



Discoursing Cultural Trauma in Gregoria De Jesus' Memorial Poem for Andres Bonifacio Through Deconstruction of Grief Using New Historicism Approach

Luciana L. Urquiola
*Faculty of Arts and Letters
University of Santo Tomas
lucianaurquiola@gmail.com*

Abstract: This study analyzes the grief in Gregoria de Jesus' or Ka Oryang's *Magmula Giliw Nang Lumisan Ka* which was penned during the pre-revolutionary period in Philippine history under Spain's rule in connection with the death of her husband Andres Bonifacio. As a memorial text, this poem was a tangible manifestation of cultural trauma experienced not only by Ka Oryang (De Jesus) but also by the members of a secret revolutionary society known as Katipunan, as a consequence of their horrendous experience surrounding the execution of Bonifacio—Katipunan's Supremo. In interrogating grief to discourse cultural trauma, the New Historicism approach is used for the proper identification of poem's meaning. This method necessitates that the elegy crafted by Oryang be viewed as a cultural product, rooted in its time and place through a text analysis that relate the poem to the dynamics of power, society, and ideology. It is in the poem's undercurrents that the cultural trauma surfaced necessitating some footnotes from the Philippine history for these lines to make sense.

Using the postulations in Cultural Trauma Theory (Alexander, 2004) which states that cultural trauma includes a group of people who continuously feel the impact of horrendous event and repeatedly get haunted by the said experience, Oryang, through the memorial poem, contributes to the support system necessary for the collectivity to cope. The memorial poem becomes a "speech act of memory," a cultural narrative that allowed Oryang and the members of collectivity to revisit the experience, make a confrontation with grief, and overcome the trauma.

Key Words: cultural trauma; grief; memorial; "speech act of memory"; cultural narrative

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most important memorial works during the Philippine revolutionary period was an elegy written by Gregoria de Jesus also known as Oryang, for her husband Andres Bonifacio who is the Supremo of the Katipunan, a revolutionary society founded in 1892 that aimed for Philippines' liberation from Spanish rule. The poem became known for these two titles, either "*Tula ni Oryang*" or "*Magmula Giliw Nang Lumisan Ka*." When

Oryang wrote this elegy to memorialize the heroism of Bonifacio, she was trying to become the grieving voice of a wife who has lost a husband in this quest for freedom. Oryang was discoursing initially her individual trauma which sprang from the loss she felt upon Bonifacio's death. While wallowing in the pain, she was navigating this trauma alone. However, when she wrote the elegy and shared this work to a community whose members underwent the same grief and disillusionment she felt, the individual trauma



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evolved to cultural trauma. Hers now is the voice of every wife, mother, daughter who has lost a husband, a son, and a father in this armed struggle. And since Bonifacio was the Supremo of the Katipunan, Oyang and the members of the community grieved too for a dear departed leader. As explained by Alexander, *"cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways"* (2012, p.18).

2. THE DYNAMICS OF TRAUMA AS A CULTURAL NARRATIVE

Prior to Alexander's definition of cultural trauma, many professional groups and individuals came up with their own definition for "trauma" so as to delineate the term considering its pervasiveness to three branches of discipline: natural science, social science, and humanities. The American Psychological Association (APA, 2017) describes trauma as *an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster*, while the Center for Treatment of Anxiety and Mood Disorders, a regional clinic of the National Social Anxiety Center (2017) explains trauma as a *psychological, emotional response to an event or an experience that is deeply distressing or disturbing*. Similar meaning is given by the Australian Psychological Society (2017) which puts trauma as *experiences which are life threatening or pose significant threat to a person's physical or psychological wellbeing*. Similarly, a psychiatrist and Harvard professor, Judith Herman spun a definition that describes trauma as *an affliction of the powerless that incites intense fear, helplessness, loss of control, and threat of annihilation* (1992, p.24). Herman even classified the calamity that renders a victim helpless as either a *disaster*—if the force is that of nature or *atrocities*—if the force is that of other human beings. Herman also notes that trauma debilitates as these calamities overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life.

While medical professionals give accurate and scientific discussions for trauma studies, yet

the cutting-edge research and the most influential and encompassing insights about trauma have come from people from a field that might appear to be irrelevant to it: Literature. The most valuable definition was given by Cathy Caruth, a professor of English and Comparative Literature in Cornell University, who took off from where Freud had left off. The term "traumatic neurosis" which Freud first coined in the monumental work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) was diagnosed by the American Psychiatric Association (1980) as a new medical condition which became known as *post-traumatic stress disorder* (PTSD). Prof. Caruth links Freud's *traumatic neurosis* with *post-traumatic stress disorder* and comes up with this definition for trauma: *an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of* (1996, p. 11).

In addition to Prof. Caruth, two more academicians endeavored in the psychoanalytic literary criticism for trauma. Prof. Shohana Felman—a Comparative Literature professor from Emory University and Prof. Jeffrey Alexander, a leading American sociologist once connected with Yale University. Felman has made a rejoinder to the claim of Caruth regarding the belatedness or delayed experience in trauma. She explained if that trauma is recalled belatedly, it provides an opportunity for victims and survivors to bear witness to the harrowing experiences by listening to their voices (2002). The delayed reliving of the traumatic experiences as well as the act of witnessing i.e. listening, empathizing are the major ideas espoused by Caruth and Felman which have become the seminal ideas for the formulation of the Literary Trauma Theory.

On the other hand, it was Alexander who conceived the definition for cultural trauma by establishing a clear distinction between individual or lay trauma and cultural trauma. Whereas individual trauma is a spontaneous emotional response to a calamitous event, cultural trauma is not immediately perceived as catastrophic. Rather the perception undergoes a long process of assimilation and signification. Events in cultural trauma enter a series of integration in the consciousness of the collectivity.



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3. ARTICULATING THE INARTICULABLE: THE EMERGENCE OF MEMORIAL LITERATURE

In discoursing the cultural trauma in the elegy of Oryang, the initial step is to trace the grief in the text of the poem because among the emotions associated with trauma, grief is the most familiar since this one is interwoven with human suffering. Grief among a number of emotional states gives shape to many a memorial text. It is grief which is a major attribute in trauma which afflicts human communities whose coping mechanism is to release the pent-up emotions through different modes of adaptation, of which the most common is writing. In the book *On Grief and Grieving*, Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, a Swiss-American psychiatrist collaborated with a grief expert, David Kessler where the duo demystify the process of grieving wherein the victim relives the experience to purge him/her of emotional excesses (2007). This work by Kübler-Ross and Kessler was developed further by Dr. James Pennebaker who researched the link between language and recovery from grief. Dr. Pennebaker, an American social psychologist designed a writing therapy program called Expressive Writing, a breakthrough work which uses the act of writing to ease the feelings of emotional trauma (1997). In Expressive Writing, putting into words one's thoughts and feelings about emotionally challenging experiences provides the necessary release to the pent-up emotions that consume a bereaved. That the experience does not control the victims/patients anymore with painful memories. Rather, they learn to control the experience and own it through writing. Their writings now comprise a group of writings known as memorial literature.

The term "memorial" originates from Latin *memoria* which means memory; this evolves to Latin *memorialis* and *memorial* referring to something that serves as a legacy or reminder. The English "memorial" as a modifier to literature takes the same meaning from its Latin etymology i.e. something by which the memory of a person, thing, or event is preserved ("memorial"). An

academic definition of memorial literature is given in the European Journal of English Studies by cultural studies scholars, Prof. Ann Rigney and Astrid Erll who wrote that memorial literature consists of writings that become repositories of "*memories that are shared within generations and across different generations which are the product of public acts of remembrance*" (2006, p. 112).

Having cultural memory as their area of interest, both see the role of literature as sites of memory. The same definition applies to the classification of works comprising Holocaust literature i.e. writings wrought from the collective memories of the Holocaust victims. These European Jewry who survived the Nazi genocide gave literary form to their harrowing experiences using stories, memoirs, elegies, diaries, poems, and novels. History attests to the cultural trauma of the survivors who have to live with the horrors of mass murder done by the Germans to the 30,000 Jews between 1933 to 1945 in Eastern Europe. The Holocaust memorial literature has provided them with the avenue to confront this harsh footnote in their history via memorial writings. After the holocaust and after they left Europe, Jewish immigrants organized communities that also serve as their mutual benefit societies. Known as *Landsmanschaft*, these societies were commissioned to write the *Yizker*, a vast body of memorial books commemorating Jewish communities destroyed in the Holocaust. A greater part of *Yizker* is comprised of the Holocaust memorial literature (Horowitz, 2011).

In the Philippines, not one compilation or anthology of memorial literature has been published, though many forms of memorial literature such as elegies, eulogies, poems, dramas, novels have been in circulation. Events such as revolutions (Philippine revolution, EDSA Revolution) wars (World War II, Japanese Invasion, siege at Marawi against ISIS), natural calamities (Typhoon Ondoy, Typhoon Yolanda), political disturbances (coup d'etats, impeachment), violence (murder, extra-judicial killings), and crimes (rape, murder, plunder) which the writers personally experienced are sites of memories which awaken individual and collective trauma—the catalyst for memorial writing. Such major upheavals etched in the memory are enough to give any person or group of persons the compulsion to

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write. Witnesses of traumatic events often find themselves in a situation where the natural tendency to them is to articulate the inarticulable. That in the process of articulating the trauma through individual or collective narratives, there is the process of undoing oneself, the remaking of the self. When grief finds its way to a literary page as a short story, poem, eulogy, or memoirs, cultural trauma becomes more tangible, more discernible. Through grief, cultural trauma is given a human face, a human dimension. Grief gives a concrete form to trauma making it easier to grasp, to process, to write, to study and analyze. It is only possible to discourse cultural trauma, the moment grief becomes palpable, that is, when grief is being read on a printed page, when every detail of the human suffering is put into words, when grief is felt and expressed. As Shakespeare puts it in *Macbeth*: “Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak whispers the other fraught heart and bids it break...”

4. GREGORIA DE JESUS’ TRAUMA UPON THE DEATH OF SUPREMO: A WIDOW’S WITNESSING AND ARTICULATION OF GRIEF

Gregoria de Jesus, popularly known as Oryang, had not been known to many, more so of the trauma she had been through. While historical accounts noted the role of Bonifacio in Katipunan, Oryang’s own was not known to many. Her position in the revolutionary movement was very valuable because she held in custody all records of the society including names of its members, paraphernalia for campaign propaganda, and more importantly Katipunan’s funds. She also created the Katipunan’s own alphabet, a decoded language meant only for its core members. She was an endeared female figure in a male dominated organization that she earned the title Lakambini, for indeed she was the Katipuneros’ muse. (Medina 1995, 62).

In loving memory of Bonifacio, Gregoria de Jesus wrote an elegy as a memorial tribute to

her husband, Bonifacio. Written in the form of kundiman, the poem became known for these two titles, either “*Tula ni Oryang*” or “*Magmula Giliw Nang Ikaw ay Pumanaw*.” The first part of the poem was written on August 31, 1897 while the second was penned sometime in September 1897 (Medina 1995, p 62). The poem articulated the sorrow that possessed a grieving widow. She became livid, lethargic, and maladjusted. Prior to having known the death of her husband, Oryang was full of spirit looking for her husband. When Bonifacio was arrested and imprisoned in an undisclosed location, Oryang started looking for him. Fired by hope that Bonifacio is still alive, she was still possessed by physical strength to locate Andres. Yet when information reached her that he was executed, physical strength escaped her. The poem often mentions the persona’s body parts—internal and external organs such as “puso” (heart), “mata” (eyes), “dibdib” (chest), “ugat” (veins), “palad” (palm) which are the frail parts of one’s body. These are parts that show her vulnerability to her situation.

This is the meaning of the elegy in its surface level. This is the lamentation of Oryang over Bonifacio’s death. If one looks at the elegy and feels the grief embedded in the text, one is exposed to the individual or lay trauma of the writer. The memorial work is evaluated as a literary text only. Yet it is in the poem’s undercurrents that the cultural trauma is best understood necessitating some footnotes from the Philippine history for these poetic lines to make sense. To make sense of grief, the New Historicism approach is considered for proper identification of text’s meaning. This method requires that the text of Oryang’s elegy be understood in its historical context by relating it to the dynamics of power, society, and ideology of its given time. New Historicism provides the needed leeway in giving new perspective to the events of distant past so as to give a relevant historical judgement. Relating this to the elegy, three new historical undercurrents come to surface.

Undercurrent 1: Grief from Rigging of Election in the Tejeros Convention

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Oryang and the Bonifacio's supporters were well aware of the sacrifices of Bonifacio who founded the Katipunan. Though his leadership suffered military reverses, nevertheless, he stirred the nationwide campaign for independence. They too knew of Bonifacio's humble beginnings and how he was set aside or even cheated in the Tejeros Convention. Bonifacio, on the account of lack of formal education, was disqualified to sit even if he was elected in the lowest position as Secretary of Interior of the Republic of Biak na Bato or the revolutionary government then. *In a letter dated April 24, 1897, Bonifacio wrote to Emilio Jacinto and disclosed the irregularities in the said Tejeros Convention:*

Isang kasuklam suklam na balita ang akin maipapasabi sa inyo tungkol sa kasukaban gawa ng mga pinuno ng S. Magdalo na nag si sukob sa indulto o umayon sa Kastila ito'y si Daniel Tirona, Mtro. de Guerra, Jose del Rosario, Ministro del Interior, José Caelles, teniente Gral., gayon din halos lahat ng mga taga Tanza sampu ng Cura doon; ang lahat ng ito'y pawang kabig o partidos ni Capitan Emilio; kaya't malabis ang hinala ng marami na kun kaya't malabis na nagpumilit na sila'y maguing Gobierno ay ng upang maisuko ang boong Revolucion.

A piece of sickening news I can tell you is the treachery committed by the chiefs of the Magdalo Council who have applied for pardon or gone over to the Spaniards. These are Daniel Tirona, Minister of War; José del Rosario, Minister of the Interior; José Cailles, Lieutenant-General, and nearly all the Tanza people, even the parish priest there, the whole lot of them henchmen or partisans of Capitan Emilio. For this reason, many people strongly suspect that they strive so hard to get control of the Government in order to surrender the whole Revolution. (Bonifacio, 1897)

Undercurrent 2: Grief from the Hasty Execution of the Death Sentence

When Oryang put in the elegy: *Lubhang malabis ang aking pagdarandam/ Sa biglang paggayak mo't ako'y panawan, she was alluding to the sudden disappearance of her husband when Aguinaldo's men arrested Bonifacio on April 25, 1897. Fifteen days later, on May 10, 1897, Bonifacio died. As the Supremo of Katipunan, Oryang could not believe that the execution of Bonifacio would be carried out. Hoping for pardon, Oryang and the Katipunan members under Bonifacio were traumatized with the harshness of the sentence accorded to him considering his stature as leader of Katipunan. What they could not accept also was the hasty execution, that the trial and decision had been railroaded to get rid of Bonifacio. Oryang even wrote:*

Ng matapos ang paglilitis, ipinagutos alinsunod sa kanila, ni Capitan Emilio na barilin ang asawa ko sa loob ng 24 na oras. Hindi man lamang nila pinahintulutang makapagtanggol sa kanyang sarili. Nakalipas ang ilang panahon at siya ay pinatawag; nguni't pagkaraan ng mga apat o limang araw ay iniutos ang pagpapatapon sa kanya.

When the trial is over, it was ordered as they claim that my husband be executed in 24 hours. They did not even allow him to defend himself. After some time, he was summoned; after four or five days, he was ordered to banish. (Agoncillo, 2002)

Undercurrent 3: Grief from the Violent Death of a Supremo

The death of Bonifacio on May 10, 1897 was viewed by Oryang and his supporters as a tragedy because he was executed by fellow freedom fighters who are members of Katipunan, though belonging to a rival faction. Considering that Bonifacio was a charismatic leader, his appeal to the masses attracted the common people to join the

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Katipunan, and thus they could collectively identify with him. What was even more disturbing was bearing witness to the violent capture of Bonifacio. Her tell-all narrative account in *The Story of Katipunan* revealed the details of the arrest and the brutality he suffered from the men of Emilio Aguinaldo who signed his death sentence. This harrowing incident was being recalled by Oryang at a time when she was still searching for Bonifacio's body. She narrated:

Ng magmamadaling araw ay nakarinig ng mga putok. Sila'y aking ginising at ng sila'y lumabas nasalubong niya ang isang kawal na nagsabi sa kanya na sila'y dumarating na napakarami at sila'y malapit na. Ng sila'y malapit, sila'y nagpaputok ng mabilis, at patuloy ang kanilang pakikihamok at kami'y kanilang kinubkob. Siya, sa kabila ng ganitong pangyayari, ay nagutos na huwag magpaputok ang kanyang mga tauhan; at ang aming tao ay sumigaw: mga kapatid, huag kayong magpapaputok; sabihin ninyo kung ano ang inyong kailangan. Hindi sila nakinig; at ng kami ay nalalapit, kanilang pinaputukan ang aking asawa, at ng siya'y nalugmok, siya'y kanilang pinagsasaksak at pinalo ng kulata ng kanilang baril. Ang aking bayaw na si Ciriaco ay inagaw ng dalawang tao at binaril hanggang sa mamatay.

"When dawn came, we heard gunshots. I woke them up and when they went out, his men told him that they were coming, they were many, they were near. Within distance, they fired shots and surrounded our place. Andres, despite this, had forewarned his men not to fire; and his men shouted, don't fire; tell us what you need. But they never listened, when they get near, they shot my husband and when he fell, stabbed him repeatedly and clobbered [him] by their rifle butts. My brother in law Ciriaco was snatched by two men and

was shot until he died." (Agoncillo, 2002)

5. DISCOURSING THE CULTURAL TRAUMA IN ORYANG'S MEMORIAL POEM

Through the lens of New Historicism, the cultural trauma of the Katipunan members who sympathized with Bonifacio becomes apparent. As Alexander (2004) emphatically put, cultural trauma has five interwoven elements. First it involves a large group of people who experienced a horrendous event. In the case of Katipunan, the death of Bonifacio had an impact to its members which was documented by Agoncillo to have ballooned to 30,000 members in 1896. Second, there must be an open acknowledgement among members of this group that the experience of the event is indeed horrendous. The period before and after the Philippine Revolution were traumatic enough, haunting the memories of those who witnessed it. But more so, to those whose had information of the sad fate of Bonifacio who was murdered by those who fought the same cause he fought for. The leading voice was his wife Gregoria de Jesus as well as the members of Magdiwang Katipunan chapter. Thirdly, it is horrendous enough that the experience leaves an indelible mark in the mental state or consciousness of the people. There are writers of Philippine history who would continue memorializing the heroism of Bonifacio long after his death. A big number of Filipinos believed that he was unjustly executed. This idea continue to persists until now. Fourth, the impact in the consciousness of the people leaves lasting memories to the collective group. Memorial tributes for Bonifacio continue to proliferate such as poems, stories, films, etc. Fifth, the memories of the collectivity result to a change in their future identity. The Filipino people have ascribed to Bonifacio and to his Katipunan the groundwork for the first Philippine Republic. The Filipinos looked up to Bonifacio as epitome of true heroism.

Oryang's elegy was written from a recollection of a series of horrendous events which



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she personally experienced. This horrendous event had recurred to her repetitively because she wrote about it and would share it with others. Literature, like this memorial tribute, enables us to bear witness to events that cannot be completely known and opens our ears to experiences that might have otherwise remained unspoken and unheard (Caruth, 1996). Felman, on the other hand, stipulates that the testimonies of the witnesses which she describes as the act of bearing witness provides a necessary and vital response to trauma. Felman elaborates that the very act of speaking/writing in the first person is therapeutic because it puts the witnesses to a position that compelled them to speak the truth (2002). They are made to confront the ugly side of reality, talk about it, validate it, and get that thing "off their chest."

To liberate the victims and survivors of trauma such as Oryang and the Magdiwang revolutionary members, they have to be delivered from their trauma status which requires a radical disruption of memory, the severing of past from present. Paradoxically, the collective group have to undo themselves to reconstruct their distorted selves and continue living their reconfigured lives. The healing process involves collective trauma narratives which is termed "speech acts of memory" (Brison, 1999, p.39). The way to recovery is to revisit the traumatic experience and make a narrative account about them. These cultural narratives are in a way a coping mechanism because the victims are aided by their own helpful memories to process the trauma. The victims make a confrontation with their trauma through memories and after this, they were made to deal with the pain through writing. The ghosts that haunt them have found place in the cultural narratives which is like purging themselves of negative emotions. In the end, the trauma process revises the collective identity.

The memorial poem which was a repository of grief has cut across a population who empathizes with Oryang. Those who have been traumatized by the revolution would identify with Oryang, while those who have no prior experience of trauma nor been exposed to it, may also feel for Oryang since grief is a feeling common to all. Being wife to the Supremo, she had gained a lot of supporters too. She may never be as popular as

her husband but people connect with her because of the same experience that they share with what she went through. At this point, there is an increase membership to the group of empathizers who could identify with Oryang. Through a memorial text that is read and passed through many generations since 1897, the cultural trauma brought about by Philippine revolution to the Filipino is discoursed and understood and resolved. As further elaborated by Alexander:

"Collective traumas are reflections of neither individual suffering nor of actual events, but symbolic renderings that reconstruct and imagine them. Rather than descriptions of what is, they are arguments about what must have been and what should be. From the perspective of cultural sociology, the contrast between factual and fictional statements is not an Archimedean point. The

truth of a cultural script depends not on its empirical accuracy, but on its symbolic power and enactment. Yet, while trauma process is not rational, it is intentional. It is people who make traumatic meanings, in circumstances they have not themselves created and which they do not fully comprehend." (2012, p. 4)

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