

*Commentary/Essay*

**PRELIMINARY REFLECTIONS ON THE  
FUNCTIONS OF LITERATURE  
REGARDING FILIPINO VALUES  
AND IDENTITY**

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**INTRODUCTION**

In a published paper<sup>1</sup> on the role of arts in preserving and transforming national identity, I discussed what I considered to be the three fundamental functions of arts vis-à-vis national identity, namely, the expressive, hermeneutic (interpretation), and critical functions. Fundamentally, arts express and manifest national identity through the creative, imaginative, aesthetic, and technical skills of the artist. Art as interpretation forms and redefines national identity through meaning generation or interpretation. Arts as critique allows people to critically examine themselves and the factors that affect their lives and national identity. Arts and literature are intimately bound together. Literature as a body of written works with aesthetic qualities is considered one of the traditional categories of arts. Great works of art inspired literary works and vice versa. Thus, if arts have these three functions, we could easily say that the same functions are also performed by literature. Literature expresses not just the thoughts, feelings, and ideals of the author but also the values of a people. Literature interprets and generates meaning and values, and it also functions in society as a means of criticizing and affirming social, religious, cultural, and even political values. This paper or presentation is a preliminary reflection on these functions of literature, namely, the expressive/aesthetic, hermeneutic/interpretative, and critical/ethical, regarding national values and identity. I will first discuss briefly Philippine literature in relation to our history, then the nature of Filipino values and national identity, and lastly, the functions of literature in relation to values and national identity.

**PHILIPPINE LITERATURE IN RELATION TO PHILIPPINE HISTORY**

The richness of Philippine literature evolved together with the history of our country. The history of our country started long before the Spanish colonizers came to our islands. According to Godines-Ortega, we need to view the heterogeneity and

richness of our literature in “the context of our country’s pre-colonial cultural traditions and the socio-political histories of its colonial and contemporary traditions” (Christine Godines-Ortega n.d.). During the pre-colonial period, our ancestors had already developed their folk speeches, songs, narratives, and indigenous rituals and dances that expressed their beliefs, values, customs, culture, and traditions. Their proverbs or *salawikain* and metaphors and aphorisms or *talingahaga* express norms or codes of behavior and communal beliefs, and they also instill values and wisdom. Their folk songs express their hopes and aspirations, their loves and pains. During the pre-colonial period, as it is still now, folk songs were important parts of our ancestors’ social life. Their folk narratives, legends, and tales tell how they view the world – its origin or how it was created together with the other things in nature and the origin of man as well. Their stories and tales tell man’s relation with the other beings in the world – the animals, the spirits, and the objects of nature. These tales also tell how our ancestors viewed natural events and how moral lessons can be learned from nature, even from animals. Their epics portray supernatural events or heroic deeds that embody or affirm their ideals, aspirations, beliefs, and customs. These tales and narratives were normally sung or chanted to the accompaniment of indigenous musical instruments and dancing performed during harvests, weddings, or funerals by chanters who were considered “treasures” and/or repositories of wisdom in their communities (Godines-Ortega, n.d.). Pre-colonial literature bears the mark of the folk religiosity of our ancestors.

When the Spanish came, Christianity was integrated into the culture of our ancestors. Consequently, our literature was colored with foreign religious doctrines, beliefs, and teachings. When the Spanish came, our existing literature was mainly oral; as mentioned, they consisted of tales, narratives, epics, legends, songs, riddles, and proverbs. The Spanish colonial strategy was to undermine our native oral traditions by substituting them with Christian doctrines. The Church spread the Christian doctrines by communicating to the natives through their own language. The *Doctrina Christiana*, for example, the first book to be printed in the Philippines, was a prayerbook written in Spanish with an accompanying Tagalog translation (Francis Macansantos and Priscilla Macansantos, n.d.). Eventually, our ancestors were able to blend their folk beliefs, customs, traditions, and religiosity with the teachings and doctrines of Christianity, and the native translator learned to read and write both in Spanish and his native language.

Literature during this period may be classified as religious prose and poetry and secular prose and poetry (Godines-Ortega, n.d.). There was a mix of religious and secular meanings and contents. This can be seen in the religious lyrics like that of the *dalit* that were appended to novenas and catechisms. Religious poetry like the *pasyon* also became a permanent fixture in our commemoration of Christ’s passion and death. Then there were the *awit* - a poem about heroism, like the *Florante at Laura* by Francisco Baltazar or Balagtas, and *korido* – a religious poem like *Ibong Adarna*, *Mariang Alimango*, *Bernardo Carpio* by Jose de la Cruz. But there was also secular literature written by the elite who were educated and read printed works that were just available to the clerics. The notable secular lyricists and poets were Jose Corazon de Jesus, who penned *Huseng Sisiw*, and Francisco Baltazar, or Balagtas.

The Spanish not only brought with them Christianity but also their language and the European literary forms. They introduced the theater, which would take the form of *komedya*, which was performed during fiestas depicting the battle between Christians and Muslims, and the *zarzuela* – a lyric theater drama that incorporates singing, dancing, and dialogue and portrays typical Filipino realities and stories about marriage, family, values, and vices; some focused on patriotic themes where Filipinos emerged victorious against colonial rule. Most notable are *Dalagang Bukid* by Hermogenes Ilagan, and *Paglipas ng Dilim* by Precioso Palma.

In the later period of the Spanish era, liberal ideas like freedom and equality that would influence Filipino intellectuals and writers reached our country. The Filipino *ilustrados*, the intellectuals who were educated in Europe with their desire for freedom and equality, became critical of the colonizers and started to write about the negative effects of colonization. Writers like Jose Rizal, Marcelo H. del Pilar, Mariano Ponce, Emilio Jacinto, Apolinario Mabini, and Andres Bonifacio called for reforms and used their pens to voice out their sentiments against the Spanish colonizers. The members of the Propaganda Movement wrote essays with political content and sentiments and political novels, like Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere* and the *El Filibusterismo*. These would motivate the Filipinos to fight against the Spanish colonizers and would eventually result in the downfall of the Spanish regime. This literature would instill a sense of nationhood and patriotism in the consciousness of the Filipinos.

When the Americans came, a new set of ideas and literary forms would influence Philippine literature. The English language was introduced, and new literary forms like the free verse in poetry, the modern short story, and the critical essay were introduced (Godines-Ortega, n.d.). Still, writing in the vernacular or native language persisted through the publication of modern short stories in weekly magazines like *Liwayway* and *Bisaya*. There were still poets who followed the Balagtas tradition until the poet Alejandro G. Abadilla advocated modernism in poetry and influenced young poets who wrote modern verses, like Virgilio S. Almario, Pedro I. Ricarte and Rolando S. Tinio (Godines-Ortega, n.d.). While the vernacular was still used in the provinces through the weekly magazines, English became the main medium of writing. The leading essayists during the American era until the present used English. Some of the leading essayists were journalists like Carlos P. Romulo, Jorge Bocobo, and Pura Santillan Castrence, who wrote formal and informal essays.

In contemporary times, Filipino literary writers continue to write poetry, short stories, novels, essays, and other literary forms. Of course, the literary forms of the pre-colonial and Spanish eras are already fading, except for some occasions where their significance is commemorated. Filipino writers, in general, are politically and socially conscious and committed, and they write almost about anything – politics, culture, religion, society, environment, and current issues, based on their personal experiences, opinions, sentiments, and thoughts and what they consider to be of value to them and to their readers. As in the past, they will always express Filipino sentiments, sensibilities, values, and ideals. They will always be critical of the social and political realities.

## THE NATURE OF THE FILIPINO VALUES AND IDENTITY

Value is an assessment of worth; it is what an individual or group deems to be useful, significant, or desirable; it constitutes a large part of who we are and how we live. People, objects, places, events, situations, or occasions have values. Values are the goals of man's striving, the goals to which a man tends, the vision that motivates him to action, and the object of an attitude. They are the deeply rooted motivations of man's behaviors; they define what is important to a person, and they form the basis of his decisions, reactions, and choices. Many of these values are internalized through time from childhood into adulthood and surface every time one must make a decision.

Values could either be objective or subjective. By objective, we mean that such value is independent of the assessment of men; such value does not depend on the valuation or estimation of individuals or groups of individuals (Aguas 2019, 5-6). Whether such value is recognized or not, it remains to be a value. The value of the human person, for example, is objective because whether we recognize and respect it or not, it is always there. Moral values, like honesty, charity, justice, generosity, and respect, are objective values. Subjective values are those that are conferred by individuals on certain objects or situations. The subjective value is dependent on the estimation or valuation of individuals, so that something may be valuable to one but not valuable to others. (Aguas 2019, 5-6). In this sense, values or what we can consider to be valuable can change and can undergo modification. Such is the nature of cultural, social, and political values. Since culture and the social and political setup change, what we can consider as cultural, social, and political value could also change or be modified. Some values can be considered objective and subjective. This is how I see some of our core values like the values of personalism, *pagkamaka-Diyos*, *pakikisama*, *pakikipagkapwa-tao*, and *utang na loob*. Take, for example, *pakikisama*; its value is objective because it is worth practicing whether we value it or not, and it is based on such moral values as respect, charity, justice, and honesty. But its practice could be based on the estimation of a person. *Pagkamaka-Diyos* is an objective value, but we can also translate it into fatalism – *Bahala na ang Diyos*.

The values of a people or nation, like some of our own core values are dynamic and continuously undergo transformation. While some of our core values remain, there are those that are constantly being transformed and redefined both by factors within our nation and by external factors. We continuously integrate internal and external factors; our values and belief systems and the internal dynamics within our society constantly interact with other factors – political, social, technological, and economic. Hence, our core values, that is, what we may consider to be valuable, cannot be static; whether we like it or not, there will be external forces that will influence what we value and how we apply those values. Certainly, there will always be a core value that will remain despite the external influences. There may be some transformation, but the essential values, like the objective core values that we mentioned, will remain the same. Now, given the constantly changing political, social, cultural, and even economic environment, the crucial question is how a people or nation's essential values can be preserved and at the same time be transformed amid all these changes.

Now, our core values are deeply rooted in our culture, and our culture is based on our worldview. Examining our worldview, we can say that it is ambivalent. It is both optimistic (“If you’re down now, you’ll soon be up.”) and fatalistic (“What will be, will be”). It is theocentric (We are created in the image of God”), and egocentric (“We are selfish, never contented”), and also other-centered (“We are loving”). It is proactive and purposive (“We are the ones who run the world”) and, at the same time, receptive and passive (“We should follow the turning of the world to avoid trouble.” “We should wait and see what will happen.”). It is person-centered (“We create our own problems.”) but also situation-centered (“We have problems because we are jobless.”). We put importance on the affective (“We should have true understanding and sympathy.”) and the cognitive (“We are created with unique talents and abilities.”). Filipinos value the material (“We have problems because of money.”), the spiritual (“We have faith in God.”), and transpersonal (“We are capable of accepting reality as ordained by God.”).<sup>2</sup> If our worldview and psyche are closely intertwined and they are ambivalent, no wonder, that our values are also ambivalent, our national identity as well. I do not consider national identity in the political sense, that is, as an ideology that espouses that there must always be something that binds politically, like a national language. I consider “national” here in the social and cultural sense, meaning that as people of diverse identities and ethnic backgrounds, we have collective cultural roots and experiences that bind us together.

National identity is our sense of a nation as a cohesive whole, as represented by distinctive traditions, culture, and language. It is the sense of a people as to who they are as a people based on their core values, ideals, belief systems and practices, aspirations, and traditions. The national identity of a people is very much rooted in its cultural heritage, which includes the works of its artists, architects, musicians, writers, and scientists and also the work of other artists, which express the people's spirituality and the body of values that give meaning to life.<sup>3</sup> Cultural heritage includes tangible and intangible works through which people's creativity finds expression like languages, rites, beliefs, historic places and monuments, literature, works of art, etc. (Aguas 2011, 107). All these works embody the cultural values of a people. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) provided a more extensive definition when it says: “In its widest sense, culture may now be said to be the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and letters but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions, and beliefs.”<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, there is an intimate relation between the national and cultural identity of a people, which is based on their core values, and this is more particularly seen in our case as Filipinos. Our national identity is very much rooted in our cultural identity and values, so that to speak of the Filipino national identity is also to speak of the Filipino cultural identity and values. As Filipinos, such a sense of national identity reflects the wide range of our cultural influences, pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial roots, religions, and traditions. For us Filipinos, the close relation between our national and cultural identity and our literary works and arts is seen in the way we express or portray

our core values, belief systems, practices, and traditions in our literary and artworks. Even our history is usually expressed through our literature and arts. And because of the varied cultural influences, we are ambivalent about our identity and values.

## THE FUNCTION OF LITERATURE IN RELATION TO VALUES AND IDENTITY

The main task of this paper is to reflect on the functions of literature regarding our values. Literature expresses in a creative and aesthetic manner the nation's core values, ideals and aspirations. Literary works express not just the thoughts, feelings, and ideals of the author but also the values of a people. Literature interprets and generates meaning and values, and it also functions in society as a means of criticizing and affirming social, religious, cultural, and even political values.

**Expressive Function** – Literature expresses, first of all, the subjectivity, that is, the thoughts, moods, and emotions of the writer. Such subjectivity may be rooted in the writer's values, ideals, and social and cultural background. As a literary writer, the Filipino expresses his subjectivity through his literary works. Literary works can also express the collective experiences, thoughts, values, ideals, and aspirations of a social group, e.g., community, race, or nation. Literature, visual, and performing arts can fully express the values and, ideals, culture of a people. Our literary works, including arts, are not just expressions of our values, beliefs, practices, and traditions but also our talents, skills, and abilities. They showcase the ingenuity, passion, and talents of Filipinos. Literature expresses our identity, not just our own individual identities but our identity as a people.

Our core values of personalism, loyalty and hospitality, closed family ties and solidarity, social cohesion (*pakikipagkapwa* and *pakikisama*), gratitude and shame (*utang na loob* and *hiya*), spirituality and religiosity, (*Pagkamakadiyos*) hard work (*kasipagan*) and perseverance (*pagtiyatiyaga*), patriotism (*pagkamakabayan*) and respect for elders (*paggalang sa mga nakatatanda*) are usually portrayed or are the subject of our literature and arts. Our core values - *maka-Diyos*, *makatao*, *maka-kalikasan*, *makabayan*, *masayahin*, are expressed in our pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial songs, music, and dances. Our religious, social, and cultural beliefs are usually portrayed or are the subject of our literature and the arts - painting and graphic arts. Our literature arts, like novels and poems, contain expressions of our core values and beliefs. Our performance arts, like songs, music, dances, and theater, express our traditions. We love to tell stories – the *korido* and *awit* narrate stories about our religiosity and the bravery of legendary heroes. The *Zarzuela* and *the moro-moro* are forms of art that depict the life of the people. Our poems and short stories tell about slices of our Filipino lifestyles.

**Hermeneutic** – Literary Interpretation – A literary piece could convey different meanings to different audiences. A literary masterpiece is transcendent in the sense that its meaning is not bound by time and space. It can provoke discussion among different individuals. A literary work can also convey a person's interpretation of reality and life.

For example, the folk narratives, legends, and tales of our ancestors tell how they viewed the world and how it was created together with the natural things. They are interpretations of how they view their relationship with the other beings in the world – the animals, the spirits, and the objects of nature. Their tales are interpretations of how they view natural events and how moral lessons can be learned from nature. Their fables are interpretations of how we can learn moral lessons from the animals. Their epics are interpretations of their heroic deeds that express their ideals, aspirations, beliefs, and customs.

The literary writer, with his own particular view of an event or subject or of life itself, can use his writings to convey his own interpretation of reality. The amazing part of it is that his interpretation is also subject to the interpretation of the readers. Take, for example, the mix of religious and secular literary writings during the Spanish era. The religious lyrics like that of the *dalit* that was appended to novenas and catechisms were interpretations and adaptations of the literary writers. There was also religious poetry like the *pasyon*, a Filipino interpretation of Christ's passion and death. The *awit*, like the *Florante at Laura* by Balagtas, is not just a poem that expresses heroism; it is an interpretation of love, tragedy, and redemption. The *korido*, like *Ibong Adarna* by Jose de la Cruz, is an interpretation that blends love, sacrifice, and fantasy. The *komedya* is an entertaining portrayal of the battle between Christians and Muslims, and *zarzuela* is an entertaining lyric theater drama that incorporates singing, dancing, and dialogue about the typical Filipino realities and stories about marriage, family, values, and heroism.

Thus, in appreciating a literary work, there is a “fusion of horizons” between the writer or the people who composed the literary words and their readers or audience. While the writer or those who composed those literary pieces use literature to interpret a particular reality, his literary work is also interpreted by his audience so that literary appreciation results in a kind of “fusion of horizons.” This fusion of horizons generates meaning and enables the audience to understand and appreciate the values portrayed and interpreted.

**Critical Function** – A literary work always conveys a message, and the message could have political, social, or cultural meaning or significance. A literary piece can instigate, it can provoke, it can criticize. A literary writer can use his literary pieces to instigate or question an event, an issue, reality or life itself, etc. Literature itself can also evoke criticism and stir the readers' emotions. Take, for example, the Filipino ilustrados, who were educated in Europe; with their desire for freedom and equality, they wrote critical literary pieces against the colonizers and about the negative effects of colonization. Rizal, del Pilar, Ponce, Jacinto, Mabini, and Bonifacio used their pens to voice out their sentiments against the Spanish colonizers and called for reforms. They wrote essays and political novels with political content and sentiments that were critical of the political and social conditions in the country during that time. Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo* are perfect examples of literature with a critical function. Not only did they instigate and question, but they also instilled a sense of nationhood and patriotism in the consciousness of the Filipinos.

Even in the literary movements, there are some forms of critique. For example, the formalist movement in literary theory that dominated American literary criticism in the middle decades of the 20th century, *New Criticism*. It emphasized close reading, particularly of poetry, to discover how a work of literature functioned as a self-contained, self-referential aesthetic object. Some literary works are, in fact, used to criticize a particular idea, program, action, or situation. Some of our literature and visual arts, and even performing arts, are media of critique. Contemporary poets, essayists, and short story writers use their craft to critique the system, our government, and institutions. Criticism could be bi-directional; it could be directed internally and externally. Internal criticism is when literature causes the individual to look into himself and make some self-examination. External criticism is when literature causes one to critique prevailing ideas, situations, or policies. So, the question is not about whether literary criticism must be an ethical or critical theory or not because it is.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Our literature is rich and diverse, and it is intimately connected to our history, and by history, I mean the pre-colonial, the colonial, and post-colonial or contemporary. Our history is a trace of many influences, and all these influences are part of the continuous transformation and modification of our identity. We have not lost our identity; it has been transformed by our past experiences, most significantly by our colonial past. Whether we like it or not, whether we accept it or not, our identity is partly the product of a long process of colonization. We are what we are because of our past, including our colonial past. We cannot simply ignore or take it for granted or erase from our memory our colonial past. We cannot sanitize our identity of colonial influences; we must accept that as part of the constant transformation of our collective identity.<sup>5</sup>

Our literature is not just a repository of our tales, narratives, speeches, poems, songs, epics, short stories, essays, and other literary forms; it is the expression of our values, ideals, aspirations, dreams, and beliefs. It is our way of interpreting life, relationships, the world, God, and the divine realities. It is also a mirror that lets us see who we are, our values, and our identity as a people. Yes, there may be some ambivalence in our values and identity. Still, through the critical function of our literature, we can see the various influences and transformations that made us who we indeed are as a people. For all its aesthetic and entertaining significance, our literature, more importantly, enables us to know, understand, and appreciate ourselves as Filipinos.

## NOTES

1. See Jove Jim S. Aguas, *The Role of Arts in Preserving/Transforming National Identity in Times of Change: Filipino Context*. [https://papers.iafor.org/wp-content/uploads/papers/acerp2018/ACERP2018\\_39527.pdf](https://papers.iafor.org/wp-content/uploads/papers/acerp2018/ACERP2018_39527.pdf)

2. Adapted from Rose Marie Salazar-Clemena. *Counseling and values education: Steps in the Asean setting*.



3. See UNESCO Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies, World Conference on Cultural Policies
4. See UNESCO Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies, World Conference on Cultural Policies.
5. See Aguas 2023, 175-176. The critical role of philosophy in the future of the Philippines.

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