

*Introduction*

**On Why a Singing Woman  
Dyes a Handkerchief—  
A Review of New Poems**

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**IN ONE OF THE POEMS IN THIS COLLECTION,** a woman is described as singing while dyeing her handkerchief in two rivers, one with black waters; the other red. This fresh metaphor signals new narratives that highlight women's issues.

Students of literature often ask the question: is there a difference in female and male writing? How do women write? How does a man who understands the woman question write?

While reading the poems in this collection, I was reminded of Ligaya Tiamson-Rubin's essay about her experience as a mother and writer. I was also reminded of the researches of Soledad Reyes, Edna Manlapaz, Marjorie Evasco, Elynia Mabanglo, Lilia Quindoza-Santiago, Benilda Santos, Rosario Torres-Yu, Thelma Kintanar, Delia Aguilar and Critina Pantoja-Hidalgo. Their studies assert that the personal is political, that women have voices that should be heard, that women write using their bodies, and that the struggle for social equality is waged at the same time as the women's struggle.

The poets in this collection follow the footsteps of women poets—from Leona Florentino and Gregoria de Jesus in the 19th century, to Angela Manalang Gloria who wrote in En-

glish in the 1920s, and the poets of Liwayway and Taliba in the 1930s and 40s who wrote in Tagalog (Arsenia Rivera, Emilia Felipe Jacob, Lorenza Pagiligan, Epifania Alvarez, and others) to the feminist poets of the 70s, 80s and 90s. Like the early women poets, the writers of the poems in this collection share the unique experiences of women and call on their sisters to be strong, brave and first

In "Hinga, Hikbi ... Sigaw!," Mae Vicedo tells of the daily life of a battered wife and mother. The poem starts and ends with the line "*imulat ang mata*" (open your eyes), but these have different meanings. The line at the beginning literally means a woman waking up to start her household work. The line at the end refers to the awakening of her consciousness. Note, too, the use of the collective "we" with the verb awaken, a signal that the awakening should be done collectively.

In Vinci A. Beltran's "Huwag Mo Akong Bigyan ng Bulaklak," a new meaning is given by the poet to an over-used image—the flower—usually the symbol of love. We can recall that in the writings of many male poets (for example, "Ang Bulaklak" written by Mateo Ocampo in 1926), the woman is compared to a flower—beautiful, pure, fragrant. Beltran, in her poem, rejects the flower offered by the man because it is not only a declaration of love but an attempt to court the woman after she has experienced violence. Beltran reminds us of the poems of women poets in the 30s and 40s who also used the flower as a dynamic symbol as a response to male courtship. For example, the 1931 poem "Ang Bulaklak" by Lorenza Pagiligan, questions the flower as a symbol of love as flowers fade and are thrown away similar to how women are abandoned once they grow old. Similar to earlier poets, Beltran reappropriates the image of the flower to give voice to the issue of violence against women.

In the series of illustrations and poems of Arbeen Regalado Acuña, we see two sources of inspiration—the indigenous “Ulahingan” and the writings of Nobel Laureate Wislawa Szymborska of Poland. Why are the two different but interrelated sources of inspiration significant? First, because it is important for Filipinas to revisit the lessons of the pre-colonial period—a period where women had power in their communities as *babaylan* (spiritual leaders) and as *binukot* (the teller of epic). Second, because it is important that we extend solidarity with women of other countries. Through the appreciation of the past and through solidarity, women may draw additional strength.

A personal note—in the country where I am now—some poets usually utilize indigenous images (*babaylan*, *diwata*, and others) without full appreciation and understanding of their significance. Thus such use appears to exoticize the self. Acuña is different in his conscious use of the indigenous narrative. Through the poems which are not verbose but have rich meaning, he encourages readers to think of the images (*honey*, *pinipig*, *lawing bulik*, *panyong pamutong*, *mapulong ilog*) and scenery and give them new meaning.

I congratulate the poets whose works are in this issue of the *Review of Women's Studies*, their teachers and the Center for Women's Studies. Women poets and male poets who stand for women's liberation are an integral part of the struggle for women's equality, gender justice and freedom from oppression and violence.