

# Harnessing Regional Literature for National Literature

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“Literature of the Philippines.” “Filipino Literature.” “National Literature.”

Do the above terms refer to one and the same body of literary works? The first—“Literature of the Philippines”—refers to the totality of works found within the territory called the Philippines. It implies that there is a unifying thread binding all works found within the said territory. It could be that the unity derives from the race of people producing literary works in the Philippines. Another possibility is that a common experience of history binds the works of authors residing in the Philippines. It could be also that the authors recognize a single central government.

What might be the sense of “Filipino Literature?” First of all, the nationality of the authors is “Filipino.” Secondly, that on the literary works taken together, nationality has left a mark that distinguishes them from the writing of authors found elsewhere in the world. Juxtaposing the term “Filipino Literature” with “Literature of the Philippines,” one may note that behind the term lies the assumption that the literary works produced in one country carry the distinct stamp of the nationality of the authors.

What lies behind the term “National Literature”? There is the assumption that the works are by authors who are part of the nation and are willing participants in the aspirations of that nation. This assumes that there exists a common concept of nation among the writers. Highlighted in the term “National Literature” is the political character of literary production.

How did we get into the habit of assuming that the people inhabiting the territory occupied by the Republic of the Philippines share a common idea of nationhood? According to Teodoro A. Agoncillo, the people who were later to call themselves “Filipinos” began to have a consciousness of their nationality as a result of events that started in the Cavite Mutiny of 1872. Although such an interpretation of our history has been internalized by generations of young college graduates who used Agoncillo’s textbook, up to the present, historiographers have not quite agreed on the signs constituting the sense of nationhood among the Filipinos at that particular historical juncture. What seems to have been clarified is the fact that by 1898, when the Malolos Republic was proclaimed, it was the consciousness of the native landlord class that shaped the concept of nation among those who called themselves “Filipinos.”

It was Benedict Anderson, seeking to understand nationalism in Southeast Asia, who used the term “imagined community” to mean a community “dreamed up” by a people who aspired to become one society, and whose members are in agreement about certain aspirations. And what was the imagined community of the ilustrados who thought up and constructed “the Filipino nation?” That “community” began to take shape during the early years of the American occupation. When the treaty ending the Spanish American War handed the Philippines over to the United States, many ilustrados actively collaborated with the American invaders in anticipation of benefits that the new colonial regime could bring them. The “imagined community” of so-called “revolutionary leaders”

like Pedro Paterno, Felipe Buencamino and Trinidad Pardo de Tavera was a community directed by the interests of the rich landlords, and to be protected from the "simplemindedness" and "ignorance" of the "indio" population.

Once the educational system set up by the Americans was in place, it was enthusiastically supported by the Filipino upperclasses who saw in it their opening for participation in the blessings of the new colonial regime. The literary works that came into the Philippines via the educational system catered to the aspirations of the ilustrado class.

Aside from filtration by class, there was also filtration by language. With English as medium of instruction, works by Filipino authors found only limited space in courses teaching literary appreciation. Thus was the canon of Philippine literature, as we have received it from the past, "purified." Thus was our "national literature" constructed.

And so, let us turn once again to "regional literature." Why is it that literary works in Spanish and English, although written by regional writers, seem to transcend geographical and linguistic boundaries, slipping away from the confines of "regional" literature? Surely, Resil B. Mojares must have been revolting against such an anomaly when he put out under one cover a collection of English fiction by Cebuano writers and called the anthology *The Writers of Cebu* (1978). Resistance to the concept may explain why other anthologists have not come up with such collections as "Ilocano Writing in English" or "Literatura Tagala en Español." The language of the colonial masters have indeed been so privileged that whatever is written in either Spanish or English seem to automatically attain the stature of "national" writing.

Who was it who decided that regional literature ought to consist only of works written in the vernacular? Who was it who relegated "regional literature" as a mere sub-category of "national literature"? The questions are raised not so much to identify individual culprits as to identify the structures that decreed certain literary works by Filipinos as "regional" but others, for reasons that remain unclear, as "national." As far as we can tell, such a system arose from the same consciousness that set up the educational system, which in turn has been instrumental in spreading the notion that language determines the classification of regional literature.

The task of historians and critics is to enrich the canon we now consider as our "national literature." Unfortunately, it is almost impossible for any one historian or critic to read and analyze literary works coming from such a diversity of languages in the Philippines and thus be able to pick out individual authors or groups of works for inclusion in the pantheon of "national literature."

The need still remains for the bodies of works now designated as "regional literatures" to be collected and studied by specialists. Translation into Filipino of regional works has been started, but needs to be gone into with greater vigor. Since the 1960s, there has been a tremendous surge of energy among young scholars and critics working on vernacular literature. Doubtless the coming years will witness a radical shake-up of the existing canon of "national literature" which up to now has been constituted largely by works coming from "Tagalog literature and Spanish and English writing.

As we approach the day for the big shake-up, there is a need to find among the literary theories proliferating in the contemporary academes in the world the theoretical framework that would best engage regional literature and national literature in dialogue. The concept of "national literature" has to be thoroughly interrogated so as to avoid the narrowness fostered by strictly formalist criteria, and to make it possible for a set of politicized norms to allow hitherto marginalized writing and oral lore to enter the canon.

And after the shake-up, what then? The categories "regional literature" and "national literature" ought to be kept separate, with "regional literature" continuing to depict the specificities of life experienced and viewed within a narrower framework and "national literature" expressing larger concerns and broader perspectives. What ought to disappear, however, is the implicit judgement that "national literature" consists of superior literary products and "regional literature" is everything that could not make it as "national" literature. Such judgment was fed to intellectuals reared on colonialist culture by our educational system, and future historians and critics should have no truck with it.