

Forbidden Fruit, Women Write the Erotic,
Tina Cuyugan (Ed.), Anvil Publishing, Inc.,
 Manila, 1992.

Kung Ibig Mo, Love Poetry by Women,
Marjorie M. Evasco and *Benilda S. Santos*,
 Anvil Publishing, Inc., Manila, 1993.

Reviewed by *Annette Hug*



RPM

Love and the erotic are domains of male verbosity in literature, film and poetry, while they belong to a sphere of life associated

with women. In the last three years, women writers in the Philippines collectively claimed their public voice on these themes. The result is two anthologies, one containing love-poems *Kung Ibig Mo*, the other incorporating texts in prose. Both collections contain contributions in both English and Tagalog, reflecting the bilinguality of the contributors.

The contributors to *Forbidden Fruit* work from the assumption that "true liberty" can only be achieved when "Everywoman is allowed to express herself and live life to her fullest capacity." *Margarita Go Singco Holmes* writes in the Foreword:

"The point is not that the works in this collection are 'true-to-life-accounts', but that they communicate and touch other women by reworking life in the realm of the imagination, celebrating and dignifying sex, love and eroticism."

Editor *Marjorie Evasco* (*Kung Ibig Mo*) uses the phrase "languaging desire" to capture their project. She encourages women to "open spaces in the mind-heart-body where everything is possible."

Both publications have the air of newness, of trying something for the first time. This air is refreshing for any reader who knows the feeling of stepping on new ground in excitement. It seems to me that the writers (most of whom contributed to both anthologies) felt more at home with the love-theme than with the erotic. *Marjorie Evasco* writes in her introduction to *Kung Ibig Mo* that love is a "notoriously elusive" theme. This elusiveness allows the writers to incorporate many different areas of intensity that make up a woman's life. Hence the poems make clear that women finding their own words are in the process of creating new understandings of emotional involvement with the world and with men. (There is a lamentable absence of outspokenly lesbian texts.)

In contrast, the theme of erotica doesn't seem to provide the opportunity for a similar opening. Reading *Forbidden Fruit* is not like a harvest of

ripened images of joy, the reader has to look for those texts that go beyond a timid, sometimes awkward examination of the terrain.

Thought provoking are the poems that reflect indirectly on the way sex is usually discussed. *Benilda S. Santos*, hints in her poem 'Lullaby' (Cuyugan) at common ingredients to the physical surrounding of the act, lists limbs that participate and rips the theme from any mythical haze:

"behind the door
 on table on floor
 over and over
 ever and ever
 more"

Nerissa S. Balce's poem 'Pizza and Pretense' depicts a heterosexual couple eating pizza at the nearby parlour after sex, freshly cleaned and scrubbed. The last part goes:

"There is a lipstick smudge on your left shirt sleeve. There is a pink mark on my nape. I feel the folds of fat on my belly while I sit and imagine the taste of melted cheese on crust. I study your

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hands now on the table,
properly clasped the way
we pray at Mass."

Balce brings together different facets of urban life. Sex is an ordinary thing for many people, it often happens and is not always special. Still, it is somehow at odds with the catholic culture, and the fast food atmosphere of the pizza parlour adds a spur of irony, or is it the tickling impulse to giggle like a teenager at these every day incongruencies?

The celebratory concept of **Forbidden Fruit** evades any mention of power in relationships, it clearly avoids the language of sexual politics. The limitations of this concept become clear in the short story **Oil** written by *Maria Elena Paterno*. The author describes a massage scene after a tennis match mainly through the lens of the male tennis player. The masseuse is a blind woman employed by the club. *Paterno*,

a woman writer, expresses the sensual enjoyment but it is a man's enjoyment, the woman's blindness seems to be a literary device to focus on the touching sensation. I didn't find convincing the assertion that the described encounter was a mutually stimulating and satisfying experience. While reading, louder and louder I heard the voices telling me about a recent feminist campaign in Manila to close those many massage-parlours functioning as brothels. Images came to my mind of blind people in this city of neglect and I thought of the life-story of a blind masseuse I read which told a story of want and struggle to be respected as a human being.

This is where the framework of celebrating sexuality, be it in the realm of imagination, is not only limiting but blind to the fact that sexuality is a major field of male power over women. *Paterno's* story glosses

over the problematic of the industry behind many massage services, the attitudes to visually impaired people, and, she uses her literary craft to make up a male centered fantasy that could well serve as an advertisement for a massage parlour catering to 'sensitive men'. Celebration is great but I prefer to discern more clearly what exactly it is that we celebrate.

Both anthologies certainly show how large, rich and manifold is the circle of women writers in the Philippines. Reading **Kung Ibig Mo** is a journey back to the pains of separation, to a criticism of left male's attitudes to their not so 'political' wives, to satirical smiles at avant garde filmmakers, to a first time in a women's disco, and so on and so forth.

Two poems by *Marjorie Evasco* won this reviewer's heart. Instead of giving my comments, they are reprinted here in full:

MOULTING TIME

My serpentine heart wills
in perfect stillness
to grow warm colors back.

I do not eat or sleep.

In time I shall slither
from the dark to sun new skin,
leaving cast-off scales;
my eyes, bright and vulnerable
in the naked light.

Marjorie Evasco

LOONS

Wild sounds fill this sanctuary.
Late autumn birds drift in pairs
Towards new waters in warm places.
We hold what we hear and see
And shiver in quick remembrance
Our broken affinities with wings.

Marjorie Evasco



Lynn Lee

Annette Hug has just completed her masters degree with a thesis on **Romantic Love: A Feminist Study of Change** (in the Philippines).

Both books reviewed are available from
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