

THE BIKOLANO SENSIBILITY IN MERLINDA BOBIS'S *WHITE TURTLE*

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to resolve the questions of ten selected short stories in White Turtle as representation of postcolonial literature - how these stories subvert the domination of imperial culture and assert the consciousness of Bikolano sensibility thereby liberating the colonized subject from Western hegemony. The short stories are described as having emerged out of the experience of colonization and readings of the texts explore the recurrent themes of hybridity, ambivalence and displacement which foreground the tension between the colonizers and the colonized stereotypes. The abrogation and appropriation of the English language to english language, and the writer's use of magical metaphor and metonymy creatively reconstruct the identity of both the colonizer and colonized. The content – thematic and symptomatic readings reveal the different postcolonial themes that appear in different guises throughout the ten selected short stories by Merlinda Bobis – from the hybridity and language and food that emerge from the melding of different cultures through the appropriated english language as a postcolonial tool in writing back to the Center. Finally, this paper posits a response to the phenomenon, which has been inaccessible to the growing introspective consciousness of the Bikolanos in liberating the Bikol aesthetics and pragmatics through mythmaking and open perception of reality.

Keywords: Bikolano sensibility, hybridity, multiplicity, abrogation and appropriation of language, postcolonialism.

INTRODUCTION:

The ‘Filipino identity’ has been the topic of heated debate for a long time. It has proven itself elusive and difficult to define mainly because of the country’s history of colonization. The hundreds of years of colonization have left the Filipinos with a hybridized existence that has seen the dominance of imperial influence on culture, practice, and mentality. Colonization has served as the great force in “othering” the indigenous practices and values of the Filipinos. The belief of the West in their superiority has led to the propagation of stereotypes that portray the colonized as inferior and strange. This is evident in television, film, and literature, where the Filipino is portrayed either as the domestic helper, factory worker or the mail-order bride. These stereotypes have reflected the West as superior at the expense of marginalizing the colonized that even the Filipinos themselves have come to believe these stereotypes. As a result, the Filipino sensibility is silenced and challenged by these stereotypes. Seemingly, the Filipino legacy underscored by the revolt in Mactan against the Spaniards, then against the Americans is almost forgotten by the Filipinos themselves, for traces of colonization are still evident in the Filipinos in their culture, philosophy, education, literature, and the like. It is no surprise then that from the moment of its birth, Philippine Literature in English has been tested against the Anglo-American tradition. (Almario, 2006) argued that there is a need of reorientation of teaching Philippine Literature to discover the roots, origin and metamorphosis of the colonized subject. ¹Similarly, mainstream writers and critics consciously or unconsciously believed that there was a correct literary center to follow and to learn from. Pineda in her thesis stated that many critics often depict Philippine writers as being initially a group of apprentices who need to learn both the language and the craft of literature and eventually a group that finally learned both language and skill while they struggled with their national and most importantly their local identity along the way.² However, these same critics recalibrated their critical instruments according to alternative contemporary standards. The result, as postcolonial theorists seem to have discovered elsewhere in our emergent world, was a potentially new reading and appreciation of Philippine Literature.

One of the writers today who shares equal footing in writing on uniquely Filipino subjects, characters and themes is Merlinda Carullo Bobis, a Bikol writer who has made her name known not only in the Philippines but also outside the country. The originality of Bobis’s stories cannot be overstated. Reading each one becomes an adventure of discovery, as though Bobis has given her reader a piece of fruit so delicious that in eating it, you almost forget there is a seed of truth hidden inside.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

This research article attempts to resolve the questions of ten selected short stories in *White Turtle* as representation of postcolonial literature - how these stories subvert the domination of imperial culture and assert the consciousness of Bikolano sensibility thereby liberating the colonized subject from Western hegemony. The short stories are described as having emerged out of the experience of colonization and readings of the texts explore the recurrent themes of hybridity, ambivalence and displacement which foreground the tension between the colonizers and the colonized stereotypes. The abrogation and appropriation of the English language to English language, and the writer’s use of magical metaphor and metonymy creatively reconstruct the identity of both the colonizer and colonized.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONSIDERATIONS:

In examining the postcoloniality of Bobis’s texts, this research uses the postcolonial framework proposed by Homi Bhabha, a theory that appropriates Michel Foucault’s notion of discourse as power, Jacques Lacan’s subjectivity and Jacques Derrida’s difference and supplementarity. Before this paper discusses Bhabha’s theory and his appropriation of the theories mentioned, it is best to provide a brief outline of the postcolonial perspective. The term ‘postcolonial literature’ is used to label literature written by people living in countries colonized by other nations. (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1989) use the term postcolonial to cover all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. They believe that there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression; hence, the literatures of African countries, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Pacific Island countries, USA and those colonized by the USA such as the Philippines are considered postcolonial. These literatures of the colonized

¹Virgilio S. Almario, *Pag-unawa sa Ating Pagtula: Pagsusuri at Kasaysayan ng Panulaang Filipino*, (Manila: Anvil Publishing, Inc.), p.18.

²Maria Teresa Pineda, “Domination and Resistance in Ten Philippine Short Stories in English”, Unpublished Master’s Thesis, (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University, 1995), pp. 1-3.

subject appeared in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial center.³ Postcolonial is a term posited by Homi K. Bhabha which describes the form of social criticism that bears witness to the inequalities of representations by which the historical experience of once-colonized subject comes to be framed in the colonizer's culture. (Bhabha, 1996)⁴ And since Western theories use certain criteria that are incongruous to the complexities and cultural provenance of postcolonial writings and therefore cannot adequately evaluate and give legitimacy to these literatures produced out of colonization, postcolonial theory was born. This theory attempts to identify the general characteristics of writings born out of colonization and to present a different set of criteria or literary norms by which postcolonial writing ought to be evaluated.

Postcolonial culture is inevitably a hybridized phenomenon involving a dialectical relationship between the grafted colonizer's cultural systems and an indigenous culture, with its impulse to create or recreate an enriched cultural identity – the emergent culture. The emergent culture (an indigenous culture recreated) is a disavowal against the imperial culture. Its dominant purpose is to alter the subjective identity of dominant culture against the marginalized culture and introduce a new identity of the marginalized. Homi K. Bhabha expounded this in his concepts of ambivalence and hybridity where he made it clear that cultures must be understood as complex intersections of multiple places, historical temporalities, and subject positions. Bhabha identified the ethnocentric blind spots and voluntarist rhetoric in what were regarded as the most radical critiques of liberal models of cultures, the possibility of “translation” and new way of thinking the dialectic between the general and the particular”. (Bhabha, 1995)⁵ In the process of translation, a generalized social situation of conflict is held together or motivated by distinctive rules like the use of the language. And this language could be a site of struggle or resistance as it shows discourse of truth. Following Foucault's notion that discourse creates power, which enables resistance, it follows then that the discourse of any text, like Bobis's texts, becomes the site of struggle. This paper will therefore look where/how the discourse of truth specifically on colonialism is embodied in Bobis's texts as a site of struggle and a question of emergent culture.

Bhabha noted “ it is the trope of our times to locate the question of culture in the realm of the beyond.” (Bhabha, 1994)⁶ He stressed however, that... the ‘beyond’ is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past...⁷ the *emergent culture* carries within it the dominant culture that it opposes, resulting into a *hybrid of culture* - a fusion of the dominant trends of the past and a new cultural emergence. The emergent culture never succeeds in creating a new culture which is pure and free from the influence of the dominant culture, for “... the trace of what is disavowed is not repressed but repeated as something different – a mutation, a hybrid.” (Bhabha, 1995)⁸ In his discussion on *hybridity* and *multiplicity* of emergent cultures, he concludes that the multiplicity of emergent culture as revealed through language shows that an emergent culture is a hybrid opposition and adherence to dominant culture. Bhabha further articulates that the social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to *authorize cultural hybridities* that emerge in moments of historical transformation.

This cultural hybridity and multiplicity is a product of an ambivalent signification. The colonial signifier – neither one nor other – is an act of ambivalent signification, which Bhabha calls “splitting”. *Splitting* is an intricate strategy of defense and differentiation in the colonial discourse. This process allows the native, the subaltern or the colonized the strategy of attempting to disarticulate the voice of authority (that of the colonizer's) at the point of *splitting or ambivalence*.

This notion of ambivalence or splitting is what Jacques Lacan identified as subjectivity. Lacan's fundamental contention in his theory of subjectivity is that, the human subject is split into the conscious and unconscious part and that the subjectivity of the analyst and the analysand work on each other in the same way that the subjectivity of the colonizer and the colonized conquers each other. Since each person possesses his/her own subjectivity, the psychoanalytic encounter between the analyst and the analysand becomes the dialectical, playing out of their subjectivities: the analyst works on the analysand and/or vice-versa. Bhabha calls this dialectical playing of subjectivities the *transference* between the colonizer and the colonized. The word “I”

³Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 2.

⁴Homi K. Bhabha, “Caliban Speaks to Prospero: Cultural Identity and the Crisis of Representation”, in Mariani, *Critical Fictions*, p. 63, ed. Padmini Mongia, *Contemporary Post Colonial Theory: A Reader*, (New York: Hodder Headline Group, 1996), p. 1.

⁵Homi K. Bhabha, “Translator Translated”, *Art Forum* v. 33, March 1995, pp. 80-84, in interview by W.J.T. Mitchell.

⁶Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 1.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁸Homi K. Bhabha, “Signs Taken for Wonder” in the *Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 34.

therefore reflects a part of both the colonizer or the colonized, since there is no pure culture, as a result of transference of culture through colonization. Thus no one can say that s/he has a pure culture, the colonizer cannot anymore speak of himself/herself without the colonized and vice versa.

Lacanian psychoanalysis is applied in this paper the way Bhabha used it to read postcolonial texts, by analyzing the subjectivities revealed in the texts through its content and form – metaphorical and metonymic images with which the colonized character identifies and summons the absent colonizer.

This element of *hybridity* is prevalent in postcolonial and third world societies, like the Philippines where hybrid culture threads on the boundary between opposing cultures. This hybridity of emergent culture, however, is problematic. An emergent culture is always in motion opposing a dominant culture. In the process of opposition, the emergent culture remains, although in a concealed way entangled in a dominant.⁹ The continual motion means that there is always a constant change; there is always a direction. The entanglement with the dominant may weaken and the emergent may become the new dominant culture. Hence, while there is an element of hybridity in the nature of emergent culture, this *hybridity* is also in motion like in an open ended construct that the signifier may move to either end and it keeps on changing that it is difficult to catch it or paint a picture of it. But an object in motion always passes through particular points while it moves towards a certain direction. Bhabha further posits that the production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot ‘in itself’ be conscious and which this unconscious relation introduces an ambivalence in the act of interpretation.¹⁰

In articulating the ambivalence of discourse, Bhabha points out that in mimicry, the representation of identity and meaning is rearticulated along the axis of metonymy. Lacan illustrated the ambivalence of discourse through the concept of mimesis in which mimicry is like camouflage, not a harmonization or repression of difference, but a form of resemblance that differs from or defends presence by displaying it in part.¹¹ Hence, both colonizer and colonized are in a process of miscognition, the state of ambivalence where each point of identification is always a partial and double repetition of the otherness of the self – democrat and despot, individual and servant, native and child.¹²

This study also uses deconstruction but will not identify the binaries; it only considers the *historical context* of the texts in question by assuming that the subjective identity given to us by the imperial culture is constructed through historical, cultural, and social process which can be negated as natural. It goes with the notion of Derrida about the “center” which is not fixed that it could change with time, which Bhabha appropriated in his examination of the moment of enunciation and inscription of writing in post-colonial texts through the notion of *differance and supplementarity*. To Derrida, *differance* may either refer to “difference” which is a note of contradictions or negation in language and interpretation or “deferment” which may apply to the belief that meaning is never really present or temporarily postponed. With this, Derrida argues that meaning can never be traced to a point of origin because meaning arises from a system of relations and differences, and words are defined by other words whose meanings are in turn determined by other words. He expounded it in two ways: first, that no linguistic element has a positive meaning, only an effect of meaning arising from its differences from the other elements; second, that presence or fullness of meaning is always deferred from one sign to another in an endless sequence. Operating from this principle, *differance*, then may be conceived as an underlying principle of non-identity which makes signification possible only by ‘spacing out’ both signifiers and concepts so that meaning appears merely as a ‘trace’ of other terms within or across any given term.¹³ *Supplementarity*, on the other hand, can be traced back to the opposition between nature and its others – such as art, culture, education, and the like. The word “supplement” can signal both the addition of something to an already complete entity and the making good of an insufficiency. To Bhabha, *supplementary sense* is the disembodied evil eye, the subaltern that wreaks its revenge by circulating, without being seen. It cuts across the boundaries of master and slave;¹⁴ it opens up a space in-between the colonized and colonizer and asserts the difference yet the equality of the colonized culture to the colonizer’s culture.

METHODOLOGY:

To examine the *postcoloniality* of Bobis’s texts, this study will look into both the *form and content* of the texts

⁹Cyril M. Conde, “The Voices of Silence in the Novel *Bamboo in the Wind*”, Unpublished Master’s Thesis, (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University, 1998), pp. 54-55.

¹⁰Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 36.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 90.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 97.

¹³Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 58.

¹⁴Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 55.

based on Homi Bhabha's concept on the *hybridity of emergent culture* in which he appropriates Michel Foucault's discourse as a site of struggle; Jacques Derrida's differance and supplementarity which posits that Western culture cannot be privileged over the colonized culture because one is enabled by the other; and Jacques Lacan's notion of subjectivity on the text's content and form through the use of metaphoric and metonymic images with which the colonized persona identifies and summons the absent colonizer.

The first layer of criticism uses a *content thematic approach* to identify the content of Bobis's text, which discusses the central themes or prevailing issues in the text. The postcolonial themes used in classifying the texts of Merlinda Bobis are the themes of hybridity, ambivalence and displacement. The second layer, which uses *symptomatic reading and deconstruction* will examine Bobis's style of writing which includes abrogation and appropriation of language, and her use of metonymy and magical metaphor to assert a Bikolano sensibility. To further illustrate these *postcolonial symptoms* in a limited scope, this paper focuses its discussion on *Bikolano sensibilities* as revealed by Bobis's texts. In this part, this researcher establishes the notion of the effect of colonization to the colonizer and colonized. It also discusses how Bobis texts show rejection of the categories of the imperial culture and the assumptions of traditional and 'fixed' meaning in language to reveal the process by which language is taken and made to bear the burden of Filipino/Bikolano's hybridity, ambivalence and displacement. It posits Filipino/Bikolano's sensibility for cultural negotiation and infixity which asserts position.

(Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1989) characterize *symptomatic reading* as "readings that are not directed towards totalizing interpretations but readings that may enable us to isolate and identify significant shifts in the development of postcolonial writing."¹⁵ In other words, these are the text's "unconscious", what is unspoken and inevitably repressed that aims to "reveal the discursive formations and ideological forces which traverse the text"¹⁶. Here, Bhabha's notion on emergent culture which appropriates Michel Foucault's notion of discourse will be used. This reading will show the configurations of cultural domination that enabled the writing of the text by the writer in question (Bobis) and which, consciously or unconsciously prompted the same writer to make the characters in the text speak and act the way they do. Deconstruction will look into the metaphoric and metonymic images through which the notion of power inherent in the model of center and margin are appropriated and so dismantled."¹⁷ This time, Jacques Derrida's differance and supplementarity, and Jacques Lacan's subjectivity will be used to examine the use of metaphor and metonymy to summon the absent colonizer, appropriate and abrogate his culture, and assert Bikolano sensibility. The paper ends in the analysis of how Bikolano sensibility rejects the assumptions of the colonizers about Western culture and the colonized culture.

SCOPE AND LIMITATION:

Merlinda Bobis is one of the writers today who shares the same goal of liberating people by raising their consciousness or sensibility that is rooted in social structures. The ten selected short stories of Merlinda Bobis from her collection in *White Turtle* signifies relevance to the problematic relationship between language and literary practice addressed by postcolonial critics and to the problem of constituting *Bikolano sensibility* within the Self-Other division imposed by colonialism, imperialism and patriarchy. Considering the strong colonial influence that emerges in Bobis's texts, this researcher uses only ten selected short stories out of twenty-three short stories of Merlinda Carullo Bobis's *White Turtle* as a signification of a unique representation of Bikolano sensibility, culture and literature. The ten selected stories manifest diversity of setting which cut across the setting in local area, national and international scene. These stories are: "An Earnest Parable," "Fruit Stall," "Fish-Hair Woman," "MacDo," "White Turtle," "The Long Siesta as Language Primer," "The Kissing," "Pina and the Flying Cross," "Border Lover" and "Before the Moon Rises." Moreover, this researcher still uses other narratives in the said collection to further establish his arguments. However, in this publication, the researcher uses only two short stories in the discussion, the "White Turtle" and "Fish-Hair Woman" respectively to fully articulate the methodology of analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION:

In the absence of the tables and figures, this researcher utilizes two selected texts to present the discussion in a full landscape. The discussion commences with the *synopsis* of every short story, followed by the articulation of the recurrent *postcolonial themes* of hybridity, ambivalence, and displacement which resurface in different

¹⁵Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 178.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 83.

¹⁷Ibid.

guises throughout Bobis's texts, and ends by interpellating the *writing technique of the writer* with her use of magical metaphor and her hybridized discourse, the abrogation and appropriation of the English language to english which asserts an enriched Bikolano culture/identity.

Text 1: White Turtle

"White Turtle" tells of a Bikol epic chanter, Lola Basyon, who came to Sydney Writer's Festival and chanted a story of the white turtle. White turtle is a mythical tale, which ferries the dreams of the dead children in the navel of the sea. Lola Basyon was invited by the Australian anthropologist in Sydney to show her Bikol poetry in a writer's festival. Different foreign writers participate in the writer's festival and from among the participants, the novelist who sports a cowboy hat and snakeskin boots has disturbed Lola Basyon because he suspects that the poetry of Lola Basyon is only a pedestrian writing. Lola Basyon almost loses her confidence because aside from the scrutinizing gaze of the cowboy she has no book to read on but only stories to recount. The applause of the audience nevertheless eases her discomfort especially when the chair of the readings approaches her to buy her book.

The giant turtle, which is only dreamt up by the Bikol epic chanter, is not white at all but begins turning white in the local seer's consciousness and to her readers/audience. The mythical turtle keeps on transforming, becoming a funerary attendant to dreams of dead children, and changes into bone-white like the corals under the deep sea, a new patina of this mythical character. Lola Basyon is able to reach the reader's/audience's consciousness when the audience unconsciously mythologizes, and transforms the turtle into a white turtle. The readers have fleshed out an old story, giving the story an even stranger gloss, taking an old story and giving it back as something new. The Bikol chanter does not have a book, but she is invited to the festival through the Australian anthropologist. She does not quite fits in the context of the festival but her presence signifies a re-valuing of the oral tradition.

Postcolonial Symptoms in Asserting Bikolano Sensibility

The audience once thought that Lola Basyon should have attended a multicultural presentation instead of the writer's festival but they later realized that Lola Basyon has a new story to tell. Here, Bobis introduced a new mode of story telling, hybrid in nature, for she uses a conventional mode with a newer look. Bobis has opened up a space of translation in which the construction of a political object [white turtle] is a contemporary argument to reveal the difference between the East and the West, between Filipino and English, showing that the Bikol/Filipino character is not displaced from the Sydney writer's festival but is able to sing new songs. Lola Basyon's creativity in her readings invokes acceptance from the audience/readers. She is able to get along with Western writers and audience because she has adapted to her new environment/culture and the same time retained her native culture. This ability of the local chanter to establish her identity in the Sydney writer's festival to the moving of the split subjects and differentiated social movements on two planes, is what Bhabha calls, the emergence of the interstices – in which overlap and displacement of domains of difference are negotiated.¹⁸ Lola Basyon's notion of displacement, because of her multicultural style, does not hinder her to narrate [Bikol] stories. Her use of Bikol language fused in English language posits a new site of struggle which demonstrates that English language could not fully express the exact dimensions of what the colonized think and believe in. Bhabha says that this is an in-between space which provides the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood that initiate new sign of identity and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.¹⁹ The Bikol chanter has articulated her ambivalence, not own self and other but the otherness of the Self inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of colonial identity. Moreover, Bobis has also perfectly shown through the character of Lola Basyon and the image of the white turtle that even if the Bikol character has established her identity she could not really avoid the fact that her character is still displaced in a foreign land. Take note of this:

The spell was broken. Everyone started moving and speaking in unison, some in wonder, others with the deepest unnamable emotions, but a few murmured their doubts. Dreams? Dead children? Suddenly, they remembered the story. Funerals. One man contemptuously dismissed this foolishness and argued instead against cruelty to animal. ... She wanted to explain to the men in the blue that it did not mean to cause harm or any trouble. (Bobis, 1999)²⁰

The white turtle that bore on its back the dreams of Iraya's dead children has buried the little girl and boy's

¹⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p.3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²⁰ Merlinda Bobis, *White Turtle*, (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1999), p. 51.

dreams that later sprouted into corals which were the colors of the bones. It suggests that the mythical reptile is a transporter of dreams, dreams that had not been realized before, but become true during this present generation, the dreams that have been nurtured for long time by the children who are now parents of these young children. However, this ‘bone white dreams’ refer also to funeral, a frustration, because of failure of not realizing the childhood dreams. Here, the white turtle shows dual identity, the bone for children’s dreams and funerals for death or frustration. Bobis has shown the significance of transformation. The transformation of death and grief which are told in a tale to become manageable. She uses a hybrid writing style to express her thought, she mythologizes, re-creates stories from conventional to contemporary, appropriating another style of retelling a story, to become more than itself.

Bobis writes:

We tell stories, so we don't forget them. First we memorialize ... then we extend ourselves: we mythologize because we can't help ourselves either. What is myth then but a memorial with a strange patina? There is an other-worldliness about it or a heightened sense of the world-even loftiness, perhaps? All stories are "tall tales", because in the telling, we are transforming and hopefully transcending something. (Bobis, 2001)²¹

Though Lola Basyon, the Bikol character was displaced in the writer’s festival, she has managed to reveal her own self and gained the confidence of her readers and audience. The Bikol chanter sings [reads] the giant turtle in the writer’s festival, and this white turtle materializes amidst the book signing at the writers’ festival. This illustrates that colonizers [Australian readers/audience] has understood the sensibility or consciousness of the colonized.

When the mythical turtle appeared over the readers/audience, the crowd was afraid whether the white turtle was an endangered species or was not properly quarantined. It testifies that shared histories, of discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities, may be collaborative and dialogical but may also be antagonistic, conflictual and incommensurable. In this text, the Bikol chanter explains that the white turtle does not mean to cause harm or any trouble, the turtle only wants to tell stories because her stories are written on her back and only offered to Lola Basyon in a moment of music. The white turtle was just a conduit of narrating life of migrant writer, their aspirations and frustrations. This text manifests that, Bobis through Salvacion Ibarra, a.k.a. Lola Basyon has transplanted her own sensibility, a new currency of Bikol which articulated that local writers could also be relative to Western writers.

The “White Turtle” is a metaphor for the source of stories, creative energy, inspiration and salvation. Bobis uses the mythical reptile to reveal her character’s intention and through the local chanter, she is able to present the struggle of Asian writers in a foreign country and contend to Western writers. Bhabha reiterates, the social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation. And the right to signify from the periphery of authorized power and privilege does not depend on the persistence of tradition. It is resourced by the power of tradition to re-inscribe through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are in the minority”.²² Bobis in her story, “White Turtle” freely abrogates and appropriates the literary genre and language of the colonizer. Her story fused with local color seizing the language of the center and replacing it with a discourse adapted to the colonized place to create the Other (the ambivalent, hybridized or fragmented Filipino/Bikolano identity/culture). She uses the language as site of struggle. Take note of the words “Lola”, an English term for grandmother or an old woman and “Basyon” which is a local tag for Salvacion, from a colonizer’s name – Spain, the use of “*tapis* and *kimona*”, native Bikol garment worn by women instead of skirt and blouse, the expression, “*ay Dios ko!*”, or Oh, My God!, are used by Bobis to emphasize an spontaneous discourse of how a local Bikol reacts to a magnificent event. Likewise, the expression of gratitude, “*salamat* or *maraming salamat*”, thank you or thank you very much in English is written in Bikol instead of the colonizer’s language. These are only some of the Bikol/Filipino language sentences which Bobis appropriates for the use of English to fully articulate the local color and meaning of the text. Consider this narration:

“Hesumaryahosep”, the Filipina journalist muttered under her breath, a miracle! The mother and daughter, and the young man gasped as the immense creature came very close, while, at the other end of the room, the anthropologist stood riveted, all movement drawn in, pushed to the back of his eyes. A hundred white turtles somersaulted there.” ... “Book ...” “Yes, book ...” “Gusto niya raw bumili ng libro mo,” a shrill voice from the

²¹ Merlinda Bobis, “Trading in Imagination”, Conference Paper, Power House Museum , August 23, 2001.

²² Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 2.

audience interrupted the exchange.”, ... “Marhay ta enjoy ka. Su kanta mo very good.” The anthropologist offered her another glass of orange juice.”, ... “Kumusta, I’m Betty Manahan, a Filipina journalist originally from Manila. Ang galling mo talaga – great performance!” ... “Salamat ... thank you ...” Lola Basyon bowed once more.”, “Salamat ... maraming salamat ... thank you very much.” They saw the white turtle after all, thank God.”²³

Though the narration is a fusion of three languages – the Bikol dialect, Filipino language and English, Bobis has successfully delivers her intention to her readers to make them see the “white turtle”. Nevertheless, Bobis use of Bikol/Filipino language reveals that English language could not fully serve to her needs and the local language can help her best illustrate the message of the text. This consciousness sums up Bobis’s sensibility and her poetics as source of stories, and conduit. Bobis recounts:

In this story, the white turtle is a metaphor for the source of stories, creative energy and inspiration, as well as salvation. As such, the white turtle is a ‘precious, holy thing’, as I wrote in that story. In a way, this concept sums up my philosophy or, you might say, my poetics: the author is not the ultimate source of stories, but only their conduit. And these stories are either murmurings or explosions in the air; plot lines captured by the writer’s ear then telegraphed to the heart, so that it can speak or sing. I liken the process of writing to the workings of a magic cable: the story travels fluidly from the ear, the heart or the artistic sensibility, then the voice. (2002)²⁴

Bobis further argues that *the author is not the ultimate source of stories but only their conduit, part of the chain. All stories are already out there, either murmurings or explosions in the air; plotlines captured by the writer’s ear then telegraphed to his/her heart, so that it can speak or sing, “a magic cable which goes first to the ear then stimulated to the heart or to the artistic sensibility and then creates the voice.” (Bobis, 2001)²⁵* The white turtle called upon by the Bikol chanter through her poem/short story is a mythic story. Her [Lola Basyon] style of narrating her story rejects the dominant way of narrating stories. Lola Basyon establishes the Bikol way of relating stories. Likewise, Lola Basyon’s Filipino outfit rejects the colonizer’s assumption over the colonized, even she looks multicultural because of her Bikol outfits she still exudes the confidence. This assertion typifies also the transformation of the writer herself when she [Bobis] migrated in Australia for her post graduate education.

Bobis transplants her Bikol sensibility in her new home, Australia which is shaped by mythologies of her first culture but Bobis is also anxious how to be fully understood in one’s original tongue in a foreign land. This is the dilemma of the migrant writer like her Bikol character [Lola Basyon] on how she could be accepted in the foreign land with her own *Bikol sensibility* which is strange to them. Bobis writes, *“the migrant writer has to work extremely hard to win this faith – of the publisher, the reading public, the critic, or the writer’s festival directors, so that they finally invite you (Bikol writer) to the party.”²⁶*

The epic chanter did not have a book, but she was invited to the party through the Australian anthropologist. The Bikol chanter did not quite fit in the context of the festival because she could be just another exotic anthropological display evoking the orientalist gaze or maybe the anthropologist thought that her guest could bring to the festival a re-valuing of the oral tradition. Though feeling a bit lost during her co-panelists’ book signing, the chanter summoned the white turtle into being because she wanted to tell everyone that her stories were not hers but were written on the turtle’s back. Take note of the following lines:

*“Ngunian na banggi ipangaturugan taka ki pawikan ;
duyan sa saiyang likod
kasingputi kan tulang.
Ngunyan na banggi ipangaturugan taka ki pawikan”.*

*“I’ll dream you a turtle tonight;
cradle on her back
bone-white
I’ll dream you a turtle tonight”.²⁷*

This is the song of the Bikol epic chanter in the story. Bobis tries to point out two arguments. One, the act of dreaming, the evocation of myth and the particular sensibility shaped by the story and the other is the writer’s

²³Merlinda Bobis, *White Turtle*, (Manila: De La Salle University Press, Inc., 1999), pp. 37-52.

²⁴Interview Notes on Merlinda Bobis, February 10, 2002.

²⁵Merlinda Bobis, “Myth and Mythologizing in *White Turtle*”, Conference Paper in *Trading in Imagination*, Power House Museum, August 23, 2001.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Merlinda Bobis, *White Turtle*, (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1999), p.39.

act of mythologizing. The poem or novel has only been lent to the reader in various forms like in a moment of music. Such a striking configuration has been noted by Bobis in her texts which for (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1989) bears a crucial implication:

The 'intersection' of language which occurs in the literatures of formerly oral societies does not take place simply between two different ways of conceiving the practice and substance of language. One characteristic of the world-views of oral culture is the assumption that words, uttered under appropriate circumstances, have the power to bring into being the events or states they stand for; to embody rather than represent reality. This conviction that the word can create its object leads to a sense that language possesses power over truth and reality.²⁸

In this situation, the phenomenon of two languages and cultures intersecting gives rise to syncreticism that interpellates appropriation and abrogation of language and cultural transformation. This linguistic and cultural process is very evident in this mythical tale of Merlinda Bobis. Bhabha has also asserted that the subaltern people can speak and that a native voice can be recovered. His introduction of the ideas of mimicry and parody as both a strategy of colonial subjection through reform, regulation and discipline, which appropriates the Other, and the native's inappropriate imitations of this discourse, which has the effect of menacing colonial authority suggests that the subaltern has, in fact, spoken, and that properly symptomatic readings of the colonialist text can and do recover a native voice.

White Turtle illustrates the themes of hybridity, ambivalence and displacement. It has opened a space of translation for social and cultural negotiation between the colonizers and colonized. Bobis uses the white turtle as a metaphor for the source of stories, creative energy, inspiration and salvation to give the once colonized subject (Lola Basyon) to narrate the stories stored at the back of the mythical reptile. The Bikol character's presence in the writer's festival signifies displacement not only of her identity but also of her culture and context. However, her displacement did not make her inferior because she managed to show her currency. The audience love her way of storytelling which is a new mode of political signification and even her multicultural outfit which reveals her Asian culture and heritage adds to the enriched identity of the colonized. The enriched identity is a domination of the colonized of her/his hybrid identity, not Self and Other but the otherness of Self which shaped the Bikolano sensibility, the ability of the colonized to be sensitive and conscious to her/his social and cultural negotiation.

The nurtured Bikolano sensibility in the colonizer's context makes the Bikol character face the Western audience to sing her story through the mythical character in her own way and later gains the confidence of the audience which defies the Orientalist stereotype that Western is superior and Eastern is inferior. Bobis's use of the Bikol language fused in the English language posits a new site of struggle which demonstrates that English language could not fully articulate the meaning without blending with the colonized language. Moreover, Bobis has freely abrogated and appropriated the literary genre and language of the colonizer through this text. Her story mixed with local color arrests the language of the Center and replaces it with a discourse adapted to the colonized place to create the Other, the hybrid and ambivalent Bikolano. Hence, the *White Turtle* testifies that shared histories, discrimination, exchange of values, meanings and priorities may be collaborative and dialogical to create a new political signification and at the same time opens a negotiation between the subjected identities of the stereotypes, the colonizer and colonized.

Text 2: Fish-Hair Woman

The "Fish-Hair Woman" is based from the story narrated by an Australian academic to Merlinda Bobis who did research on Philippine militarization. It is about a particular military operation during the time of former President Corazon Aquino in 1987 when the New People's Army, a leftist group, was purged by the Philippine government in a total war. The military operation was called Lambat Bitag: Net Trap. Bobis recalls:

"If you grow up in a culture where you read about mass graves, assassinations, massacres, etc., in the papers with such regularity, the terms denoting violence float around you like the air you breathe – you don't give it a much thought. But it shapes your mythology, which in turn shapes your (Bikol) sensibility."²⁹

The "Fish-Hair Woman" was again, expanded into an Iraya-context novel. This has turned out to be a mythopoetic narrative – about making of the myths. The "Fish-Hair Woman" talks about the life of the people in Iraya, where the government declares total war against the rebels. Iraya is thousand miles away from

²⁸Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 81.

²⁹Merlinda Bobis, "Myth and Mythologizing in *White Turtle*", Conference Paper I Trading in Imagination, Power House Museum, August 23, 2001.

civilization. Estrella, who is figured by Irayans as an icon of salvation, courage and strength, is acknowledged the “Fish-Hair Woman” because she is entrusted by the Irayans the supreme task of salvaging the body of the dead people, victims of militarization, thrown into the river.

Two men – Sergeant Ramon, a military officer assigned in Iraya, and Tony Mac Intyre, an Australian researcher, vie for Estrella’s love. Tony promises deliverance from the ordeal, while Ramon reminds Estrella of her mission to the Irayans and strongly coerces her to perform her duty.

Postcolonial Symptoms in Asserting Bikolano Sensibility

The “Fish-Hair Woman” has an affirmative note about the Bikol character. In this text, Estrella demonstrates dominance and leadership, a manifestation that woman may handle greater responsibilities like man; however, the text does not equalize man over woman but only shows the assumptions that woman is relative to man who can handle greater responsibilities. This is a hybrid characteristic which may come to a new gender-woman. It is hybrid in nature because it blends the characteristics of man to a woman that a woman may reveal new characteristic/identity different from the assumptions attached to female. Bhabha defines hybridity as the construction of a new political object which is neither the one nor the other. Hybridity alienates our political expectations, and changes, as it must the very forms of our recognition of the moment of politics.³⁰ In this text, Estrella is in the position of negotiation, negotiating her hybrid identity as a woman, a woman different from the patriarchal assumption. Her identity being the icon of salvation and being a woman creates a new strong hybrid identity. Bobis only presents temporal position, to conceive the articulation of contradictory elements, which according to Bhabha is an emergence of transcendent history that opens up hybrid sites and objectives of struggle, and destroy those negative polarities between knowledge and its objects, and between theory and practical political reason.³¹

Considering also the character’s stature and complexion, she is able to attract not only the villagers but also the Australian researcher which connotes that Bikol [Filipina women] are beautiful like the mestisa, señorita or latina. This argument reveals sense of superiority of the Bikol character because of her ambivalent characteristics over that assumption which posits that it is not only the white that is beautiful but also the colored ones. Take note of this dialogue:

*“I am a Filipina, tiny and dark as a coconut husk, but what red fires glint on my head! ... “Fish with your hair, woman.” Always that command which summed up my life. After the government declared its total war against the rebels, I realized the purpose of my being, why I had come to be such a freak of nature, why I was more hair than body, the span of it nearly thrice my whole frame.”*³²

Bobis’s character to define and exhibit her double otherness as Bikol, deconstructs both the male/female binaries but only to reveal the ambivalent and displaced characteristic of the Bikol character, Estrella.

Estrella is a strong and brave woman, being the shaman of the villagers, she manifests bravery and strength as she trawls dead bodies from the river but she also demonstrates weakness when she [fish-hair-woman] falls in love with the Australian researcher and surrenders herself to him. The fish-hair-woman shows that even how strong a woman could be, she would reveal her true self, the assumption attached to woman by the patriarchal order, being passive and submissive to the will of man because when Estrella falls in love with Tony, she never considers her own decision and just believes on the promises of her lover. This situation articulates that woman, though she has strong characteristics, still manifests weaknesses. Thus the night before Tony leaves Iraya, Estrella surrenders herself to Tony believing that her love over the Australian researcher would release her from her task as icon of courage and salvation.

In this writing, Estrella always wants to desperately save the dead with her hair, to net them back to dry land for a decent burial. Bobis, in turn, wants to save the stories of the dead, to net them back into the consciousness and to memorialize them. Then the fish-hair woman’s vocation is a netting of salvation not to trap but to help free the psyche, to bury a body, in order to find a conclusion. Bobis uses this mythical character in her negotiation in relating to Bobis’s new home though she loves her new home but life in the original cultural heritage is more sentimental than the other. Bobis writes:

The myth of the Fish-Hair Woman is an old-current story. Old, because she evokes the time of larger than life heroes with magical powers. But this seemingly ‘ancient’ figure is only a vehicle for something ever present, never been outdated: the quest for salvation. Very close to purgation and of course, rebirth. A pattern of the

³⁰Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 25.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 25.

³²Merlinda Bobis, *White Turtle*, (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1999), p. 12.

*psyche, again to refer to Joseph Campbell, my collective pattern. But for a while, fleshed out within my context, thus becoming a woman with twelve-meter hair: I could say I dreamt her up – or did she dream me up, so I could dream her? Were just trading time and context: her ancient world to my 21st century? Whatever happened, she is now a memorial with my own cultural patina – politics, aesthetics and all. Now transplanted into a new soil, Australia. How will she fare here? Will she have enough currency in this new trading ground with its own mythology and sensibility?*³³

The Fish-Hair Woman articulates a partial escape from colonialism. The Fish-Hair Woman is reminiscent of the powerful female shaman, *baylan* or *catalonan* of the pre-hispanic Tagalog and Visayan speaking areas of the Philippines. For the *baylan*, long hair is an essential component of propitiating rituals. In Bobis's tale, the fish-hair woman uses her long twelve-meter hair to trawl dead bodies from the river and at the same time cleanses the river by trawling corpses from its depths with her powerful tresses. This story however could not silence colonial existence for it reveals the influence of Hispanic colonialism which is found in whispers of martyrdom and resurrection that trace across the pages. Nevertheless, the "Fish-Hair Woman" rejects the assumptions of the colonizers of their superiority over the colonized when Bobis uses Estrella, the Bikol character to reveal an affirmative note about the identity of a woman, being an icon of salvation and courage. These characteristics are noted to men and now attached to the female Bikol character. However, the text does not equalize man over woman but only deconstructs the assumptions that woman is inferior to man, hence deconstructing the yoke of patriarchy. The character of Estrella emphasizes the reality confronting us in our country, that, we [colonized] could not just choose because there are no choices unlike in Tony's [colonizer] country, there are choices thus Estrella was tied to the responsibility accorded her by the villagers. Her dialogical discursive identity manifests what Bhabha calls a "negotiation of terms in the on-going present of the enunciation of the political statement."³⁴ Her identification is fragmented that despite her desire to wrest herself from the duty binding her to her culture, she is torn between her love for Tony and his promise of redemption and the very redemption of her own people through her devotion in performing her duty as fish-hair woman.

The assignment provided by Bobis to Estrella is similar to the *diwatas* and *enkantadas* in our Bikol culture that deities are not only male but there are female deities, which further argues that gods are either men and women, thereby defying the Western ideology that there is one true God as proffered by the colonizers' culture represented by the Christian faith handed down to us by both Spanish and American colonizers.

Bhabha further argues that the strategic image of identity in the margin of otherness which displays identification always intensifies the edge of identification of the Other, which reveals that identity are aggressively twinned. The colonized character may negate or just simply accept the situation because denial is always a retroactive process, a half acknowledgement of that otherness may leave a traumatic mark. Estrella's character in the "Fish-Hair-Woman" does this as she demonstrates that the point of intervention should shift from the ready recognition of images as positive or negative, to an understanding of the processes of subjectification made possible and plausible through stereotype discourse. Estrella eventually succumbs to the call of duty as Fish-Hair woman despite her love for Tony as Ramon, in an act at the height of mockery and injustice, forces her to go to the river for her ultimate act of sacrifice.

Bobis has also twinned the identity of the Bikol character and the Australian journalist. Estrella, an icon of courage and salvation asserts the dominant subjectification of a man; however, despite her strength, she also manifests inferiority, the submissive characteristics of a woman when she falls in love with Tony, the Australian journalist. Here, the Bikol character unleashes her mask of strength and recalls the inferior subjectification of the dominant culture over women. Moreover, the superior identity of the Australian researcher-journalist was tainted by the effeminate tag sissy. It transforms the superior mark of the "white" into inferior one. Take note of the following narration:

*"... Sissy Australian – bakla!" Ramon spat at Tony's back. Back. My back, most loved.", ... "He wasn't that good after all – " Ramon paused, slowing his words for effect. "Your pale sissy did not even know how to fight – like a man."*³⁵

The colonized Bikol character side by side with the colonizer (Australian journalist) created hybridized images which both the colonizer and the colonized form part of his/her Self-identity and vicé-versa. This text has exposed Western essentialist claims to the purity and supremacy of their own culture over Oriental culture and

³³Merlinda Bobis, "Myth and Mythologizing in White Turtle", Conference Paper in Trading in Imagination, Power House Museum, August 23, 2001.

³⁴Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 23.

³⁵Merlinda Bobis, "Fish-Hair Woman", *White Turtle*, Manila: De La Salle University Press, Inc., 1999), pp. 17-22.

articulated the supremacy of the colonized over the colonizer. Through these images of identification, which Bhabha calls “disassembling” images or images of “doubling”, the colonized subject has succeeded in occupying the privileged place of the colonizer, and yet has retained his own “avenging” place. This process, according to Bhabha, is situation of continuous embedding, in which it is impossible to find its origin.³⁶

Fish-Hair Woman shows the recurrent themes of hybridity, ambivalence and displacement. The Bikol character’s hybrid identity being the icon of salvation exhibits a position of displaced political position, manifests the dominant patriarch order and is able to define her double otherness deconstructing the male/female binaries and creating a hybrid and ambivalent character. The same characteristics of the fish-hair woman articulate a partial escape from colonialism, from being a submissive and passive individual to a figure reminiscent of the powerful female shaman, baylan or catalonan of the pre-hispanic culture. This mythical character signifies that the Bikolano before colonization has already an established sensibility that shows Bikolano superiority equal to the first Catholic priest and educators of the country during the Hispanic revolution. The fish-hair woman is an icon that rejects the assumptions of the colonizers of their superiority over the colonized particularly when the Bikol character has aggressively emphasized the deconstruction of the imperial assumption that woman is inferior to man. Moreover, the same mythical character defies the Western ideology that there is one true God, as proffered by the colonizer’s culture represented by the Christian faith handed down by both Spaniards and Americans, and reveals an open ended construct which both the colonized and colonizer are in continuous negotiation.

Finally, this text has exposed Western essentialist claim to the purity and supremacy of their own culture over Oriental culture when Bobis uses the female Bikol character to deconstruct the patriarch culture and combines Bikol chants and expressions in her text to articulate that English language could not fully serve the needs of the colonized culture.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION:

The themes in Bobis’s texts are so closely interwoven because each text posits parallel postcolonial symptoms from hybridity, ambivalence to displacement of characters and assertion of Bikolano sensibility. Each story articulates the hybrid nature of Bikol characters which are not pulled apart but singing new songs, a new creation from/within the border. Bobis’s characters like the local seer and fruit stall vendor prove their currency in the colonial context, the local chanter uses her multicultural characteristics in cultural negotiation, while the fruit seller uses her hybrid and ambivalent identity to mask her native mark. On the other hand, the Filipino/Bikol cook in the story “An Earnest Parable” considers each migrant in the Bessel Street a member of the family. This is a notion of hybridity which liberates the union of things that have been artificially separated and the Bikol migrant experience is one. The Bikol characters’ displacement, by geographic separation, culture or identity speak nourishment of their hybridity in a foreign land or man’s dominated culture as a totally fragmented Self, no longer pure but already an enriched hybrid.

Considering Bhabha’s notion on ambivalence, hybridity and displacement, Bobis’s characters establish the Bikolano sensibility in the colonized context on how to get along with the Westerns and adapt to the new environment/culture and yet retain their local culture. Each time this encounter between Self and Other occurs at the point at which something exceeds the frame of the image (as in the case of the stories analyzed in this chapter), it evacuates the Self as the site of identity and autonomy and leaves a mark of the subject, a sign of cultural identity, the Bikolano sensibility. This becomes the moment in which the demand for identification takes the form of a response to other questions of signification and desire, culture, and politics. Bobis’s use of Bikol/Filipino language in her texts asserts this question of signification which speaks against the superiority of the Westerns (colonizers) over the Third World countries (colonized).

The ten selected short stories appropriated language to “bear the burden” of the colonial experience showing that the colonized subject has altered the prevailing paradigmatic norms of standard English and has proven what Bhabha calls the “supplementarity and hybridity of cultural translation and linguistic filiation.” Bobis has also summoned the absent colonizer in the presence of the colonized Bikol characters through metaphoric and metonymic images such as “*white turtle*”, to signify the dreams of the dead children and an alternative way of retelling stories, “*fish-hair woman*”, for an icon of salvation and courage, “*border lover*”, for the Bikol character who has learned Western education and culture and yet retains her native identity, “*fruit seller*”, for the Bikol character who covers her Asian identity to live in a colonizer’s country, “*Mac Do*”, the colonizer’s

³⁶Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 8.

burger fastfood chains, “*Manolito*”, a Bikol character who once wished to become the American Peace Corps volunteer to win his desire over a canvass, “*flying cross*”, which describes the futility of the natives on technology and being boxed to fanatic belief, “*Padre Biya*”, a Bikol character who has an education of the colonizer but serve in the province, “*Iraya*”, local term for province, “*Lola Basyon*”, tag name for local grandmother or elder, “*cowboy*”, which signifies colonizer or imperial culture, “*oriole*”, a multicultural local bird and may refer to beauty and sensibility of Bikolanos, “*Estrella*”, a local name for stars, “*Tony McIntyre*”, which refers to dual identities of the West, being the colonizer and an inferior character, “*banana heart*”, which connotes local culture and practices, “*stove*”, which stands for submissiveness of the colonized to dominant culture, “*feminism*”, a voice for inferiors (colonized) to speak for their sensibility and break their bondage from being inferior/weak, “*Mr Shoji X*”, which symbolizes the Japanese colonizers, “*Che-che*”, who typifies the exploited colonized character, “*Manay and Rosa*”, who symbolize the intelligent Bikolano and yet typify scarcity, “*Mac Lisa*”, a Bikol character who manifests colonial actions, “*Coke*” and *hamburgers*” signify cultural colonization and indoctrination, “*Pina*”, who symbolizes the wit and intelligence of young Bikolanos. Bobis has lots of local words and poems fused in her texts to serve her purpose of illustrating Bikolano sensibility and colonial configurations.

In consonance with Bhabha’s assertion on identification that is never a priori, nor a finished product but only a site for ambivalence, it follows that a figure of contiguity that substitutes a part for a whole must not be read as form of simple substitution or equivalence but as a double movement that follows what Derrida calls the logic or play of the ‘supplement’. Here, Bhabha stresses that the identity articulated by the colonized subject is not the single, coherent, and pure white-ideal ego proffered by the colonizer. Rather, the identity of the colonized subject articulated by the texts shows fragmentation, hybridity, multiplicity, and contradictions. And conversely, the identity of the colonizer himself is not coherent, pure, authentic, supreme Self from what he claims to be in Western discourse, but an ambivalent and fragmented identity characterized by hybridity, multiplicity, and contradictions.

The preceding texts, therefore, in abrogating and appropriating Western discursive practices and in representing and addressing the colonizer through Western images with which the Bikol character likewise identifies, interrogate not merely an image of the colonial past but the power relations that enabled the discursive and disciplinary place from which questions of Bikolano sensibility may be strategically and institutionally posed. Bobis’s texts attempt to locate the postcolonial subject in the hybrid gap, within the play of the subaltern instance of writing. She articulates the cultural difference as an enunciative category which opposes the notion of cultural purity and supremacy and posits cultural difference and hybridity. These postcolonial symptoms are well articulated in the her texts like the “white turtle” as metaphor for the source of the stories, creative energy, inspiration and salvation and “Estrella – the fish hair woman” mirrors a strong woman, being the shaman of the village manifests bravery and strength compared to man, as she trawls dead bodies from the river. The grandmother in the story “Border Lover” typifies a strong interpellation of the stereotype being submissive and boxed inside the household chores while her grandchild who finished her doctoral studies in Australia brags to her the Western cultures, which shows that both characters are in the border of either the one or the other, that both characters posit identity which has traces of colonialism which they try to eliminate and yet present in their sensibilities. Because no matter how Bobis tries to efface this cultural configuration, it evolves in her texts and no matter how she injects indigenous identity, what appears is a fragmented identity.

Bobis’s abrogation and appropriation of language to suit the needs of the situation shows that Bobis exercises a certain power that she has an access to various possibilities of using, developing and expanding the language. This further proves that English can never fully articulate the writer’s sensibility, thus the Western notion of superiority of Received Standard English could be negated. Moreover, in the story “Mac Do” Mac Lisa’s mastery of the language and the act of mimicry of Bikol siblings, “*manay*” and “*Rosa*” signifies the assertion of equality of the colonized with the colonizer in the use of the language.

The almost kissing by Manolito to the portrait recalls the act made by the volunteer American Peace Corps to Asuncion which articulates a dual signification, in which Derrida says a “double scene on a double stage” that the repetition of this act evokes and effaces an Orientalist stereotype. The use of the “flying cross” in the story “Pina and the Flying Cross” summons the colonizer through various metaphoric and metonymic signs. In the story “Before the Moon Rises” tells of militarization done through “hamletting”, a practice popularized by American troops during the Vietnam war. Through the use of metaphor and metonymy, the force of cultural difference is articulated; a force which, in itself, is a “violation of signifying limit of space, since it permits on the very level of discourse, a counter division of objects, usages and meanings.”

Indeed, Bhabha’s postcolonial framework reveals the notion of Bikolano sensibility asserted in Bobis’s text which articulates the different symptoms: hybridity, ambivalence and displacement. These postcolonial

symptoms erase any essentialist claims for the inherent authenticity or purity or supremacy of cultures because one is enabled by the other. Bobis's texts, in espousing this concept of Bikolano sensibility have succeeded in liberating the postcolonial subject from cultural hegemony.

1. *What postcolonial themes emerge in Bobis's texts?*

The themes of *hybridity*, *ambivalence* and *displacement* are so closely interwoven because each text foregrounds similar postcolonial symptoms, like the sensibility of the local seer, fruit stall vendor, Bikol scholar, fish-hair woman and other characters identified in this collection. These characters prove their currency in the colonial context, as in the case of the local chanter who uses her Bikol tongue and multicultural characteristics in her cultural negotiation, while the fruit seller uses her hybrid and ambivalent identity to mask her native mark, and the fish-hair woman deconstructs her identity to portray a patriarchal order.

The Bikol characters' *displacement*, by geographic separation, culture or identity speak nourishment of their *hybridity* in a foreign land or man's dominated culture as the totally fragmented Self, which must not be read as a revelation of some suppressed truth of the postcolonial subject, who looks no different from the metropolitan intellectual with the *ambivalence* of his/her desire for the Other. Bhabha's concept on *ambivalence*, *hybridity* and *displacement* is manifested in the sensibilities of the Bikolanos in getting along with the Westerns and adapting to new environment/culture and yet retaining the local culture. Each time this encounter between Self and Other occurs at the point at which something exceeds the frame of the image (as in the case of the stories analyzed in this research), it evacuates the Self as the site of identity and autonomy and leaves a mark of the subject, a sign of a local identity - the Bikolano sensibility. This becomes the moment in which the demand for identification take the form of a response to other questions of signification and desire, culture, and politics. Bobis's use of Bikol/Filipino language in her texts asserts this question of subjected signification to speak against the superiority of the Westerns (colonizers) over the Third World countries (colonized).

In the ten selected short stories studied, Merlinda C. Bobis has attempted to liberate her Bikol characters from the subjectivity addressed to stereotype. She has also exposed the conditions of Bikol characters in the Western culture by showing in her narratives the many *instances of abuse* that have caused the suffering and marginalizing of Bikol characters, such as: *displacement*, *alienation*, *marginalization*, *discriminating situations of women*; for example, the way women are treated as sex objects, victimized into prostitution and overburdened with housework. This marginalization was not only caused by the imperial culture but also by the superiority demonstrated by city people over rural folk. However, Bobis has demonstrated superiority of the Bikol characters in their negotiation against imperial culture through *abrogation and appropriation of the language*. Moreover, the concurrent presence of the submission and resistance to different cultures creates a fusion of unique cultural *hybridity*, *ambivalence* and *displacement*, or what Bobis calls a "negotiation between cultures".

This social and cultural negotiation uncovered a unique *hybrid culture* which opposes and at the same time supports the dominance of neo-colonialism and patriarchy, treading on the boundary between domination and resistance, a cultural identity which altered both subjected stereotypes (colonizer and colonized), dominant over marginalized culture because of the effect of transference. This is what Bobis has demonstrated in her texts negotiating in the border between the colonizer and colonized. The negotiation is mediated through the use of Bikolano language which Bobis herself has articulated in her negotiation with her new home, is also seen through the process of "refusal, rejection and radical questioning of the categories of the imperial culture, it's aesthetic, it's illusory standard of normative or correct usage and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning inscribed in words." This rejection of the power of the imperial center incorporates the colonial elements with the existing postcolonial culture in order to come to terms with the postcolonial reality. Nevertheless, *Bobis has appropriated, reconstructed, and remolded the english language to new usages as an expression of a renewed sense of Bikolano identity and self-value.*

2. *How do these themes reveal configurations of cultural domination?*

In contemplating and judging Merlinda Bobis works, readers are tempted to turn from the examination of her short stories mark with local color (Bikol language and myth) and the author herself as a representation of postcolonial literature and of an Asian as a whole. With the use of Bobis's *abrogation and appropriation of language*, it fulfilled the needs of the meaning of the text to which the English language could not respond or justify the criteria used by the dominant culture in understanding the colonized/subaltern literature.

The *english language*, or the so called colonized language becomes a site of struggle because it summons the absent colonizer and at the same time rejected the assumptions of traditional and fixed meaning of the subjected stereotypes, and finally asserts that regional and national literature written in various postcolonial englishes which have questioned

the claim of English to assume the dominant status of a standard code – the language of the erstwhile center.

The Bikol experience in every story traces a historical fact that Philippines is once then a colonized country that has gained independence after the three colonizers freed the Philippines from their bondage but even though colonization has already passed, the colonizer's culture comes out in the colonized subject's identity and culture.

The ten selected short stories in Bobis's *White Turtle* demonstrate how the experience of colonization had shaped the Bikolano consciousness and ideology - the *Bikolano sensibility*. The Bikolano sensibility is a currency of the Bikol character in his/her social and cultural negotiation between cultures. Bobis has *abrogated and appropriated the English language* by fusing the Bikol/Filipino language and asserted that English language could not fully appropriate the colonized meaning and language. This notion articulates the Bikol tongue/language to demonstrate the life and culture of the colonized and reveal the currency of stereotype which alters the subjective signification of the imperial culture that the colonized are inferior and the colonizers are superior. The *Bikolano sensibility* is the avenging power to show that the colonized appear superior over the colonizer, for without the colonized, the superiority of the colonizer will be silenced by the absence of the colonized.

The conditioning that occurred in the process of colonization makes the Bikol characters speak of the power and authority of the colonizers on one hand and the colonizer on the other hand, speak the *sensibility* of the colonized, because during the colonization, the *transference of culture* takes place and creates a *border*, a border between the colonized and colonizer, that in the long run, one could not anymore speak of *pure identity/culture* because both are already *hybrid* in nature.

3. *What sensibility is revealed in Bobis's texts?*

Through the short stories of Merlinda C. Bobis, this paper was able to prove successfully that there is a *Bikolano sensibility* that exists beyond the stereotypes created from the fusion of the colonizers and colonized's identity and culture - a *hybrid and ambivalent identity and culture*. This is an identity that cannot be neatly defined, but the border that created the emergent hybrid culture and identity transcends this definition. The Filipino is not just brown-skinned, but may also be fair skinned. Filipinos do not only do the honest job of housekeeping, but they are also poets, writers, entrepreneurs, political leaders and the like which are also evident among the superior stereotypes. This is a *sensibility* that is continually being re-discovered by the colonized themselves, who have assimilated mentally even during and after the propagation of superiority of the colonizers.

The *fusion* of Bikol/Filipino language in Bobis's stories abrogating and appropriating the English language has enabled the colonized subject to alter the English (colonizer's language) to english (colonized language). This abrogation and appropriation of language resulted in a *hybrid identity* which characterizes a dual signification, the superiority and inferiority of both the colonizer and colonized who are both spoken with of might and weaknesses. This is what Bhabha calls the "supplementarity and hybridity of translation and linguistic filiation". When Bobis summons the absent colonizer in the presence of the speaking subject through metaphoric and metonymic images such as "Mac Do", "Fish-Hair Woman", "Border Lover", "Flying Cross", and the like, while at the same time identifying with them as his/her own, the colonized subject has defined his/her own identity and that of the colonizer. This is the Bikolano sensibility which Bobis's texts have posited, that the colonized subject has succeeded in occupying the privileged place of the colonizer. Having an *ambivalent and hybrid self*, the colonized has an origin which is difficult to trace back, which in Bhabha's argument, the subject cannot claim a single point of origin and cannot speak of its Self without reference to its Other.

Bobis's texts therefore, agree that both the *colonizer and colonized subject* do not possess a single, coherent and pure identity but an emergent, fragmented and hybridized identity. This signification created certain equality between the colonized and the colonizer, and a commonality of identities which effaces the stereotype subjectification of the colonized and colonizer.

4. *How does this sensibility reject the assumptions of the colonizers about Western culture and the colonized cultures?*

Bobis has tried to efface the experience of colonization, but it naturally comes out from her texts, which reveals configurations of cultural domination. Through the content thematic, symptomatic reading, and deconstruction, the researcher has unearthed the Bikolano sensibility found in the ten selected short stories of *White Turtle*. Bobis's texts has appropriated the Bikolano sensibility by displacing the traditional and fixed meaning to the subjected colonized and colonizer, and through her Bikol characters, created a border which fused the two emergent cultures. Here, the issue of *hybridity, ambivalence and displacements* are particularly evident in Bobis's *White Turtle* short story collection because her themes resurface in different guises throughout her texts. Her use of *magical metaphor and her discourse*: abrogation and appropriation of language made her writing unique from any other contemporary

writers. Bobis's language rejected the assumptions that Western language reveals concepts of truth, power and reality; however, within fusion of Bikol/Filipino language, she has been able to present emotion, and meaning which the English language alone cannot perpetuate. Bobis *appropriated the language and writings for new distinctive usages*. Her displacement due to her migration to Australia presented an effective identifying relationship between self and place, identity and culture, linguistics and language.

Moreover, in the short story studied, Merlinda Bobis has attempted to *free her Bikol characters* especially the women characters from the yoke of patriarchy and colonization. Bobis has exposed the conditions of her Bikol characters in the liberating symbolic order, the Bikolano sensibility. This Bikolano sensibility speaks out from behind the veil of silence to create a border in which both the colonizer and colonized develop a union of an emergent hybrid identity and culture. Bobis's short stories have raised our consciousness to reclaim and liberate our stereotype identity subjected by the colonizers.

Bobis's texts has documented a *hybrid approach* of interpellation from the conventional concept of articulation like that of tracing the influence of the writer to his/her texts that somehow the writer has an unconscious contribution of his/her life to the textuality of the text - a space of intervention which may establish a hybrid culture or the Other. This *hybridity* demonstrates a notion which is not an identification of binary oppositions, but rather, going beyond it by decentering the center through a fusion of cultures. This *hybrid culture* is neither the dominant nor the emergent opposition to it. It belongs to the boundary between the two. Minh-Ha argues that "the hybrid culture/individual who stands in that undetermined threshold where he/she constantly drifts in and out, which at the same time undercuts the inside/outside opposition, his/her intervention is necessarily that of both a deceptive outsider whether he/she turns the inside out or the outside in." This *hybrid culture/individual* is, like the two sides of a coin, the same impure, both in one, the insider/outsider.

With the foregoing conclusions, this study *recommends* further studies on the other works of Merlinda C. Bobis to demonstrate another territory of translation and testimony of analytical argument or framework such as:

- a) works of other Bikolano writers to further validate the Bikolano sensibility;
- b) other Filipino writers rejecting the assumptions of the colonizers about Western culture and the colonized cultures;
- c) works of other Filipino authors belonging to other regions or cultural communities which interpellate Eurocentricism, and;
- d) other writing style to unveil more complex colonial configurations in the Philippine context.

Finally, this researcher hopes that this paper may open up a series of literary studies to other perspective and multidisciplinary approaches that will further establish the *Third World* claim regarding the subaltern identity subjected to us by the imperial culture especially on the identification of *Bikolano/Filipino sensibility* in Philippine fiction in English of other Bikol/regional writers, and may contribute to a fuller understanding of the different questions posed by postcolonial literature and criticism.

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