

State of Engagement: Filipino and Singaporean Women Writers in English Engage the State

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The late twentieth century can be said to be the period of the newly independent states. Many of these states, Southeast Asian states included, have acquired full sovereignty from former colonisers to begin their lives as young nations. Nation formation became the most significant activity after the end of the colonial rule, an ending marked by a peaceful transfer of power or by a violent struggle for independence.

Women participated in the fight for independence and in the establishment of the nation-state but they felt that they were not accorded due recognition for their efforts. According to Margaret Ward, “generally the importance of women’s contribution has been dismissed in a few sentences as historians itemise what they consider to be important events, events which have been evaluated in male terms” (2). And when the women pressed for redress of grievances, they were told: not yet, not now. There were more important things to be done. After being allowed to participate in independence campaigns, women are now relegated back to the private domain.

Because women have been so marginal in the consciousness of those who have researched events, their significance has remained hidden within historical records, waiting for the understanding of someone who wants to know what women did, what they thought, and how they were affected by the upheavals of the past century. Although women’s history clearly reveals the importance of the powerless in contributing to the success of those who became peaceful, this contribution has at times been deliberately downplayed and not just simply undervalued. (Ward 2)

Or if they are allowed participation, their “female” attributes are highlighted rather than their competency. Eleanore Lepinard describes a (French) perception of women in a political role:

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At a time of political crisis, women were presented as the cure of all evils: their increased presence would modernize the political system, renew the political elite as well as the style of politics, bring more humanity and finally enlarge and achieve true democracy. Women's specificity, such as their presumed proximity to "everyday" concerns, their ability to listen and understand people's problems and their lack of personal ambitions, were also used to support the argument that a democracy inclusive of women would function differently and pursue alternative agendas. (31)

While this may be taken as a positive appraisal of women, no male in a political role who has the same attributes is cited as having positive male qualities.

This attitude to history is echoed in the citizenship accorded to women in the new nation-states. In the new nation-states, there is, according to Nira Yuval-Davis, one characteristic which specifies women's citizenship: "that is its dualistic nature. On the one hand, women are always included, at least to some extent, in the general body of citizens of the state and its social, political and legal policies; on the other, there is always, at least to a certain extent, a separate body of legislation which relates to them specifically as women, such as age retirement or qualifications for public office" (27). This othering has made it easy for women to be excluded from political and economic life.

Feminism through civil society and the media has sought to change attitudes towards women and has allowed women "opportunity spaces that can be used to alter the existing pattern of gender relations" (Waylen in Wilford 12). Suffice it to say here that feminism has informed much of the achievements accomplished by women in modern times. The feminist issue is a crucial concern for nationalism because women and their participation in nation formation are also constructed by dominant discourses including that of nationalism. In the language of nationalism, women are given metaphorical status (e.g. the motherland) and yet in reality they are just that, idealised and totemic. As Elleke Boehmer has pointed out, "the idealized woman figure can take on massive, grand even continent wide proportions... but despite the bright myths of motherhood, women make up the greater part of Africa's illiterate, oppressed and poor" (23). That women have been portrayed as objects and men the subjects of national aspiration (Boehmer) suggests women's passive secondary role in the construction of nation. They are relegated to the sphere of the personal and the family; they are to act as support system rather than a pro-active force.

But women have addressed this issue. Christine Sylvester points out efforts of women to make the personal political. They expose the family as the site of politics or make whatever public life which is available to them personally political. Boehmer suggests the countering of monologic narratives with multivocal ones, which I should add, should be grounded within the contexts and cultures of the women's communities. There are also those who do not want to give up on the partnership between nationalism and feminism, citing past and present successful cooperation (Herr, 2003). Increasingly, women are starting to break the barriers of the margin,

leaving their silent, silenced space, using their narratives to break the patriarchal exclusions. It is this desire for inclusion that has made women conscious of institutions and policies that everyone takes as beneficial but are actually detrimental to them.

One of the more seemingly innocuous institutions of post-independent life is the state. There may be many definitions and readings of the concept of the state but let me use a general one as a working definition. The state is a political institution which through its various machineries determines the political life of a citizen. I emphasise the mechanical and utilitarian aspect of the state because this will be most crucial to the Southeast Asian women's engagement with it.

The state in Southeast Asian post-independent life has been generally the logical result of colonial departure. It is supposed to embody the aspirations of a nation now articulated legally and is imbued with the power to concretise these aspirations. It is in fact the result, in its sovereign state, of the nationalistic energies of peoples who long for national belonging as well as community protection from external threat.

Later, the nationalism now embodied by the state would undergo a horrendous transformation. The nationalism which has sustained the good anti-colonial fight would suddenly pounce on its own people. It was Chinua Achebe who summarised the people's surprise and dismay as independence seems to have created a new estrangement. Expecting the genie of liberation, the people instead find the resurrected monsters of oppression and exploitation. Edward Said observes that frequently, the bourgeoisie would replace the coloniser and the colonial instruments would become class based. Twenty years earlier, Frantz Fanon issued urgent warnings against the bourgeoisie's rise to power. He indicated pitfalls that would endanger nations which were on a nationalistic march to independence. The bourgeoisie would form a state to which people would transfer its allegiance, thinking the bond between nation and state intact and mutually beneficial. Yet as Fanon disclosed, the sacred bond would be imposed with unequivocal strength. The realities of nation-building would soon anaesthetise the leadership's coercion of nation.

For most newly independent nations, independence is just the beginning, not the end of the long and treacherous search for genuine nationhood. The fledgling state has to be strengthened, run efficiently, by the group of leaders on whom political power is conferred and to whom the caretaker's task is assigned. The logical source of such individuals is the most dominant group. However the ascendancy of such a group, through election or other means, seems to create a wedge between itself and the less powerful groups for it is now the ruler, the less powerful group, the ruled. The former accrues the privilege of the state, consigning to itself a position beyond and above community/nation. I suggest that these developments in post-independence political life have created a tension between state and nation. Ideally, the narratives of state and nation should be one and the same, or at least complementary. Succeeding

political engagements in post-independence years, however, reveal schisms in the supposedly united narratives, unmasking a forking of national direction.

The assumption, of course, is that the state, which is the institution of politics and governance, is the culmination of an evolved nation (the community created by a “specific solidarity and specific group feeling”) (Heidt 122). For many post-colonial countries, statehood has been attained without the benefit of a gradual evolution and may have been an inchoate element in a society just vacated by a colonial order. In Malaya, it lies in the dispersed racial desires of a people with different origins. In the Philippines, it is found in the deep social stratification by class. The colonial structures familiar to colonised societies may have been partially destabilised, creating an expectation of their termination. While independence may have been a moment of triumph, it may also have been a moment of crisis, for in a way it also meant the demolition of a centre that had held things together for decades or centuries. The fledgling state has to create a new centre to which a nation can cleave for self-validation.

In order to rebuild their centres, states require universal powers. However, given the multicultural quality of most of the subject countries, it is difficult to arrive at a centre by general consensus. The more practical and logical, though not necessarily the more just alternative, would be to privilege a dominant group or point of view. The flashpoint between state and nation can be found in historical moments when the desires of both are in contention. Even if the state is controlled by only a ruling minority, there is no doubt about the outcome. Consequently, the desire of nation is thwarted, and resentment toward the state corrodes the delicate link between the ruler and the ruled. The situation also grants opportunities for state abuse of power, against which the community members have meagre defence. In such a case, the relationship between state and nation tends to become adversarial. Homi Bhabha calls this “the split between the continuist, accumulative, temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious recursive strategy of the performative” (297).

The hegemonic activities of the state consequently brought about suspicion and hostility towards nationalism. There is more cognisance and concern regarding its Janus-like transformations. Interchanging state and nation here, Simon Gikandi indicts what the “nation” has become: “The divinity of nation has collapsed, the nation is not the manifestation of a common interest but a repressor of desires” (380).

State nationalism which is a euphemism for state desires has become a strong force in the life of two Southeast Asian nation-states: Singapore and the Philippines. One of the mandatory undertakings of emergent nations is to build an economy which would assure it of self-sufficiency and self-respect, if it were to be accepted as an upstanding member of the community of nations. Political independence evidently does not guarantee freedom from external pressure the way a strong economic blueprint does. For countries in the initial stage of nation-building, a sound economy ensures substantial implementation of national welfare and defence policies.

Established nations provide models for economic structures and planning, following the democratic system's policy of anchoring its development strategies on ownership and control by nationals or the totalitarian system's utilisation of ownership and control by the state. Either way, nationalism underscores economic self-sufficiency with a "view to control the economic destiny of newly independent states, and secondly, to vie with developed countries on which the new states formerly used to depend" (Chavan 428).

Singapore seems to be the most successful example of a strong state development through economic means. In 1965, with its limited resources and unprepared professional sector, its leaders felt that a fast-track development plan was vital to its survival. What Singapore has become in its four decades of independence has been largely considered a miracle. It has a per capita income lower only than those of Japan and Brunei and exceeded many European economies. As a whole, Singapore's economic policies have produced high growth, low inflation, a very healthy balance of payments without recourse to external borrowings and substantial gains in living standards. It enjoys a status that ranks it with major international economic players.

Singapore's success can be attributed to government participation in economic development. Lim Chong Yah, et al. explain that government promoted economic growth by creating a favourable and depoliticised labour situation, by providing skilled manpower through education, and by providing excellent infrastructure and tax incentives. Most importantly, it participated directly in the economy, establishing wholly owned and partly owned industrial and commercial ventures.

Singapore's economic strategies have been the state's resounding response to the uncertainties of post-independence life. State presence takes the form of aggressive economic programmes which permeate all aspects of national life. The state operates on the pragmatic premise that a sound economy must be built first, after which all citizen privileges will follow. The state is not very tolerant of dissent, since this creates fissures in the laboriously built economic wall. It has neglected other significant aspects of nationhood such as culture and the arts inasmuch as these are seen as higher needs which can be met after a certain level of affluence and ethnic coexistence is reached. Denyse Tessesohn's short story "Kumari" will dramatise one of the effects of this neglect. The state sometimes forgets that there are citizens other than the productive ones.

Economic success and competitiveness seems to be a national *raison d'être* and an essential ingredient of the national fibre. Government from time to time reminds the people of their responsibility to maintain Singapore's cutting edge. Economic nationalism has evolved into a binding ideology with the capacity to rally a multi racial, capitalist, and technology-oriented nation into a formidable force of nation-builders. Catherine Lim's story, "The Paper Women," demonstrates how mothers are drawn into nation-building by virtue of their wombs.

No evolution preceded Singaporean statehood. Statehood was foisted on an unprepared, still dispersed nation. According to Wilmot, Singapore in 1965 did not have a national identity. The state has preceded the development of nation, had become the first major symbol of identity and had since set out to create others. The state was imposed on an inchoate nation whose varied races had lived relatively independently of each other. Thus, it is the state which has nursed the young republic into the robust entity that it is now. What is believed to be typically Singaporean is state-induced, formed not so much by inter-racial encounters as by the various national campaigns sponsored by the government as well as guided by the civic curriculum.

The Philippines is not so fortunate. Although it started optimistically, by the end of the Marcos years, the country was virtually bankrupt with a negative growth rate. Nationalist economists trace the problem of the Philippines to its neocolonial status. Neocolonialism, as defined by Alejandro Lichauco, is the “process by which, through techniques other than war and outright colonization, imperialism subjects its victims to influence and domination so overwhelming as to reduce in fact and effect to the status of virtual colonies while permitting them to retain the ceremonial vestments of independence” (9). Politically, neocolonial governments are subservient to a foreign power or to the nationals of a foreign country. The military establishment becomes an adjunct of the imperial power, dependent upon the latter for its needs. Social and cultural values must synchronise with the goals of the superior power, making the educational system a key factor in the neocolonialist project. Economically, it creates a relationship of dependency between superior and inferior nation, while maintaining a semblance of mutually beneficial trade relations; the superior nation introduces measures which would allow its profits to accumulate while stifling the growth of indigenous industries which would threaten its interests.

The United States wields its influence in absentia. Its interests are represented by an elite class whose wealth and influence allows its members to dominate centres of power. Neocolonialism in the Philippines therefore acquires a class face. While the masses do not directly feel foreign influence, they feel the burden of exploitation by local capitalists. Class tension is underpinned by neocolonial desires and, as a result, anti-colonial resistance in post-independence Philippines always includes the elite as a critical target. Because the elite dominates the centres of power, the state follows its desires. In the agonistic encounters of class interest, the state often abandons the nation and uses its police powers to suppress resistance. In Merlinda Bobis’ story, “Fish-Hair Woman,” the state turns its guns against its own in the war in the countryside. The victims are peasants caught in the pernicious grip of countryside militarisation.

In the seventies, despite industrialisation after independence, despite an annual rise in GNP, the quality of life in the Philippines deteriorated and many families, especially those in the rural areas, lived below the “food threshold” (*Philippines: Repression and Resistance* 64). Unemployment was high so skilled labour and professionals joined the overseas labour market.

The situation prompted the solidification of a culture of dissent. Opposition rose from the sectoral groups, especially from the universities where issues could be discussed openly. The streets became a venue of dissent. The period before 1972 is crucial because the Philippines experienced a resurgence of nationalism, directed, not only at the foreigner but also against the elite who, as capitalists and politicians, were perceived to have allowed the culture of exploitation and corruption. The Marcos regime, in particular, was held accountable for the worsening of poverty and human rights violation in the country.

The period gave birth to a form of resistance called pressure politics – the parliament of the streets – which coincided with the development of student activism. The violence with which the forces of the state confronted the students and other street parliamentarians forms such vivid moments in the history of the post-independence period that it has become a staple topic in the nation's various art forms. Ninotcka Rosca's story "Our Apostle Paul" narrates the choice of one such activist who turns his back on priesthood so that he may serve the people in another way.

The state looms large in the lives of the Filipinos and the Singaporeans. While the citizen believes in the necessity of a state, s/he is no longer sure if it works for his/her interest and these doubts and contentions emerge from the four stories by women from Singapore and the Philippines.

Women, as mentioned at the beginning of this article, are not as privileged as men as citizens. The women writers reveal not only the insidious oppressive conduct of the state, they also include empowered characters, both male and female, who articulate by word or deed resistance to state desires. Women characters are specially given attention.

In the past, literature has reflected the predominant view of women as inferior through the images of them presented in various literary works many of which were written by men. These images are often presented in the form of a binary opposition: woman as the virginal maiden or sainted mother who is placed on a pedestal, upheld for her purity, piety and submissiveness. She is everything spiritual and good, to be loved, worshipped and admired. Conversely, she is femme fatale, sex object, whore. She may be coveted or lusted over, but never respected, representing what is dark, material and evil. These two stereotypes have shaped the portrayal of women in literature. Many women characters, especially those in men's works, are seldom allowed to be complex or unique, to grow or develop, to act freely rather than be acted upon. (Kintanar 7)

Through their choice of themes and characters, the women writers included here deny this description of women's depictions. In fact, they are involved in the courageous mission of engaging the state, disclosing its shortcomings and failures, using literature to articulate what would cause others their freedom and their lives. By using fiction, they shift the site of the contestation to the personal, the individual with

which other readers can identify. The stories are metaphors of the citizen, struggling to find national and personal meaning in this contest with the state.

Kumari, from the short story with the same title, is a plain girl who works at an NTUC supermarket in Telok Blangah, living a life with no expectations. She is described as someone with “poor grades at school, close to missing the marriage boat by being without a decent dowry and plain to look at” (“Kumari” 232). Her life changes when an old man asks her to help a group of old ladies living in her block. The old ladies eke out a small living selling discarded clothes. Kumari finds herself helping this aged community by giving them illegal discounts. She is discovered, brought to the police but is saved by the community she has helped.

The story interestingly focuses on two marginalised sectors in Singapore, the academically challenged (who are at the bottom rung of its meritocratic ladder of economic achievement) and the aged (also at the bottom rung of the social ladder because of their lack of productivity). Kumari, who represents the former, is neglected and conveniently pushed to the level of menials where quality of life has a low hard ceiling. Her marital future is dim because she has been judged not only according to her lack of looks but also according to her lack of financial prospects. Education is wealth in capitalistic Singapore and here where wealth in education is literal, Kumari is read as someone whose lot is to be a non-entity.

The aged represents an unexpected experience of poverty in a nation whose GNP is highest in Southeast Asia. Bereft of state care, the aged seem to have been forgotten perhaps because they have outlived their usefulness. Many Singaporean families now look at their aged as a burden so much so that the state at one point has to enact a law that prohibits the abandonment of old relatives. One can infer that the old people in the story have no relatives, have been abandoned not only by their families, but also by the state.

Kumari becomes the accidental heroine who steals from the supermarket to support her old friends. The story posits an interesting proposition: Can a citizen steal from the state something that s/he thinks is due him/her? The NTUC is a trade union cooperative in which the state has a stake. In effect, Kumari steals from the state what by function the state should give its citizens: “Toothpaste, can of sardines, tin of condensed milk, single bar of soap, packet of cream crackers and box of tea leaves” (24), basic things really. The old citizens may have expended their energies in the service of the state during their more productive years and the story suggests that they should be treated better.

The sad plight of the aged is in a way an offshoot of the state’s economic priorities. The state seems to view its citizens in a corporate and pragmatic way. The story reveals what happens when one loses one’s marketability. The aged, revered in traditional Asian societies, have become a burden in modern Singapore. The corporate outlook of the state privileges the young and productive, marginalising those who are no longer useful. The citizen absorbs this state outlook and applies it in the family domain.

Denyse Tessensohn creates an unlikely heroine in Kumari, she who is not intelligent or rich enough to be socially acceptable. Subverting the corporate paradigm, Kumari achieves a measure of fame and acceptance because she had a heart that was sympathetic and not pragmatic. Moreover, she had no corporate guilt. She felt no guilt regarding the “theft.” She and the old man did not even think of a story when they were caught. Kumari’s act can be read as criminal in the legal sense but the story gives her moral ascendancy over the state which has failed to provide for its aged citizens. Her act of theft, which is not even defiant, is described by Kumari as doing good. Her heroism consists of helping others and her gentle subversion exposes the state’s shortcomings.

In the face of a jail term, Kumari is silent. The old folks whom she had been helping go to their Member of Parliament to seek help. An old man threatens to cut his wrist if help is denied. The state however does not see the desperation in Kumari’s act or in the old man’s threat. It sees instead a good opportunity for publicity. The contrast between Kumari and the state highlights the former’s heroism, citizenship and femaleness. Kumari was the ordinary Jane who helped the hidden poor and thereby shamed the state.

Catherine Lim’s “The Paper Women” engages the Singaporean state more directly. While the state is absent in the lives of the old people in “Kumari,” it is very much present in the ordinary (productive) citizen’s quotidian life. The narrator in this story had to undergo sterilisation so that her son can enter Singapore’s best kindergarten. Since her son failed to get in through his own steam, the surest way to get in is for the mother to present proof of sterilisation. This is in line with the state’s desire to control population. Since a high birth rate was a problem in the past, since all sorts of campaigns have failed, someone came up with the idea of hitting Singaporeans where it hurts: children’s education. As expected, parents scramble to give their sons the best education. A pair of ovaries is a small price to pay for a son’s future.

The narrator’s ovaries are indeed used as currency to ensure the son’s bright future. But this cannot be seen only from a personal level because it is not only the family who needs bright young people. There is the great Confucian grandfather, the state, who in effect co-opts the woman’s reproductive system to produce the energy that will propel the state to further advancement and greater economic accomplishments. For now, the narrator’s womb must limit itself because Singapore with its limited resources must make sure there is plenty for everybody. Sterilisation is a compliance with state desires, a citizen’s contribution to the advancement of the state, and therefore a patriotic act.

This is especially significant in the light of the Singaporean woman’s high level of education and earning power. As they acquire more societal power through involvement in commercial (economic) activity (Tinker cited in Pribble, 2005), they become highly empowered. Yet their economic achievements are seen only as an

advantage to the state and play right into the state's economic agenda. State presence is thereby invasive in the Singaporean woman's economic and reproductive functions.

But the narrator's problems do not end here. She could not save her marriage and goes through a divorce. After remarriage, she would like to have another child. Unfortunately, the womb cannot reverse itself and in the end, the narrator is in the doctor's office seeking fertility for her sterilised womb. Ironically, Singapore will reverse its population policies a few years later. Incentives such as slots in the best schools will be given to those who will have a third child. Ultimately, the womb becomes a casualty of state desires.

The state's invasion of the womb brings the issue of female reproductive rights to new heights. The state exercises its patriarchal right to determine the use of female bodies for economic purposes. This is true not only for the Singaporean women but of other female nationalities as well. In the story, the highly educated narrator meets a young Thai prostitute who needs reconstruction so she can secure a Virginitly certificate and a pregnant Filipino mother who is seeking abortion so she can have a Certificate of Non-Pregnancy, a requirement to work in Singapore. The Thai girl's sexuality is used for tourism (a big percentage of Thai GNP comes from tourism) and the Filipino mother's womb is denied so she may continue to work as a migrant worker (Philippine economy is dependent on migrant worker remittances). All three women are used for state ends.

The issue of reproductive health is paramount in the feminist agenda. In many cultures, women's bodies are considered receptacles, baby machines and the site of male legitimacy. But as shown in "The Paper Women," it is not only the males who invade women's bodies but also the state. The womb becomes a mode of production by which state economies benefit. Moreover, the story engages the state by disclosing another of its failures. By its utilitarian attitude toward its female citizens, it practices its power of coercion, not unlike its police and military functions, to produce or stop producing. By manoeuvring reproduction, the state denies the female citizen choice and freedom in the use of her body.

For many Filipinos, the word "repression" is a reminder of the country's darkest hour, the Martial Law period under Ferdinand Marcos. His instrumentalist notion of statehood meant a curtailment of human rights which allowed him undeterred plunder of national wealth. The legislature and the judiciary were under his control while the police and the military were virtually his private army. Often the only source of help was the church. The Roman Catholic church has played an ambiguous role in Philippine history. It used to be seen as a symbol of colonisation. At other times, it was a refuge and a last resort.

Ninotchka Rosca's "Our Apostle Paul" is set in Martial Law Philippines. The characters are males, two seminarians who must soon choose which paths to take. The narrator and Rene are good friends and school rivals. Important events lead the two friends to separate paths. His mother's suffering due to an illness and his accession to euthanasia drive Rene out of the seminary. The narrator's sister's drug addiction,

unwanted pregnancy and suicide did not matter in the narrator's decision to enter priesthood.

Here are two responses to suffering brought about not only by the human condition but also by political vicissitudes. Rosca locates the political contention in the trope of religious service. Who must one serve, God or man, the church or the poor? The narrator enters priesthood to serve God and the church. Rene enters his own priesthood by working with the poor and defending them against the forces of the state. The narrator is a bit contemptuous of Rene and cannot understand why the latter chose a difficult and violent life over a life of peace and learning in the seminary. While the narrator worries about the mud that dirties his cassock, Rene braves the mud and gets forty-eight bullets in his body.

The state is not overtly present in the story but it is a hovering menace throughout. Rene who has seen suffering seeks to address it by joining the revolution, since all legal recourse has been blocked by Martial Law. As the narrator and Rene discuss good and evil, life and death, it is obvious that Rene's view of evil is social and material, while that of the narrator is religious. Rene, whose definition of religion is to serve the poor, is privileged in the story because like Kumari, he subverts a state that is not only unresponsive to the needs of its citizens, but also oppresses them. Rene practices what Aimee Carrillo Rowe calls the "politics of relation," a deep reflection about the selves we are creating as a function of where we place our bodies and with whom we build our affective ties" (16). Rowe was referring to gender relations, but one can equally apply it to ideological relations. Rene chose to locate his body and affective ties not in the safe enclave of the church but in the dangerous streets, expressing love not for one but for many. The narrator goes to the wake of Rene, only to be amazed that the people there are not grieving, instead they are celebrating a life well lived. State and church do not appreciate the sacrifice of men like Rene who must die so that others may live.

Rosca chooses the priesthood to contend with the state because the church was the remaining bastion of integrity and humanity in Martial Law Philippines. While not perfect, priests have often been seen as spokespersons of truth and justice. Inevitably, they are visited by the ideological questions that confront the ordinary citizen. In some instances, the church itself has engaged the state but its power is regarded as moral rather than political. Rene finds both moral and political meaning outside the church, especially in his struggle against an oppressive state and gives the word "religion" a different definition. The narrator represents a disengaged church that watches suffering from the sidelines.

In the Philippines, a legacy of Martial Law is the militarisation of the countryside. Since insurgency is often a result of neglect and poverty, the poorest places in the Philippine countryside have become hotbeds of dissent. But instead of addressing the social problems that fuel dissent, instead of instituting reforms, the state responds to the restiveness by sending the military. To the state, insurgency is a problem of peace and order, not of injustice.

In the militarised countryside, the state is represented by the soldier who is supposed to defend the people against insurgents. But the soldier, unable to distinguish between an insurgent and an ordinary villager, often turns on the villager, suspecting him of aiding the rebels. Thus, rural poverty is aggravated by military abuse, a state sanctioned measure in the name of peace and order.

Merlinda Bobis engages the state/military presence in the countryside not through a gun but through myth making, narrativising the plight of rural Filipinos in the militarised zones not by being factual but by weaving her own myth as a weapon against the abuses. The story “Fish-Hair Woman” tells of a woman whose extraordinary long hair is used by the village people to fish out their dead from the river. Like a net, the woman’s hair would spread in the breadth of the river to catch the floating corpses, not only of rebels but of ordinary people caught in the cross fire, including that of a ten year old boy. She does not show any pain in her face, but every time she fishes out a body, her hair grows a few inches.

The woman’s hair is an interesting metaphor of memory. As the woman catches the dead with it, it can only contain memories of pain as seen in the red strands of hair amidst the black. “You see, Mamay, history hurts my hair, did you know that? Remembering is always a bleeding out of memory, like pulling thread from a vein in the heart, a coagulation so fine, miles of it stretching upwards to the scalp, then sprouting these into the longest strand of red hair” (11). The military incursions in the countryside are often unrecorded, a part of history that remains unchronicled because the state is complicit. Thus, the woman’s hair is the chronicle of suffering that cannot be printed or articulated, the record of a death seen only in its growth and the red colour that glows within it.

The woman is a nation figure, a mother catching her dead children with her hair. She identifies herself with a nationality, with the coconut, the fruit of life, that is endemic to Filipino culture. “I am a Filipina; tiny and dark as a coconut husk but what red fires glint in my head” (11).

She is also an object of desire. The military sergeant, Ramon, makes a pass at her. But more than anything else, he wants to see her pain, to torture her with the knowledge that he can see her pain. He gets his wish when he kills the woman’s lover and forces her to catch his body with her hair. The military officer represents the male aggression of the state. According to Cynthia Enloe, “states are built as a masculine institution and exhibit masculine activities” (cited in Weiringa 71). When the woman rejects the advances of the sergeant, she rejects not only his male sexuality, but also the state and this renders her as an “other.” “Masculine memories, hopes and humiliations often centre around a woman’s sexuality. Their ‘own’ women are to be protected while the ‘other’ women are either constructed as objects of rape or other forms of gendered punishments....” (Cockburn; Sharat and Kaschak quoted in Wieringa 71). The woman is punished for refusing to cooperate with the state and the state takes away her right to happiness.

The writer makes full use of myth in the story. The woman bears resemblance to many female characters in Philippine folklore but the writer also injects her own folk narrative by giving her character a unique feature. Instead of being ashamed of her unique hair, the woman uses it to help others reclaim their dead. Forest nymph combined with *mater dolorosa* creates this woman as a powerful image of the female nation. She saves even in death and allows the dead to be buried and remembered. Interestingly, the monster in the forest is no fierce animal but the soldier, the representative of the state. Instead of giving life, it takes life. The war in that village is no longer between the rebels and the soldiers, it is between the people and the state. The woman is witness to this because it is she who fishes the dead from the river. The myth therefore contests the morality of the state.

All four stories by these women writers engage a state that is not responsive, sometimes even destructive, to its constituents. Margaret Ward states that the high points of women's participation were also moments of exceptional political crises (2). And these four women writers are committed participants in nations that are in crisis, whether it be quiet pragmatic Singapore or violent Philippines. These women write from the *conciencia*, which for Lourdes Casal means both consciousness and conscience. These Southeast Asian women writers who engage the state "invoke changes in the *conciencia* in the human view of the world and of humanness itself, and also in the set and hierarchy of prevailing values" (Casal 184). By performing their art, these women writers write a different history of their countries, their works evoking their women's history of nation.

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