chronologically, that is, according to the historical position of their authors, these essays reveal the different approaches San Juan has used to illumine the texts being considered. For example, the second part of Chapter One shows San Juan making a formalist/archetypal reading of Balagtas' poem "Kay Selya." On the other hand, the essay on Juan C. Laya, first published in 1968, demonstrates San Juan's use of Marxist concepts as a tool for literary analysis. In another essay, San Juan subjects Nick Joaquin's *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* to a formalist approach which the critic admits as having the "gaps, ruptures, and scars of its genesis" (p. 165). At the same time, though the analysis succeeds in clarifying the complex relationship between such characters as Paco and Connie, on the one hand, and the Vidals and the Monsons, on the other hand.

Two chapters which bear the imprint of much of poststructuralist thought deal with Rizal's novels and Carlos Bulosan's writings. In these essays, San Juan displays as almost self-conscious attention to the strategies and devices which determine the texts. As explained by the critic, Bulosan's works are shaped by the writer's consciousness and the sociopolitical contexts interacting with each other in constituting fictive realities. In the essay on Rizal, San Juan argues that Rizal is indeed The Other as defined by a discourse which resulted in La Liga Filipina and the Katipunan. Moreover, this essay seems to subvert traditional readings of Rizal and his novels which have abandoned Rizal "to the reactionaries, from the clerical apologists to the Establishment clerks" (p. 21). In his reading, San Juan puts forward the view that Rizal was the most agonizingly self-conscious enemy of the ego, the "mystique of the empirical self" (p. 26).

In another essay, "From Jose Garcia Villa to Amado V. Hernandez," San Juan presents a historical view of twentieth century Philippine literature and shows how it has been shaped by the material foundations of social life. Moreover, he insists on the need to view the texts also as linguistic and signifying practices.

An Afterword appears to reinforce the many discordant notes structuring the different analyses. The critic, who sees the indissoluble link between aesthetics and politics and uses language reminiscent of Lukacs' utterance, gives way to the critic who perceives the text's specificity as a signifying practise as illustrated in the fine exegesis of Francisco Arcellana's "Yellow Shawl."

Toward a People's Literature is significant primarily because it affords both critics and students of Philippine Literature an opportunity to see how a leading Filipino critic has used various modes of analysis to present a number of readings of selected Philippine literary texts. For criticism to develop with rigor, there is a pressing need to reexamine one's own critical apparatus constantly, and its position vis-a-vis the text as object of knowledge. This reappraisal is to avoid the pitfall of a reductionist view, so common in tendentious criticism, that sees literature merely as a historical or sociological document.

Admittedly a difficult critic to understand because of an excess of intellectual energy that at times threatens to break through the confines of his own critical texts, Epifanio San Juan, Jr. is nevertheless a scholar who has constituted a rich discourse that reveals the various disharmonies between traditional and new ways of studying literary texts.

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