When over lunch, I observed that the authors of the books I had been asked to comment upon characterised the dominant culture as ‘heterosexist, masculinist, and macho’, my lady friend couldn’t restrain a mocking smile, “Macho? Most of these poor devils are decidedly mother dependent, many a wife referring to her consort as her eldest son! When you come down to it, this place is run by women. The big boy just remains that, a big boy, full of bravado, which needs his wife to prop him up.” Her sneer reminded me of Thailand, where the lady of the house is referred to as ‘the hind legs of the elephant’ that would tumble without its mainstay.

Niels Mulder


According to my acquaintance with life among the Javanese, Thai, and Filipinos, for the children the mother is and remains the moral centre of the universe and the touchstone of their conscience. In this way, she becomes a cultic figure, with people in politics sometimes circulating pictures that show them paying respect to their mother as proof of their moral worth. Next to this, John Cadet reminded us that, at least in Thailand, “[W]omen are ascendant on account of their natural, that is to say, biological power, while males wishing to assure and protect themselves are obliged to acquire power, mainly through initiation. Women do not need (to do so), since in the archaic culture their natural power overbids and threatens the acquired power of the male, which requires protection from it. [This] danger all mature females pose to the male [is] abundantly referred to in social practice and belief, as well as Thai folklore, literature and popular culture.” Residually, this situation is referred to by our two authors in their interpretations of the pre-colonial Philippine babalawo, and in the mocking smile of my lady friend.

The two authors, students of literature by training, each seek to come to grips with the position of peripheral groups in mainstream culture and aspire to write recent subaltern histories, in the main using sources originating from the country’s very centre of Metro Manila. Garcia deals with gay culture and particularly with the position of the effeminate queer or baklā. Tadiar addresses the feminisation of labour, the experience of the urban underdog, and the revolutionary imagination of the masses. In order to do just this, both of them exploit scholarly literature and belles-lettres, and venture to theorise the condition of their subject matter.

To be gay? Before concentrating on being gay in the last five decades, we should be reminded that general ideas about homosexuality stem from a rather recent, Western psychiatric discourse that has infiltrated, but not radically subverted, the native Tagalog-Filipino understanding of, to use another imported idea, ‘gayness.’ In the West as elsewhere, culture, or the understanding of life, is always on the move, even as in this post-colonial yet imperial capitalist era of globalisation the current Western understanding of human behaviour – and much else – is colonially pervasive. So, however frequently Philippine culture is characterised as ‘heterosexist, masculinist, macho’ (and effeminato- and homophobic to boot), this current picture is no guide for understanding the past when, for example, power and dignity revolved around spiritual potency which was seniorty rather than gender marked. From the extensive discussion of the pre-colonial female and the cross-dressing male baboykon (priest, medium, healer, spiritual leader), one might conclude that Cadet’s observation of the archaic natural power of mature females also held in the archipelago and that, over colonial history and into the present, this power persisted as mother’s (and wife’s) moral superiority.

Be this as it may, both Garcia and Tadiar suggest that the present-day cross-dressing baklā is a prestigious carry-over from animist days in which gender, gender-crossing and sexual practice were conceptually far apart from the novel notion of homosexuality. Meanwhile, though, for most members of the educated classes such distinctions ‘have fallen away’ and vanished into an irretrievable past. Consequently, the baklā is not only labelled ‘homosexual’, but becomes, in masculinist homophobic logic, the homosexual par excellence, whose interiority (aad: kikakot) is woman-hearted, and who enacts this inversion in everyday life.

It is this very enactment, this show of effeminacy, that makes the male homosexual a homosexual, not the sex act itself. Hence, his non-effeminate partner in sex remains ‘heterosexu-’ or straight. This construction makes it plausible to suppose that the baklā queen is almost consciously part and parcel of the dominant macho culture, including its internalised homophobia, which leaves him lovelorn, anguished and self-hating.

As a male of the effeminate variety, Garcia knows what he writes about and, graciously, over the years in which the dominant discourse was imposed and gradually internalised, the seeds were sown for the emancipation from that very discourse, or, at least, of becoming a respected partner in the totality of the nation. Whereas a blatantly rampant and fabulously gay culture emerged in the 1970s, it seemed as if the same got bogged down in stereotypical comedy shows. Toward the end of the 1980s and into the early 1990s, the pressure for emancipation in wider society gathered steam, and seen from the ‘Update’ added to the book’s 2008/9 editions, this movement toward full citizenship is well under way. Even so, the ‘coming out’ of the masculine gay, which is the perspective in which Garcia discusses the works of three authors, is a painfully slow process at the time that the capitalist juggernaut reduces the mother-dependent macho-males to puppets who need to shore up their egos through violence against women and bakiī gays.

To be an exportable lower-class woman? This very juggernaut forms large in Tadiar’s narrative and dominates the current phase in the evolution of the permanent crisis of Philippine culture. In this period, prostitution became the central metaphor for export-oriented and tourism-friendly policies that prostituted the nation as a whole and in which prostituted women became the paradigmatic figure of the crisis of Philippine culture (p.25-6). Whereas as this image, in which feminised bodies and natural resources are immorally used by multinational capital, pertaining most saliently to the developmentalist policies of the Marcos period, under globalisation the crisis of culture comes to be expressed through the gendered and sexual imagery of overseas domestic work (p.27). Within this Olympian context of the international production processes and their attendant division of labour, the author proposes to explore the socio-subjectivity of female overseas contract workers through her exegesis of relevant belle-lettres.

Through going overseas, mothers, daughters, wives not only abandon their customary roles while tearing themselves apart from the security of their families, but also become ‘Women Alone’ in far-away places. The chapter concerned (chapter 2) starts on a quote from Nick Joaquin that reminds us of the fact that Filipinos grow up and live suffocatingly close together. 
which, according to Bulatan, leads to lowly individuated personalities who incorporate certain others (‘bape’ in their self-experience (1994:438). As such, this ‘staring themselves apart’ and becoming ‘women alone’ reminded me of a statement by the psychiatrist Lourdes Lapuz, who lamented, ‘Perhaps, some day, the time will come when a Filipino no longer has to cross miles of ocean and continent to emancipate himself from his parents (1972:189). It could be that this ‘some day’ has arrived with the massive deployment of Filipino labour world wide which has opened the possibility for emancipation, individuation, and self-assertion.

First of all, this is illustrated at the poetry and stories of highly educated members of the middle classes in the capital that reflect on the experience of Filipinas living solitary lives. Some celebrate their independence of family and like a ‘small victory’ that ‘gives form to their own wholeness’ (p.59). The other thing to free oneself is to be absent from a woman’s existence, the monotony of attending to the activity of others. Subsequently, the narrator seeks the dream of enjoying her body and actions, of being free-floating, which, in turn, may affect her identity experience and results in a loneliness-induced madness.

I do not know how helpful these literary products are to understand the experiences and self-experience of the myriad manual workers, migrant domestic, unmarried mothers, mistresses and other single women living separately from their families, let alone the lives of the ‘commoditised warm bodies’ whose export was initiated under ‘authoritarian modernisation.’ Through imposing feminist, Marxist, literary, and a host of other theories on her subject matter, she attempts to catch the grain of subjectivity in the universe, whereas field anthropologists would prefer to see the universe in microscopic experience. Of course, sometimes that happens when certain writers visualize the ‘fish bowl sentences’ of the wife in a society run by men to whom she is no more than ‘rice, meat, dessert served for his pleasure’ (p.77).

Less emancipatory and most pertinent in the case of the (female) overseas workers is the recognizable cultural theme of sacrifice – in the tradition of Christ, José Rizal and Ninoy Aquino – that purifies and ennobles, and that justifies the suffering in what is sometimes referred to as ‘the prison without bars.’

To be urban underclass?
In the first glimpse under the rubric ‘Urbanisation’, Tadjar seems to move closer to actual experience through reflecting on a novel by Jun Cruz Reyes that highlights ‘pedestrian testimony against the transnational spirit’ at ‘the time of catastrophe’. The person at the centre of the narrative is a university student who, because ‘students are communists’, is forced to save his skin through dropping out of college and abandoning his abode when Martial law is declared. In this story, he becomes one of the streets, poor, scavenging, without a future, etc.; this gives Reyes the means of imagining life is forced to save his skin through dropping out of college and seems to move closer to actual experience through reflection in what is sometimes referred to as ‘the prison without bars.’

The living past
Within the scope of this review of voices from the periphery, it is not possible to do full justice to two very complex, at times rather abstruse and at other moments pellucid texts of the poetry and stories of the revolutionary movement that have been in steady decline, while the ‘sourrows of the people’ live on unabated. Even so, giving attention to the ‘undercurrents of experience’ is a legitimate exercise as it may reveal ‘cultural resources of the living past that the political potentials for unfinished imaginings of the revolution in the present’ (p.378).

Revolution?
Whereas the resulting observations take us to the fly-overs symbolic of the Manila of the 1990s, it still seems it useful to explore the ‘revolutionary’ chapters to ‘Revolution’, and so we are exposed to the Marxist romanticism of revolution-inspired ‘masses’ that should be ‘served’ and ‘awakened’ and with whom the (urban, educated) cadres ‘become one’ in order to create a ‘cultural revolution’ as a ‘popular democratic’ future. As long as the Marcos tyranny lasted – and even as the great Chinese example had already crumbled – such dreams and struggles were quashed by force. However, following the popular uprising of 1986, the revolutionary movement has been in a steady decline, while the ‘sourrows of the people’ live on unabated. Even so, giving attention to the ‘undercurrents of experience’ is a legitimate exercise as it may reveal ‘cultural resources of the living past that the political potentials for unfinished imaginings of the revolution in the present’ (p.378).

References
See “Booms take their toll” on www.newasiabooks.org