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Ceremony of Circles: A gendered reading of Bino Realuyo's *The Umbrella Country*

Pia Arboleda, D.A.L.L.

CIRCLES の儀式——ビノ・リアルヨ (Bino Realuyo) の 『傘の国』 (The Umbrella Country) の女性学的読解

ピア・アルボレダ

本論文はビノ・リアルヨの『傘の国』を女性学におけるガラトリ・スピバック (Gayatri Spivak) の理論を用いつつ分析したものである。その中核となる命題は、エストレラ (Estrella) と彼女の息子たちが影響力を持たない立場を占める一方、エストレラの夫である男性が権力のある立場にいるということに向けられる。

『傘の国』は少年・グリンゴ (Gringo) の目を通して、マーシャル・ロー時代のフィリピンのスラム街での一家の生活について述べられている。グリンゴは母親のエストレラと父親のダディー・グルービー (Daddy Groovie), そして兄のピポ (Pipo) と暮らしている。ダディー・グルービーはニューヨーク (Nuyork) に行くことを夢めている。結果的に彼はその夢を叶え、息子たちと共にニューヨークで暮らす方法を見つける。小説のラストシーンでグリンゴは飛行機に乗るが、エストレラはフィリピンに残ることを決意する。

この評論 (Critique) は悲劇的な経験を持つ女性と談話する取り組みとして、エストレラに宛てた一通の手紙の形式で論をすすめる。そうすることで、自分自身がエストレラと似通った立場にいることを自覚する全ての女性たちに語ろうというのである。

Introduction

This paper analyzes Bino Realuyo's *The Umbrella Country* using a feminist framework. I rely largely on Gayatri Spivak's literary theory on gender. Spivak declares that "man is the word, and the word *woman* rests on the word *man*."¹ Man is the One, and woman, the Other; man is the center, and woman, the periphery.²

My central thesis is that Estrella and her sons occupy a marginal position in the novel. The man, Estrella's husband, holds the position of power. This man's power is reinforced through the active use of violence, and the imposition of silence upon Estrella and her children.³

The Umbrella Country narrates the story of a family living in the slums in the Philippines during the Martial Law era, seen through the eyes of a young boy, Gringo. Gringo lives with his mother Estrella, his father Daddy Groovie, his older brother Pipo, his godmother Ninang Rola and

occasional boarders.

Ninang Rola confides to Gringo a secret from the past. She tells Gringo that Daddy Groovie drugged Estrella, took her to a motel and raped her. Estrella later finds out that she is pregnant and she runs away from home. Ninang Rola reveals her hiding place and Estrella is forced to marry Daddy Groovie.

Daddy Groovie dreams of going to Nuyork.⁴ Eventually he succeeds and finds a way for his children to be with him. In the last scene of the novel, Ninang Rola brings Pipo and Gringo to the airport. Estrella is nowhere to be found. The boys get on the plane bound for Nuyork to join their father. But Estrella decides to stay behind.

My critique of the novel comes in the form of a letter to Estrella. It is an attempt to follow through on the notion that there is no longer a division between the reader, the writer and the text.⁵ It is an effort to converse with a woman whose experiences are tragic. I write to her in the hope that she will see things in a different light. In so doing, I am also speaking to all women who find themselves in a similar situation. At the conclusion of this letter, I envision a contrary resolution to the novel. While it is a viable option for Estrella to send her children off to be with her husband in Nuyork, giving her a chance to live alone, I wish to see her creating a new life with her children, a case of the margins moving toward the center.

A Letter to Estrella

Estrella, I have struggled with sleep for many nights since I read your story. I felt so much for you that I could not rest until I could speak to you. If we belonged to a different world, perhaps no woman would suffer as you did, and your story would have a happier conclusion. How would I re-write your story, Estrella? If you knew that I would re-create your world, would you let me?

The ceremony of circles. Bino Realuyo describes your world thus.

Pipo and I had been part of this ceremony all our lives, the ceremony of circles: Daddy Groovie on Mommy's lap; a pail of warm water on the floor, the dabbing circles Mommy made on his face; the dizzying smell of San Miguel beer; both Pipo and I close by. All our worlds were somehow so connected and somehow so far apart, they made me wonder what brought us together in the first place.⁶

The ceremony of circles is not just about your repeated gestures when Daddy Groovie comes home drunk. This ceremony of circles defines the power relationships in your family, with Daddy Groovie at the center, with you and your sons in the margins. Daddy Groovie is the word, the One. You and your sons are the Other.

You might protest and say that I am an outsider looking in. But let me lend you my eyes. Over the dinner table, Daddy Groovie's words and concerns dominate the conversation. Daddy

Groovie is the center of attention. Your family endlessly talks about Daddy Groovie's trip to the States. Do you ever get to talk about your sewing or your daily activities over dinner? Daddy Groovie's word is law. You could not disagree with his plans. You cannot tell him you do not wish to go to Nuyork.

He holds the power in your family, and through your littlest gestures, you reinforce his power. When you clear the table, you begin with his plate and you work in silence. Gringo observes that you and your husband move in different worlds.

Mommy was quiet as well. Suddenly, both she and Daddy Groovie were not in the space where we were. Daddy Groovie: I knew he was somewhere else, in the States working at his new job... And Mommy: she wasn't in the States, I knew that. She never spoke of a country other than our own. She rarely left the house, making dresses at home at her Singer Machine; I have five orders, she'd say... orders, orders. The whole week, she'd be *stuck at her corner* in the dining room.

The worlds of this house... At dinner, Daddy Groovie was in his own... the world of the States... Mommy's world was *apart*, her own; a world where nobody had ever been or could go, not even Daddy Groovie. Especially not him.⁷ (Italics mine)

You imagine you were somewhere else, away from Daddy Groovie. And your sewing is your portal to an/Other world.

You are marginalized because you perform labor that is unpaid—healing, plumbing and Other odd jobs.

[Mommy] had long given up on asking him to fix anything in our house. Seeing her with a hammer in her hand was a familiar sight. I had often found her with Daddy Groovie's tool belt dangled around her waist, fixing pipe leaks in the back patio, pounding walls with nails, changing our flourescent lightbulbs in the ceiling while Ninang Rola stood by...⁸

Mommy had proclaimed herself the healer of the house. Because of her, I had never seen a doctor in my life. She simply believed that everything could be taken care of at home. Her *naturaleza* ran through her veins into her healing hands, creating little inventions like the ceremony of circles. I was surprised that Mommy hadn't cut off Pipo's skin herself.

She was a believer in boiling leaves of all kinds, in preserving tree trunks and drying roots. She made tea out of toasted rice grains to clear Pipo's body of germs. Once, when I had a fever, she had wrapped two blankets around me and said, "Once you sweat, your fever will be gone."⁹

On one hand, this is good because you broke the stereotype of female labour. And Healing has always been a Sub/Version, the Feminine's Way of Communing with the Goddess. But you let Daddy Groovie get away with his laziness, and you do not demand compensation or recognition for all the work that you have done.

Pipo's and Gringo's Other-ness come from their identification with the Feminine. Gringo is infatuated with SWAT, your neighbor.

...[I]t was SWAT that my eyes followed: every step he made, his little leaps over puddles... I could actually hear his voice singing "Ave Maria"...

Every morning before I left for school, SWAT delivered a small drum of pig slop to Sgt. Dimaculangan's house... I hated that smell, but I waited for it every day because I knew it would bring SWAT along with it. I would rest my head on the windowsill and watch... I bowed my head, raising my eyes from time to time to take a glimpse, to study the slope of his skin, the thickness of his shoulders... If I missed him, I would think of the Virgen Maria procession...¹⁰

And he identifies with the mistresses, your boarders. Other women.

Had I been a mistress, I would also know the exact beginning and end of the day. I would know when and where I was every minute and who was around me. Like in those black-and-white Stateside movies, I would wait for him all the time. "Be with me," I would beg him... "Please, please, SWAT, please..." I wouldn't let him go... I would feed him milkfish in many different ways... Anything to outcook his wife.¹¹

Gringo has chosen to stay in the margins, to play the passive role of waiting for a man, and to compete with the wife. Estrella, perhaps you thought only Pipo felt this way. Sayang [too bad], you could have found out about this from Gringo himself, if only you had paid enough attention to him.

Pipo embodies the Feminine through his actions, his manner of dressing, his obsession with beauty pageants.

The one who managed to come up with the best costumes... kept his Miss Unibers¹² box under the bunk bed. But deep inside me, I knew that he was born with the ability to turn towels and bedsheets into the most decorative gowns, and to walk with grace on his long legs without bending his back or losing his balance. That I could never quite get right... He became Miss Kodak. Miss Swimsuit. Miss Long Gown. And eventually, Miss Unibers.¹³

This box is Pipo's Other World. Through it he enters a land of endless possibilities... where he

could become Nefertiti or Miss Universe. A land away from Daddy Groovie's harmful hand.

The ceremony of circles. The cycle of violence. Daddy Groovie reinforces his power through violence. He wants Pipo to be like his masculine neighbor Big Boy Jun, “just like all the Juniors in [y]our street.”¹⁴ But Pipo does not possess that macho strut your husband wanted to see in him. Pipo is not man enough. Daddy Groovie could not hide his disappointment. He batters Pipo.

The long *yantok*¹⁵ was slicing the air. I could feel it land on Pipo's skin. This was always the way with Daddy Groovie. There was the need to hurt Pipo, whip him with his long, smooth, rounded bamboo stick... A dialogue with his first-born son, he called it. I could hear him cursing. *Put a ka. Lalaki ka ba o ano?*...¹⁶ Who do you think you are, Boy Manicure?... Daddy Groovie always mentioned that name to Pipo as if it were one of his curses.¹⁷

Pipo endures the physical blows while Gringo receives the blows in his psyche.

Another whip landed on Pipo, another landed inside me... Daddy Groovie trudged out, still cursing. I bowed while he walked past and hid my head for cover, putting it between my knees and wrapping it with my hands. In darkness, as I closed my eyes, I saw Daddy Groovie's eyes, those angry squinty eyes, hurting Pipo, staring at me.¹⁸

Violence has a way of perpetuating itself. Daddy Groovie batters Pipo then Pipo batters Gringo.

As soon as I stood up, Pipo came out of the room, dirt shaped by his fingers on his wet face... Pipo looked at me with Daddy Groovie's eyes, the squint of revenge. He grabbed my hair and then ran away. My head almost hit the nail where we hung the broom. A spot of blood was left on the wall. I was too frightened to be hurt.¹⁹

Where were you Estrella? Why did you allow him do this to your sons? You just let this happen. Gringo has waited for you to do something, he has counted on you.

I also waited for someone to rescue Pipo, waited for the sound of Mommy's footsteps to come upstairs and grab the *yantok* out of Daddy Groovie's hands, breaking it with hers. Then she could scream at him, too, tell him to never ever do that again. Daddy Groovie would just stand there, holding his *Pacorabang*,²⁰ accidentally spilling it on himself. But Mommy always ignored what went on, as if she couldn't hear the noise. For as long as I could remember, she

always stood where she was—frozen, like meat in a plastic bag left to defrost on the kitchen counter.²¹

Estrella, I wish you had Gringo's eyes. He sees everything, knows too much. This is a delicate matter, but it must be said. It might be too painful, but you must know that Gringo knew what Daddy Groovie did to you.

I didn't know what they were doing except that Daddy Groovie was in control of whatever it was, his hands on Mommy's mouth as her voice passed through the holes between his fingers... Mommy was pushing him away but he wouldn't budge. He seemed to be some kind of powerful giant who managed to pin her down on the bed, as if he had so many hands. I stood watching, still wondering if this were all a nightmare.

"So what are you going to do when I'm in the States, huh?" Daddy Groovie whispered. He sounded angry... It was too dark to see what was on his face. His voice got deeper. "Find another husband, huh? Huh? Huh? The way you always wanted. Just waiting for me to leave, huh?"

And no, she wasn't crying. I had never seen Mommy cry in my life.

"Stop, Groovie, don't."²²

Daddy Groovie hurts you through rape, harsh words and false accusations. This is his way of showing you that he was the boss.

Gringo sees the marks on your skin. He sees the wounds that you refuse to see.

The marks on Mommy's back I had seen one morning, the ones she kept so well hidden until they healed... My scar. That dog. Pipo was very much like that dog, I thought, always ready to jump. It was something Daddy Groovie had planted in him with his yantok while he hit him... Mommy. Pipo. She had given him something she never knew. Hitting. Bleeding. Hitting. Healing. Another ceremony of circles.²³

The ceremony of circles. The enclosure of silence. How would I re-write your story, Estrella? You stand there, frozen, like meat in a plastic bag left to defrost on the kitchen counter, as Gringo puts it. You do not say a word. Again, your son waits.

I stood there still waiting for Mommy *to say something* about what happened. A few words would be fine. She only had to acknowledge something had happened and didn't have to know Pipo almost hit me again.²⁴ (*Italics mine*)

In silence, you bear the violence that Daddy Groovie inflicts on you. The words seem to have been taken away from you. The only word left for you to utter is *paciencia*.²⁵

“Paciencia.” Mommy took a big knife from a drawer and carefully chopped the fins off of the fish. I had often seen patience in her eyes. Her face was always waiting, for what I never knew. Her daze told me that something was going to happen soon. After she had washed the white clothes and left them to dry on the corrugated aluminum, she would sit there as if they would dry faster if she guarded them. Many times, she would just stop sewing and stare ahead, watching pictures that only she could see appear on the wall.²⁶

Pipo follows your lead. He could not articulate the pain he feels, the brokenness of his psyche.

No wonder Pipo and Mommy always healed. Although Pipo always kept his healing from me and everyone else, never complained about any part of his body hurting, *never said a word about what Daddy Groovie did*. When nobody could see, he simply took the ointment that Mommy kept on the dresser and applied it on himself before he went to bed.²⁷ (Italics mine) Gringo, too, “learned to speak without saying a word.”²⁸ Your collective silence strengthens your husband’s control over all of you. Gringo talks about the two of you healing. But the only things that are healed were your physical wounds, not the lacerations of your spirit.

Gringo wants to reach out to both of you. He wants to ask your firstborn about how he felt, he wants to ask you why you never said anything about the “cockfights,” even to Ninang Rola. But nobody pays any attention to him. So he, too, inherits your silence.

With her, Mommy became a different person. When Daddy Groovie wasn’t home, they talked about many things, mostly their lives, and listened. I had been waiting for Mommy to tell Ninang Rola about what Daddy Groovie did to her at night but she seemed to keep that to herself. Sometimes I wanted to ask her about it, but like Ninang Rola always said, certain things were better kept inside. And I had kept many, many things inside. *So quiet, this little one*, they always said about me. But I was a part of every conversation, although nobody knew, since, most of the time, *I never said anything*. I had always known that time had a way of answering questions...²⁹ (Italics mine)

You talk to Ninang Rola, but your conversations were not healing. Ninang Rola has words—Gringo even calls her the godmother of words. But her words do not empower. She complains about Daddy Groovie, she tells you that Pipo hits Gringo. But Gringo knows “she never stood up to him herself.”³⁰

There was a long pause between two of them. Silence had a way of creeping into our house... Even if I always listened in on their conversations, I knew there was so much they were keeping from me, especially when they both suddenly stopped talking. I could tell they were gone, on a trip back to their pasts, when the world had much morals, as Ninang Rola said, when there were no *queridas*³¹ except for those of the Spanish priests. *Her life was religion*, then and now. *She always acted as if she knew everything*. She knew when and where to talk. When Ninang Rola was quiet, you'd better not to say anything to her. When she talked, you'd better to listen. There's a right time for everything, she would say; sometimes it is better to speak with your eyes.³² (Italics mine)

Ninang Rola acts as if she knew everything, but she does not. She causes all your misfortune, Estrella. She introduces you to Daddy Groovie, she reveals your hiding place when you escaped from him, and she lets you marry your tormentor. All because her life is religion. Ninang Rola says,

"You know, when you got pregnant and I told Germano where you were, I always thought I was doing the right thing. And no, I never regretted having done such, I know families belong together, even the unborn. You are all here for a reason. I never had a family. I only had you. So I sent Germano to get you, to convince you to marry him. A child needs a father. If you look at your boys, you know you made a right decision."³³

I know that she is your friend and you must really love her for you to stay with her as long as you have. You might say that she had good intentions, but these intentions led you to misery. Ninang Rola thinks it is better that you marry your rapist rather than raise a child by yourself. She says, "Thank God you are married."³⁴ She wants you to stick to the traditional role assigned to women. But look at what has happened to you and your children.

Ninang Rola confides this secret from your past to Gringo. But it made me feel that she has just transferred the burden of her guilt upon poor Gringo who must now carry the weight of his new knowledge. "I was to carry their crosses," she tells Gringo.³⁵ How exactly did she do this? If she wanted to redeem you, and thus redeem herself for the mistakes that have led to your misfortune, she should have taken you out of that house, away from Daddy Groovie. But until the story closes, she is unable to redeem herself. I must say that I have developed a dislike for her. And again, Estrella, I am sorry to speak this way about your friend.

The ceremony of circles. The invocation of the Feminine Spirit. Finally, Estrella, you act. At last you say the magic word—*stop*. You do what we were waiting for you to do. I rooted for you then.

“Damn you, Germano! I said stop this now! Don’t touch him anymore.” Mommy was finally on her feet...

“You’re bad luck, ever since you were born. You can’t even be real boy...” Daddy Groovie’s *yantok* swung in the room, catching Pipo...

“Why are you always doing this to me?” Pipo screamed. *I could see on his face he was ready to strike back any moment.* “It’s not fair, you never hit Gringo, you never hit Gringo.”

“Leave him alone, Germano. Leave him. Don’t touch him anymore.” Mommy grabbed Daddy Groovie from behind, her arm around his neck, lifting up his chin...

Daddy shook her off but she continued tightening her arms around his neck... I watched his elbow lift up again, high up, above his head, and slowly, very slowly come down, right against Mommy’s chest, hitting her so hard that she squirmed and spat, her tongue sticking out of her mouth, drooling... She coughed out words that I couldn’t make out. When she finally caught her breath, *she howled, a dog howl*, so loud her voice pushed me against the wall even more.³⁶ (Italics mine)

In your howling lies the heart of your rebellion. You implore the primal Feminine, the Goddess of Destruction, to unleash Her anger toward Daddy Groovie. You invoke the Feminine Spirit.³⁷

Because you speak up, Pipo does too. Pipo challenges Daddy Groovie. You give him the courage to say something, to rebel. Gringo wants to scream at his father’s face.³⁸ Your children begin to fight back, Estrella. You would have been triumphant. But eventually you return to your world of silence. Perhaps you wanted to use your silence as a way to counteract Daddy Groovie’s power, but the ones who were really affected were your children, not your husband. Again you abandon Pipo and Gringo.

Estrella, he called her quietly... Mommy’s fingers shifted, pushing the piece of cloth to the needle. She had not talked to anyone. Not to me. Not to Daddy Groovie. Not even to Pipo who probably needed her the most...

Her weapon had always been her silence. She knew that the stitching sound of the Singer could irritate Daddy Groovie the most, could send him away in no time. Daddy Groovie did walk away from her...

“Mommy, Ma...” I said, when I reached the bottom of the stairs. She didn’t respond... I felt angry watching her not say anything, letting the Singer machine speak for her. The Singer Machine was much like her, smooth and shiny when she sewed there happily, but rough and angry at other times... I wanted to hold her in those moments, maybe that way she could stop hurting... But she let out a long sigh held deep within for some time. She rocked the pedal... I didn’t touch her, didn’t say anything; instead I walked away.³⁹

Gringo tries to reach out to you, but you shut him out. Your child wants to tell your husband that he should stop hurting you. Your child cares for you, Estrella, even as he questions why you let Daddy Groovie continue being violent. But when you stop speaking, so does Gringo. You all walk away, you all take flight.

It was those times I had wanted Mommy to start talking to Pipo... Pipo had been so quiet.... I wished he would grow wings so he could fly away with the birds. Sometimes I wished I would too. I would hold his hand, take him away.⁴⁰

After that you grow blind. You refuse to know or care that Gringo was not home. Gringo and Pipo leave your house in the middle of the night, they go to the railroad, and you never find out. And the most painful thing, Estrella, is that you never knew what happened to Pipo. "Certain things are better kept than said."⁴¹ Certain things you have to find out now, Estrella.

It went very fast... He wasn't running, Pipo. For a minute, he only stood in front of Boy Manicure's house, behind me... The summer wind pushed open the door a little bit more and I caught Boy Manicure standing there, naked, wiping his dripping body with a towel...

Pipo, I said again.

His behind was bleeding, blood slowly dripping down his thighs. I slowly moved behind him, to cover him... I didn't want anyone to see the blood on his shorts.⁴²

At that moment, Gringo performs your role as a parent. You think that this happened to Gringo, but your *bunso* [youngest] just covered up for his *kuya* [elder brother]. Poor Gringo has had to see everything. He has had to carry the burden of what he knew. Again.

You should have exercised responsibility then, Estrella. *Ang totoong pananagutan ay hindi ang pananagutan sa iyo ni Daddy Groovie noong nabuntis ka, kundi ang pananagutan mo sa iyong mga anak. Sana nagpakatatag ka.* [Real responsibility lies not in Daddy Groovie's responsibility toward you when you got pregnant, but in your responsibility for your children. I wish you had been more strong, more determined.] Had he not died, Boy Manicure might have raped Gringo as well. I would have killed Boy Manicure myself if I were in your place. Let me ask you again, Estrella, what could you have done to prevent such violence from happening to your children? What have you done to heal your sons? Why did you abandon the Feminine Spirit that you once invoked?

I would have wanted to be more sympathetic toward you. But sympathy sometimes encourages complacency and self-pity. I do not want you to stay where you are. Rather, I want to jolt you into doing something, anything that would have taken you out of that rut.

The ceremony of circles. The re-claimation of Spaces. You break your silence and tell Ninang Rola of the "cockfights," about your torment. Through your confession, you enter into a sacred space, temenos.⁴³ You say,

"I married him because of Pipo. Whenever I looked at Germano every morning since, I repeated these words to myself: I will learn to love him. I have been trying for so many, many years, Rola..." Mommy stopped, started sobbing. *Ayoko na! Tama na!* ⁴⁴ This has to stop. In the dark side of the stairs, I held myself tightly, felt the warmth of my arms. I wondered what Mommy would think if she found out I was sitting there... "Rola, you're wrong... You can never learn to love anyone, not with constant reminders, not with your daily prayers..."

"Whenever he touched me, my pores tightened, my throat clogged. I ended up gasping for air. Every time he touched me, my insides got all intertwined, as if my heart was going to burst out of my chest. So I kept on saying to myself, this is the way it is, this is my fate. I have to stay here. I have to be here. Endure all this. I wanted to leave so badly. If you weren't here, if not for the children, I would not be here anymore..."

"Es-tre-lla..."

"...Then what you used to say became even clearer, we don't have to want what we have, we'll just have to live with it... My life is not mine anymore. When the children were born, I gave it to them. My Gringo, my little Gringo, I didn't ask for him, either..."⁴⁵

But you were wrong when you said that you have to live with the life you have. That was Ninang Rola's fatalistic attitude talking. You have options, Estrella. You can change your life. You could leave Daddy Groovie. When you said that you gave your life to your children, you should have ensured their safety from all harm. You should have taken them away from their father who hurt them. They need not serve as reminders of what had gone wrong in your life. You could have considered them as reminders of endless possibilities. Now that you have them, anything can happen. Your children should not be made to pay for their father's transgressions.

"Sometimes... some... times," Mommy seemed farther away, her voice softer, "I feel that this is somebody else's life. That I had become someone else when Germano took me to that motel. I was changing all the time. From giving birth to Pipo, to Gringo, and each day I watched them grow up. *They are constant reminders of what is wrong.* It's hard to keep on seeing them. But somehow I have learned to accept it..."

"I wanted Germano to leave so badly, the States would change him, I know. He had to get away from here. He had to start anew. He could never be a better father here. Not with me around him all the time, reminding him of what he cannot possibly become. If you read his letter, you would know that he has found his direction. He misses his boys. I haven't told him

what happened to Gringo. I don't think I can. I won't. Writing him is as much a struggle to begin with. Let it all be forgotten.⁴⁶ (*Italics mine*)

Do you really believe that he would change Estrella? Perhaps you are just trying to convince yourself that he would change, so that you can give up your responsibilities toward your children. What a convenient excuse, Estrella.

When Daddy Groovie leaves, you try to re-create your space—cleaning, creating a new bed, throwing out Daddy Groovie's garbage, and letting the air in.

Each time I brought in a clean bucket of rainwater and soap, I saw her rip another one of your hang-around T-shirt. *She tore them with her teeth*, her fist so tight, I thought she was going to break her arms... I listened to the sound she made squeezing your clothes that she used as damp cloths... She pulled the bed sheets off the big bed... Then she sewed the sides into the mattress. When she finished, she covered it with a thick embroidered blanket, *turning it into a different kind of bed altogether...*

Your clothes had appeared in many parts of our house. Sometimes in the kitchen sink, wet and dirty with fish bones all over, sometimes in the corner of the bathroom to clean the toilet bowl with. Mommy used them to clean the table, the floor, even the windows... For days, we cleaned.

"Let the rain come. Let this new air come into this house, once and for all. I have waited for this for so long," Mommy said while she opened the windows, and she kept them open night and day. "Ahh. The smell of this country."

Mommy had slowly removed your things... "Collector of garbage," she mumbled...⁴⁷ (*Italics mine*)

But you could not hide your anger. You took your ire out on his shirts, using them as rags. Perhaps you just substituted these actions for an actual confrontation with him. Was it because you were never able to confront him with the way he raped you? Was it because he was never punished for what he had done? Why did you not confront him? Why did you not use your words, not your silence, to drive him away?

The ceremony of circles. The shroud of invisibility. As the novel closed, why do you completely disappear? Your sons are journeying to a strange world. They need you to be there, Estrella. Sometimes I wonder if you had loved your sons at all. You abandon them, without a hug, not even a word. The memory of that Sunday afternoon in the park would not tide them through their adulthood. You even use Ninang Rola as a scapegoat. After all the harm that she has caused you, how could you entrust this act of farewell to her?

I understand that you could not live with Daddy Groovie. You did not want to go to Nuyork with them. But you could have cared for your sons here. I know you did not want to have Pipo and Gringo. But now that they are here, they are your responsibility. Your sons are yours. Why do you let this man who oppresses you “take control of the products of your body,”⁴⁸ as Spivak puts it? You do not even put up a fight.

How could you entrust your children to Daddy Groovie? Are you not afraid that he might batter them again? Pipo will not change, his Miss Unibers box will someday turn into a huge baul [chest], and Daddy Groovie will continue to hit him. Why did you let your children go, Estrella? Perhaps you never fully believed that your children were yours.

On the back cover, Ballantine says, “As Gringo learns, shame is passed down through generations, but so is the life-changing power of blood ties and enduring love.”⁴⁹ I searched for “enduring” love in your story, Estrella, but I did not find it. You did not love your children, you opted to save only yourself. Now I know better than to believe blurbs that lie in order to sell your story.

Where are you now? If you must turn your back on the past, I hope that you are no longer living in that dilapidated house, with its bitter memories haunting you.

The ceremony of circles. The act of making whole. You were once strong, Estrella. I remember the way you did not go gaga over Daddy Groovie when you first met him, the way you just said “take me home” on that tragic day at the motel. You did not believe in his hollow promises and tears. I miss the decisiveness that you demonstrated when you left for the north to rearrange your life. I miss your determination. What happened to that strong woman, Estrella? When I look at you now, I know how much Daddy Groovie has destroyed your Spirit.

How would I re-write your story, Estrella? Maybe I would get rid of Ninang Rola, erase her image from the time you joined that cursed contest where Daddy Groovie first saw you. But then you would not have had Pipo. So if I were to keep her, maybe I would remove the chapter where she tells Daddy Groovie where to find you in the north. You might have had a better life if you lived it on your own, as a solo parent. More important, you might have learned to love Pipo. But then you wouldn't have had Gringo.

How would I re-write your story, Estrella? I know that I will keep these scenes:

Everything began with open eyes.

Mommy had never looked as much into my eyes before... Mommy's way of staring was one that didn't make her say anything, that made her gulp and take a deep sigh. Are you all right? She would ask hours later after she had walked away from me. How are you feeling today, Gringo? Once, she touched my hair and smiled, then shook my shoulders: So big now, she commented, shoulders wide.

From my bed, I watched her at night. Her eyes dazed into the dark while she turned restlessly on her bed. She lifted herself up to look at me, not knowing that in the darkness, I was watching her too. Then she stared out again. From her bed, her gaze took her outside the window, into the lamppost light, to circle with fireflies.⁵⁰

Mommy rested my head on her shoulder then kissed my forehead. She did the same thing to Pipo. This time when she took his hands, Pipo willingly gave in. I could hear his heavy breath.

He had been waiting for this moment for years.

We sat there for hours. The moon was lighting the whole park when Mommy shook me up and decided it was time to go. I had closed my eyes for some time. For a moment, my eyelids were sticky. After rubbing them a few times, I caught Pipo's eyes still staring into the bay as if memorizing everything that was there. The shore was empty then. The voice of the water was still. We slowly walked to the jeepney streets, where we got off. *Mommy never tired of holding both of us...*⁵¹ (Italics mine)

"Mommy?" Pipo turned around and looked at her while she stood there agape. *Mommy?* Her eyes were layered with tears that wouldn't slide down her cheeks. Her fingers shakingly climbed over his chest to cover her lips. It was then that Ninang Rola also turned around, but she only stood there and watched Mommy as well. The many years of being here sank into her cheeks, then into her neck, creating hollows on her skin. It wasn't Ninang Rola anymore, I knew. Not the one who trusted me with the story of their lives.

The darkness on her face, as if she had fallen at the foot of God.

"Ma, don't anymore," Pipo begged. Because by the look on Mommy's face, he could tell that she had once again flown into her own world but had locked herself in it, trembling in the heat of the sun.⁵²

"Miss World," I said in a sing-song tone that only he could hear.

Unibers, he corrected me. Boasting a smile, he walked upstairs, his hands in an eternal posture of display. Twisted, turning elbows. Much like a mannequin, I thought, muck like one, or in fact, much better, I watched him until he disappeared into the darkness of the stairs only for him to run back down. He grabbed my hands and danced with me in circles. "Da-da-da-rin," he sang something familiar but I wasn't sure what it was, I laughed. We were like two little boys again, going around the circles, jumping and laughing. "Da-da-da-rin-dum-dum-doo. "We laughed so hard he was holding his stomach when he walked upstairs, his turban of towel falling all over his face.⁵³

I would keep these scenes Estrella, because they are filled with love, because they speak of a family whose members were there for each other—Gringo looking out for you while you were sleeping; Pipo wiping away your tears; a day at the park, where you hold your sons, when you finally see them; Gringo and Pipo laughing and playing games, the way children should; Gringo and Pipo being themselves, for once, without being afraid that Daddy Groovie will find them and hit them with the yantok; you, loving and accepting them for what they are. These moments exhibit how the Spirit endures amid tragedy and despair. These memories, *your memories*, are enough to rebuild your world.

But I would end your story differently. I would let Daddy Groovie leave for the States, but let you stay here with your sons. I will take out this horrible scene where you relinquish responsibility for your sons, passing on to Gringo the responsibility of looking out for Pipo:

I continued to look ahead but made sure not to lose grasp of Pipo. I could hear his breathing slowing into sobs. “M-mommy,” he mumbled again. His arms were down on his front, immobile. I held my brother more tightly. I had never held him like this before. I didn’t want anyone to touch him again, or harm him. Inside, I would carry the weight of what I knew, everything I knew about him, no matter how heavy it was. I didn’t know why he would let me do this or lead him like that, this person who would always be older than I. Perhaps it was the look on his face, that look that made him know what we were leaving behind. I had the look all over mine, too. The face of the no-turning-back. Not a quick glance. Not a spit of goodbye.⁵⁴

On second thought, perhaps I can just change it:

I continued to look ahead but made sure not to ~~lose~~ grasp of Pipo. I could hear his breathing slowing into ~~sobs~~. “M-mommy,” he mumbled again. His arms were down on his front, ~~immobile~~. I held my brother more tightly. I had never held him like this before. I didn’t want anyone to touch him again, or ~~harm~~ him. Inside, I would carry the ~~weight~~ of what I knew, everything I knew about him, no matter how heavy it was. I didn’t know why he would let me do this or lead him like that, this person who would always be older than I. Perhaps it was the look on his face, that look that made him know what we were ~~leaving~~ behind. I had the look all over mine, too. The face of the no-turning-back. Not a quick glance. Not a ~~spit~~ of goodbye. *Not goodbye*

I will erase the words *lose*, *sobs*, *immobile*, *harm* and *goodbye*.⁵⁵ I will emphasize words like *sure*, *look ahead*, *know*, and *lead*.

Not goodbye. You, Pipo and Gringo will constitute a family. You will *look ahead*, know, and lead. You will surely become *persons*. You once declared yourself as healer of the house, Estrella. Heal your family where it hurts most, Cure the psyche of your children, Soothe the wounds due to

violence and rape, Leave the silence, Re-claim your sons and Love them. You would sit at your Singer, happily sewing, finishing your orders, waiting for your sons to come home from school. When they arrive from school you will bring out merienda⁵⁶ for them. At dinner you will converse with each other openly about your day and what happened to your children in school. In the evening, you will tuck them in. And you, Estrella, will sleep soundly, with the light from the lamppost and fireflies. You will spend Sundays at the park. Your sewing will sustain you and your family. Your Other World will become the Center. The ceremony of circles. A family made whole again.

Your story, Estrella. The story of wholeness and rebirth.

Endnotes

Bino Realuyo is a poet and novelist who was born in the late sixties in Manila, Philippines. He has resided in Manila and New York City. He currently teaches in Puerto Rico.

- 1 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987).
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Marxist theory maintains that there are power relations in all situations. The ruling class reinforces their power by force (the use of violence) and through silencing the ruled class. Check out *The German Ideology* (1846) and the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) by Karl Marx.
- 4 In the novel, Realuyo creates a place called Nuyork, a country that the characters aspire to migrate to. The name Nuyork is based on the Filipino pronunciation of New York. It is fictional and does not literally refer to New York
- 5 Post-structuralist literary theory argues that the division between reader, writer and the text has been dissolved. Check out Antony Easthope, *British Post-Structuralism since 1968* (London: Routledge, 1991).
- 6 Bino A. Realuyo, *The Umbrella Country* (USA: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1999), 21 – 22.
- 7 Ibid., 20.
- 8 Ibid., 7 – 8.
- 9 Ibid., 79 – 80.
- 10 Ibid., 56 – 57.
- 11 Ibid., 71.
- 12 Realuyo's fictional term for *Miss Universe*
- 13 Ibid., 37 – 38.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 cane
- 16 "You whore! Are you a man or not?"
- 17 Ibid., 65. 17
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid., 66.
- 20 Realuyo's fictional term for perfume, a pun on Paco Rabanne
- 21 Ibid., 96.
- 22 Ibid., 24.
- 23 Ibid., 97-98.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Spanish word meaning *patience*

- 26 Ibid., 106.
- 27 Ibid., 93.
- 28 Ibid., 107.
- 29 Ibid., 67.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 *mistresses*
- 32 Ibid., 68.
- 33 Ibid., 265.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Ibid., 130.
- 36 Ibid., 156 – 57.
- 37 This concept was first introduced to me when I read Clarissa Pinkola Estes' *Women Who Run With the Wolves* (USA: Ballantine, 1992) and this concept has been echoed in other texts by feminist psychologists.
- 38 Realuyo, 159.
- 39 Ibid., 166 – 70.
- 40 Ibid., 180.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Ibid., 182-83.
- 43 *Temenos* is the Greek word meaning *sacred space*.
- 44 *"Enough! I've had it!"*
- 45 Realuyo, 266 – 67.
- 46 Ibid., 268 – 69.
- 47 Ibid., 201 – 203.
- 48 Spivak.
- 49 This is found on the back cover of the novel.
- 50 Realuyo, 271.
- 51 Ibid., 274 – 75.
- 52 Ibid., 286.
- 53 Ibid., 288.
- 54 Ibid., 298.
- 55 This is a literary device meant to illustrate that negative words must be eliminated from Estrella's life and that positive words need to be emphasized to alter the course of Estrella's world. Instead of "not a spit of goodbye," I prefer "not goodbye." It is my wish to see her create a new life with her children, and not send them off to be with their father in Nuyork. Needless to say, it is not my intent to revise Bino Realuyo's text.
- 56 afternoon snack

References

- Easthope, Antony. *British Post-Structuralism since 1968*. (London: Routledge, 1991).
- Estes, Clarissa Pinkola. *Women Who Run With the Wolves*. (USA: Ballantine 1992).
- Realuyo, Bino A. *The Umbrella Country*. (USA: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1999).
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. (New York: Methuen, 1987).

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