

Philippine literature today: a view from afar by h.o. santos



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ET me begin by telling you about my background and what I did to learn about Philippine literature. This will give you an idea of how my impressions may have come about. I started writing fiction about four years ago. Prior to that, I had read very few short stories, and only a handful of them were Philippine stories. I read novels because they were easier to obtain. In any library or bookstore you will find only one book of short stories for every hundred or so novels. And because I have lived the major part of my life outside the Philippines, I wasn't familiar with Philippine writing—they're not easy to find where I live.

It didn't help that my school curriculum didn't include Philippine literature—we only studied American and English literature. However, I have since made up for that by having read a couple of hundred Philippine short stories in the last two years. That was in addition to the 120 contemporary non-Philippine short stories I've been reading on the average every year since 1998. Writer friends advised me I needed to read at least two a week if I wanted to write short stories. They said reading novels provides little help to anyone who wants to write short stories.

At the same time I started reading Philippine short stories, I combed the Internet for news and information about what was going on in the Philippine literary world. I read Philippine magazines and tear sheets mailed to me by friends. I exchanged emails with writers to get their views and at least a second-hand look at politics in the Philippine literary establishment. You can see that my views are those of an outsider and the only thing that can color them may be my prior exposure to non-Philippine short stories before I started reading Philippine stories.

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HOW does the Philippine literary establishment look from afar? It appears to be a small, tight-knit community—too small for a nation of 70 million people. In this community, comments critical of another's work seem to be taboo. Only pleasant words are allowed to come out in print. When I found references to Filipino American writers (Fil-Am or Filipino-American in Philippine usage), they generally pointed to Filipino writers who have moved to the United States and who have learned their craft in the Philippines. I found no mention of writers who learned to write in the U. S. writers who have not had an opportunity to be imbued with the writing styles of prominent Filipino writers whether through college courses or apprenticeship. One example is Lysley Tenorio, one Filipino American who has made it beyond the average college literary journal to *Atlantic Monthly*. (In the grand scheme of things, college journals don't amount to much. Except for a handful of prestigious journals like *Ploughshares*, they have circulations of less than a thousand, usually among other colleges only. Their importance is overblown.) Tenorio is unknown in the Philippines.

I am tempted to say, Just as well, because the average Filipino editor or contest judge will probably dismiss his works readily—they do not fit the mold of the short story they have come to like. Nevertheless, it's important that Filipinos learn how to appreciate writers like him because they use Filipino elements in their stories, albeit telling their stories in different ways. Their stories help enrich Philippine literature and broaden its scope. From time to time, I also checked on who the panelists for workshops and who the contest judges were.

Whether the workshops were in Baguio, Dumaguete, Davao, or elsewhere and whether it was the Palanca or the Free Press contest, the names seemed to come from a very small group of people whose statures are secure in the Philippine literary establishment. They rotate among themselves as members of panels and board of judges. I understand how this can happen in a country that doesn't have too many writers. But this situation raises a troubling concern as it promotes inbreeding, resulting in a certain homogeneity in styles and ideas. I submit that a larger genetic pool is healthier for Philippine literature in the long run.

Workshop coordinators should get fresh, new panelists—from outside the country if need be. Contest organizers should do the same. Lesser known Philippine writers should also be included in those boards and panels. Now let me get to the negative reports I have received. There are signs that convince me some of these comments cannot simply be dismissed as sour grapes. Certainly, I don't think these practices are widespread but the mere fact that such stories circulate means that Philippine literary icons should go out of their way to show fairness and neutrality to eliminate this perception.

I will only discuss one—the most onerous and harmful to the well-being of Philippine literature. I have gotten feedback that certain people hold grudges against writers who may have crossed them at some point along the line. These vindictive people ignore such writers, speak out against them whenever they can, and make sure their entries do not get anywhere in competitions they judge. (This becomes obvious when one judge tries hard to convince the others that one entry or writer is bad rather than extolling the merits of the story he wants to win. I believe this because things that <https://assignbuster.com/philippine-literature-today-a-view-from-a-far-by-ho-santos/>

happen in supposedly confidential settings have a way of leaking out. You'd be surprised how many people who cannot speak out openly get bothered by their conscience enough to say things in private to their colleagues. By speaking about this allegation openly you may think I am down on the literary establishment. I am not, because influential Philippine writers are, more often than not, generous and selfless in their desire to help promote Philippine literature.

Most of them will not maliciously isolate and ignore a writer they personally do not like—they understand that such unprofessional behavior can only be detrimental to the cause to which they have devoted their lives. ONE of the first things you hear in writing school is, “ Show, don't tell. ” Let me explain what this means to our readers who, like me, aren't English majors. The concept is easier shown through a simple example. Let's take a scene where Jose is tired and hungry after walking five kilometers from the bus stop to the factory where he is applying for a job.

I can merely tell you: “ It was a five-kilometer walk from the bus stop to the factory where Jose was applying for a job. He was tired and hungry by the time he got there. ” Or I can show you: “ The factory was farther from the bus stop than Jose had anticipated. He was sweating and his pace had slowed by the time he got there after walking five kilometers. Near the factory entrance were stalls that sold food to the workers. The steaming trays of food reminded him that he hadn't eaten breakfast that morning. Here, I show that he was tired and hungry without using those adjectives—I give you images that show you his condition. I get you involved and let you see for yourself his physical state at that moment in the narrative. Likewise, <https://assignbuster.com/philippine-literature-today-a-view-from-a-far-by-ho-santos/>

the personality of a character can be told in the narrative through the use of adjectives. Or his personality can be shown through scenes that demonstrate his behavior and reaction to situations and people around him. Philippine short stories tend to tell rather than show. Perhaps, this is a national preference.

Maybe Filipino readers want things explained to them because it is a cultural predisposition. After all, I've seen Filipino comedians on TV—they also tend to explain their jokes and repeat their punch lines as if to make sure their audience gets them. Grandmothers traditionally told stories this way and the style must have gotten embedded in the nation's psyche. This predilection might also explain why Philippine short stories have little or no dialog.

Philippine writers hesitate to use dialog as a tool for showing characterization or for moving the plot along.

Dialog is one area where Philippine writers are weak. Having said that, I admit that there is intrinsically nothing that proves one method is better than the other. The “tell” method uses fewer words and can't be ambiguous. The “show” method gets the reader involved but requires more effort on his part to appreciate the story. A country's preference for one or the other reflects its esthetic sense and culture. Those who live in North America, be they readers, editors or contest judges, and who are used to being shown will tend to dismiss stories that are told as unsophisticated.

This makes it hard for such stories to get published in that market. However, the biggest problem I see arising from this Philippine preference is that readers who get used to the “tell” method will not appreciate a story written

the other way. Even worse, unsophisticated Philippine editors and contest judges will wrongly conclude that stories written the “show” way are weak in characterization. I have personal knowledge of this. Another unique characteristic that was obvious to me is the sameness of voice in Philippine stories. All characters speak the same way, by and large the same as the narrator.

Young girls, mature women, men, boys, small-town policemen, army privates, English professors, and so on are presented with a dull uniformity—they all speak like English professors. This is very obvious in first-person narratives where almost no attempt is made to make the narrator’s voice match his character. I am not advocating a return to the diction and use of dialect common during the days of Mark Twain. Today, differentiation in characters is done subtly through choice of key words and the assignment of a speaking style consistent with the character’s age, gender, educational level, sophistication, etc.

NOW, to grammar, style, and the meaning of words. Generally, they’re excellent. Some writers are better than others but this is mainly due to more experience. Nothing helps one write better than experience. However, there is one universal grammatical mistake Filipinos make. To start with, Filipinos already tend to use the article “the” more often than necessary. This is the opposite of how Eastern Europeans speak English—they drop “the” even with nouns that need them. I tend to think this is a linguistic habit more than anything else. But I don’t understand why Filipinos use “the” with “university” all the time.

I'm not talking about instances where " the" is required to limit or specify its scope as in " the university at the corner of Quezon and Recto. " I'm talking about cases where the article is improper. Filipinos have no qualms about saying, " Juan, who grew up in Cebu, went to school in Manila" or " Juan, who grew up in Cebu, went to college in Manila. " However, they will inevitably say, " Juan, who grew up in Cebu, went to the university in Manila. " Also they say, " He and I went to school together" or " He and I went to college together" but change to " He and I went to the university together. This is wrong. The correct sentences are: " Juan, who grew up in Cebu, went to university in Manila," and " He and I went to university together. " It is at this point that I usually get strong protests from people I correct. The right way sounds funny to their ears after a lifetime of hearing it said the wrong way. Because of this, I ask you not to take my word for it—read the works of authors you trust and see for yourself how they do it. One interesting sidelight in the use of " the" concerns recent developments in English speech patterns.

Purists complain about how television personalities use " in studio" instead of " in the studio," like when Peter Jennings says, " Joining us in studio now is Lisa Stark. " Obviously, this was done in an attempt to elevate studio to the level of church, college, and university, words that represent revered institutions and which don't require a " the" before them. Purist may moan, but " in studio" is now deeply ingrained in the English language. Another growing development is the pretentious dropping of " the" before " table" as in, " Would you and your wife please join me at table? Unfortunately, this usage may become common by the next generation. I found another

Philippinism in the way numbers are presented. Philippine writers and editors follow the suggestions of various style sheets when showing numbers: spell it out to ten, use numerals above ten, or something similar (there are minor variations among the many style guides in common use). So they write “ 26 years old” instead of “ twenty-six years old. ” Well and good, except those style sheets were meant for newspapers and articles in general.

They were never intended for literary works. Most fiction writers I’ve read prefer “ twenty-six years old” to “ 26 years old” and only use numerals for time, dates, and addresses or when it makes the text clearer as in “ He had 2, 495 books in his collection. ” Again, don’t take my word for it—read the works of authors you trust and see for yourself how they do it. Stories that appear in BPSS are copy edited to conform to the two above rules. My last observation is about the specific meaning of words as understood in the Philippines.

I’m not referring to terms like “ comfort room” which a non-Philippine reader will eventually understand from the context. I’m thinking about words like acacia, fire tree, polo shirt, T-shirt, and such. These words evoke concrete images different from their Philippine meanings. The acacia has about 200 species but Westerners don’t normally associate the word with the monkeypod tree. I can understand how fire tree came to be used (its Spanish name is *arbol del fuego*) instead of flame tree for flamboyant or royal Poinciana, but a fire tree has berry-like fruit and broad leaves.

A polo shirt is what polo players wear—the same as a knit golf shirt, not an informal or sport shirt. And a T-shirt doesn’t mean knit shirt, only those that

don't have collars can be called T-shirts. I don't find this to be a problem except when someone writes about a character tugging on the collar of his T-shirt. For BPSS, I leave them alone because they do not change the story even though the readers may get images different from what the author had in mind.