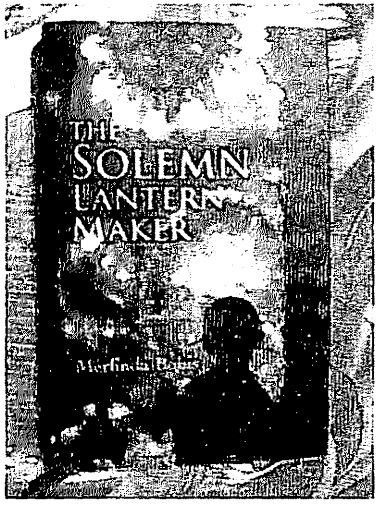
A BOOK REVIEW:
A DEAFENING SILENCE?:
THE MUTE ECHOING BACK



THE SOLEMN LANTERN MAKER

Merlinda Bobis

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2008, 207 pages

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Reviewed by
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"Batang-bata ka pa at marami ka pang/Kailangang malaman at intindihin sa mundo/Yan ang totoo/Nagkakamali ka kung akala mo na/Ang buhay ay isang mumunting paraiso lamang."

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> (Translation: You're still too young and you have a lot of things / to know and understand (about) the world/This is the truth/You're mistaken when you think/Life is but a small paradise.)

Thus runs a Filipino song entitled, "Batang-Bata ka Pa" (You're Too Young"), sung by a famous '70s trio. Adults tell young ones that they have a lot to learn about the world and they are still too young to mind all the cares in the world. They're too young to know that unlike what they think, life is not a paradise.

Indeed, it is true that "life is not (but) a small paradise" as the book, T*he Solemn Lantern Maker*, points out to readers through the young characters who learn about the world, about the harshness of life, through the attitudes of adults that surround them and the milieu that they have. As a novel, though, the book has lots of clever, imaginative and artistic ways to allow readers to see the whole point that it is driving at about the Philippines, its relationship with America, its people's reactions to given social situations, and specifically, Manila's milieu as the book's representative of the macrocosmic national setting.

Where else could this tale be about so many situations and people using the narrative mainly through the voice of a mute ten-year old boy but in this book written by a Filipino-Australian female poet-fictionist-dramatist-performer, Merlinda Bobis?

The Solemn Lantern Maker, centering its narrative on the mute ten-year-old maker of parol (Christmas lanterns), provides readers with details about a hundred-and-one events and issues around the life of Noland within a sequential 6-day Christmas time --- December 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24 (Christmas Eve). This period that presents to readers the life of Noland from the time a shooting incident happened in a busy district of Manila, to the time that Noland and his mother are put to jail, allows us to experience many facets and complications brought about by the event-twisting shooting incident. We are made

to stay in Noland's hut, peek into his mother's hidden bruises on her legs and knees, to see the distinct brightness of malls in Metro Manila, stay closely around the "white" American-angel whom Noland, through the aid of Elvis, his friend, spirited away into Noland's hut among the shanties, and many other scenes. Through these scenes, however, the book compels us to look beyond the surface and feel the depth of how it is to live in a squatters' area (slums), how it is to live as a young, male prostitute, how it is to live as a wife of a journalist, or how it is to have Christmas through selling lanterns and walking under brightly-lit trees on the commercial district, but not actually "celebrating" it with excitement, joy and anticipation because of poverty and deprivation, coupled with unexpected incidents as an aftermath of the broad-daylight shooting incident.

This layer goes deeper by letting us understand scenarios of teenage prostitution (pedophilia in this case), unjust and corrupt practices by traditional politicians, aptly called trapo (literally, meaning, rag), the problems of local war, land conflicts, and so many others. The novel goes straight into "actions" --- as if they were coming straight from an action movie, but it also goes very dramatic and poetic. It presents readers stark reality of life in the Philippines ---- especially in Metro Manila --- through the artistry and magic of the writer to weave scenes and chapters with considerable lumps of poetic narrative. This blend of reality and artistry impels readers not only to see the socio-political issues confronting the characters but leads them to feel, to empathize, with them.

Indeed, for Bobis, a Filipino Australian writer, presenting reality is not enough. The book should do something to trigger the emotions of the readers. It has to touch the core of their sensibilities and know the "guts" of the characters. It has to lead to the Philippine setting but at the same time reflect on the commonality of experiences even among Southeast Asian societies or Middle East and other war-torn areas. It is saying that where there is war, there will be problems

that are difficult to resolve; and that war wages insurmountable issues that usually pose dilemmas and life-threatening (and even-death dealing) situations to those that are stuck in between the two warring sides. The book stresses the point that though the setting might be Philippines, the meaning and repercussion of "terror of war" might be felt within a space or country that is suffering from it. Frantz Fanon, the author of *Black Skin, White Masks* (transl. 1967) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) called this as an indispensable ingredient of a post-colonialist text: Post-colonialism "is less concerned with analysis of a particular geographical area and its relationship to identity, but rather with the analysis of the social, cultural, religious and linguistic processes in which these occur." (as cited in Siriba, Dianne, 2008:n.p.)

Through this book's effort to go beyond presentation of reality, I read the novel as a socio-realist critique of the Philippine situation. I interpret it as a discourse of interrogation about the repercussive ties between the Philippines and the United States of America. The book is a post-colonial piece because it presents to readers the effects of colonialism and leads them to see the problem of a facet of the continuing relations between the once-colonizer and once-colonized that result in a neo-colonial setup. Taking the point of post-colonialism, the novel "articulates an awareness of power relations between Western (colonizing) and "Third World" cultures" (Siriban and Legasto, online handout). Therefore, the book elevates itself from a simply reality-presenting piece to that of reality-interrogating discourse.

The author's conscious point at presenting the mixture of cultures of the colonized and the colonizer goes along a very post-colonial discourse. Through this blend of cultures, the book allows readers to see a "hybrid" milieu, that indeed, colonialism, and thereby, even post-colonialism, takes a difficult stance. As Fanon asserts, it is hard to "entail a claiming back of one's own history and a rejection of

negative originally non-existent historical narratives produced and imposed by colonizers" (as quoted by Siriban 2008).

In the book, the people's fondness for shopping malls, for instance, is a piece for interest in rising commercialism, but may also be an alternative view of seeing as to whether this fondness for material or flashy things is really fondness or passion itself, or people's escapist way of temporarily forgetting their problems and assuaging their pains on their chests and guts. The book also critiques the confused Christianity or spirituality of other Filipinos through its inclusion of the church (in Quiapo) as a center for religious rituals among Catholics, but at the same time as a hub for commercial transactions (of even the so-called immoral-cum-illegal acts like selling abortifacient medicine to church-goers).

Elvis' favorite cap with "I Love NY," for instance, the people in the slum areas' fondness for videoke (singing with video lyrics-accompaniment), the characters' passion for making and selling Christmas lanterns (parol) and the customers' consequent purchase of them represent a meld of the cultures of the West and the cultures of the East (Asia or Philippines). As is true to the concept of post-colonial process, "[h]ybridity would pertain to the layers of meaning produced in the event of assimilation and adaptation of cultural practices, the cross-fertilization of cultures, etc." (Siriban 2008). This means that in the attempt at "going against" the cultures of the former colonizer, the colonized slowly imbibe the cultures of the colonizers.

I cannot avoid from assessing inter-related view alongside the book's post-colonial treatise. *The Solemn Lantern Maker* covertly tells about how the world constructs truth; and that there is no total or absolute truth. Instead, truth mainly lies according to one's intentions or purposes. The truth in the book indeed proves the post-modernist idea that, "What's true for you may not be true for me" (Grenz 1995:8). What is true for Noland as a mute character is different from

his mother. What is true for the Senator is different from the reporter-journalist. What is true for Cate, the American-angel (in Noland's eyes) is different from her former boyfriend in the US. Essentially, by providing the in-absoluteness of truth, the novel allows readers to realize that indeed, each person reads or interprets reality "in accordance with his/[her] own subjective condition." (Rorty, cited in Grenz 1995:8).

What the book does with these differences of truth is to let it flow according to how Noland constructs his own reality on whose narrative the story is based, and through the five-pointed stars (parol) that Noland creates. From his eyes and imagination, we realize that these stars may symbolically mean different things to different people. Later in the novel, readers reflect on the threats of imagination or creativity: that the creations or art works become themselves causes of dangers, as how the presence of stars and comic strips (Bobis 2008:25) that Noland has made becomes "clues" to the military's concept of "truth."

As is obvious, Bobis, the writer who shares that poetry is "painting with words," and that writing "visits like grace" (Bobis, website), has written an action-filled ouvre but laces it with poetic prose. I agree with Wei Ming Dariotis of Pacific Reader in stating that Bobis has a way of marrying socio-political awareness and responsibility with poetry (or literature), a way of saying that, like *The Solemn Lantern Maker*, a politically conscious writing can be stylistically innovative and challenging, as well as simply beautiful' (Bobis, Website: "Praise for Merlinda Bobis" works').

As a way of trying to be detached to the sometimes gory details of life in Manila while she is ensconced in New South Wales, Australia as a lecturer, writer, and scholar, she adopts symbolic images to drive out meanings of the whole piece. For one, taking this use of symbol is titling the novel, "The Solemn Lantern Maker," to emphasize the word lantern not only as the focus of the story, but also

as a word that may mean so many things: Could there still be light for the life of Elvis, hope for Noland and his mother, Nena, and justice for the death of the journalist, Eugene Costa? The writer also uses the word lantern to mean light for the artist in Noland, especially in crafting his lanterns and other artistic works inside their decrepit house or shanty. The novel also makes use of the power of light and its opposite --- as in the change of day and night sessions throughout the less-than-a-week duration. Cate Burns, the woman whom Noland and Elvis spirited away to the former's hut, also takes after a real American woman (though with a different woman) whom the Abu Sayyaf members hostaged in Palawan. Since the book is tackling the issue of Philippine-US relationships, I see the use of Cate Burns here as a representative of Americans who are instrumental in the crucial decision of the Philippines in terms of the presence of Americans in this country. She also symbolizes the terms of cooperation between the two countries. Through her, the book poses a question, Where does assistance begin and where do loyalty and cooperation end?

The use of interesting and thought-provoking names is also evident in the use of Filipino names that become leading codes to their personalities, such as, "Manang Betya" which takes after the word "bet", which means the English word, to bet, to take risk. Betya, being the contraction of "bet" and "taya" which is also associated with gambling, focuses on a Filipino character who makes people stake their bets to illegal gambling such as, *jueteng*, which has been a prevalent issue among Filipino societies, especially the rural ones. There is always the gut-wrenching issue of "survival of the fittest," and people in the lower class have the tendency to rationalize that, "The poor become poorer, the richer become richer," hence, even they, who have to live via hard-earned money, already tolerate things or practices that are deemed illegal like pimping and teen/child prostitution.

The readers will never ignore the name, "Noland," the central character's name. Obviously used with an apt intention, Noland here leads us to the issue of land ownership-cum-tenant/owner relationship in the Philippines that would normally lead to hatred and eventually, death. Noland's family, that has long sacrificed to till the land of their landlord, resulted in loss of land (no-land) and eventually, the loss of literal voice of this central character resulting from his actual witness to his father's murder.

One of the things that I appreciate in this book, despite the sometimes-gross-yet-stark-reality about poverty, injustice, corruption, and other circumstances about the Philippines, is its use of Greek theater-like scenes to make subtle the graphic or too gross parts. A particular instance of this is the time when Noland finally becomes a victim of prostitution himself (though the pimp, Bobby Cool, is justifying that it is not, allegedly because there will be no actual 'penetration'). The dialogues become a part of the narrative instead of saying them out loud via the plot. There are no words coming out, only description, through the narrative itself. The following is an example: "He keeps staring at his feet. They made marks on the man's chest when he asked him to stand there for a long time. Stand still. Don't be shy (my emphasis). His voice was gentle...He took more pictures in the bath" (Bobis 2008:128). More so, Elvis' encounter with the forceful pedophile is also seen in the same manner. Readers are wont to imagine the scenes and not focus so much on the dialogues. This is Bobis' way of saying that the scene is gross indeed and an outright violation of the victims' rights and dignity, it should never be too obvious, yet, powerfully imagined.

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[2] "Balikatan," a Tagalog word which means "shouldering the load together," has already brought together more than 5,700 U.S. and Filipino troops and is conducted in three simultaneous events throughout the Philippines, consist[ing] of a combined task force staff exercise, a cross-training and field training exercise between the two forces and a humanitarian and civic assistance exercise.

The following is a scene when the pedophile has forced himself on Elvis: "There are louder voices from the shower... The shower is steamed up, as if there's a fog. Behind the glass, two bodies struggle. A boy is screaming... his body flattened on the glass, his hand held up, as the man grunts..." (Bobis 2008:119).

I also appreciate the way the novelist treats the humane aspects of those persons who seem to be acting less-humans, say, Bobby Cool, the pimp, or even the characters that deal with the focus of the book on the US-Philippine "friendly" relationship. Though the writer is definitely taking the book's negative stand against militarism, for example, such as, the inter-related *Balikatan Exercise*[2] (Fair 2009), she has a way of saying that these characters who are for "war," for instance, are only forced by circumstances. They themselves are also victims in some indirect ways. Hence, the book also explores their good side. This is exemplified by the narrative's inclusion of the Colonel's life as a soldier in Fallujah, missing his family and confronting his inner, humane side against a very "inhumane" environment in the guise of protection and defense against world aggression: "In Fallujah, a woman grabbed his hand and wouldn't let go. His men cocked their rifles, ready to frisk her in case this was a terrorist ploy, but was undaunted" (Bobis 2008:159).

The writer could only write this ouvre using her own experiences --- vicarious or firsthand --- with the people in the shanties or slum areas (Bobis with Sarah L'Estrange in interview, The Book Show, 2008), her researches about women status in the Philippines, the atrocities of war, and her readings of the varied reactions of the country's link with the United States of America. All these have been handy in putting them all together in this 200-plus page book. Nevertheless, these wouldn't be a novel without the writer's artistry --- to "magically" weave all things together and let the characters and actions come to life. In effect, insights, experiences, researches and observations have made the bulk of the plot and the

context of the novel, but the novelist's craft (her creativity) was instrumental in making the readers raise their level of understanding of Philippine socio-political scenario to that of empathy and appreciation of the loud voices within this silence.

Through the mute "voice" of Noland, his friend Elvis, and other minor characters in the shanties, the book impels us to listen, not just hear, the reverberating sounds that these silences bring. One remarkable thing that the book provides is that, children, almost always the neglected voices of the Philippines and even of other societies, have bright ideas and unforgettable insights about life itself. As always, the adults, who have been instrumental in forcing these children into their unripe, hence, bitter adulthood, learn from these once-neglected children of "mute" voices. Hence, with the success of the book in letting these silent voices be heard, I would recommend that though actual experiences tell us that reading a book is more appealing and interesting than watching it on film, I would still look forward to watching the actions on screen and anticipate more adults to learn from the "silent" and "silenced" voices around Noland's character and others'.

In the same song "Batang-Bata ka Pa" mentioned in the beginning of this review, the following lines are sung as a part of the chorus: "*Nais ko sanang malaman ang mali sa katotohanan/Sariling pagraranas ang aking pamamagitan/Imulat ang isipan sa mga kulay ng buhay/Maging tunay na malaya 'sang katangi-tanging bata... Nais ko sanang malaman ang mali sa katotohanan.*" (I wish I could know the mistake in the truth/My own experiences will make me better/To enlighten my mind to the colors of life/To be genuinely free, a unique child... I wish to know the mistake of the truth."

Obviously the "too young voice" in the song protests the earlier lines that tell listeners that the children are "too young" to know about the world's cares. The voice in these lines tells us that they deserve to know what is happening; and the adults need not tell them that they

know nothing of the reality around them. Their experiences will tell these adults the truth and somehow convince them to realize if, to use the words of the writer, "anguish can be made bearable and injustice can be overturned" (Bobis, home website).

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