

Joaquin's *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*

Historical Transformations Bereft
of Social Transformation

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ABSTRACT

Nick Joaquin's *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* is a multi-voiced novel revealing a counter-voice that is contrapuntal to the widely perceived bourgeois voice of Joaquin's stories and novels. Through a trope that conflates the personal and the social (or national) in the novel, the counter-voice cries out for real economic and personal freedoms but is muted by promises of freedoms repeated throughout the country's historical transformations that continue to remain unfulfilled. Highlighting the contrapuntal voice puts to question the prevalent interpretation of the novel as a text about personal and national identity. Without denying the author's own disavowal of the interpretation that the two navels represent the double colonization of the Philippines by Spain and the United States, this study nonetheless argues that Connie Vidal's claim to having two navels is indeed a manifestation against colonization and a cry for an authentic social revolution. Furthermore, as the novel ends and Connie Vidal finds in Paco Texeira a soulmate of her deepest desires for freedom, they leave their respective spouses to start a life together. Their elopement upends the bourgeois moral principles of the Monzon brothers who, while knowing how the rest of society would judge the couple, find themselves unable to condemn Connie and Paco. The unresolved moral dilemma that the Monzon brothers face at the conclusion of the novel gestures to an assertion that

authentic transformations that lead to real lived freedoms require changes even in the personal and social moral structure.

KEYWORDS

Post-colonial literature, Philippine literature, Nick Joaquin, *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*, contrapuntal reading and analysis, social and moral transformation

Like the Old Monzon's dream of an independent Philippines, the currency of Nick Joaquin's corpus refuses to fade. Sixty years after he started writing *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*, a collection of his short stories was published by Penguin Books in 2017. The publication by Penguin opens new possibilities of a wider world audience for his works while galvanizing a renewed interest among Filipino readers. Perhaps the interest in Joaquin remains because even Filipinos born in a century after he wrote still resonate with the critique of the historical and national experience contained in his writings. This, unfortunately, does not indicate a happy circumstance, for it means that despite the passing of so many political regimes and eras after national independence, Philippine society still finds itself quite unchanged.

This essay focuses on the novel *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* employing a critical strategy that borrows from Edward Said's contrapuntal reading. Contrapuntal reading was introduced by Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) which addresses the problematic of finding the periphery in the metropolitan text. He draws the idea of such a mode of reading from Western classical music which he describes as having "various themes [that] play off one another, with only a provisional privilege being given to any particular one; yet in the resulting polyphony there is concert and order, an organized interplay that derives from the themes, not from a rigorous melodic or formal principle outside the work" (51). Said asserts that canonical novels contain such a polyphony of histories informing metropolitan narratives. Just as other themes in a piece of music support, sustain, and privilege the main melody and become essential yet unprivileged parts of the whole, other histories support, sustain, and highlight the main narrative of canonical texts becoming essential though obscured histories informing the metropolitan narrative. Said especially focuses on how canonical texts conceal the histories of imperialism and the resistance to it, despite the fact that these histories to a great extent constitute what Said calls the "structure of attitude and reference" (62) which provides the ground of possibility as well as sets ideological trajectories in the production of the main narrative.

Said proposes a *contrapuntal* reading which means the re-reading of canonical texts with "a simultaneous awareness of the metropolitan history

that is narrated and those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts” (51). This entails a mode of reading that accounts for both the histories of imperialism and of the resistance to it (66). This, moreover, means extending our reading to, as Said puts it, “what was once forcibly excluded” (67). By re-reading canonical texts with a heightened sensitivity to subjected and/or obscured histories, “alternative and new narratives emerge” (51); that is, drastically new or highly nuanced meaning is obtained from the text.

Said explains that “[e]ach cultural work is a vision of the moment” (67). By “moment,” Said refers to the historical moment of the production of the cultural work; and by “vision,” he refers to the composite of attitudes and references from multifarious, sometimes contradictory, sometimes disconnected, and always unequal cultural, historical, and political forces, that make possible the production of the cultural artefact. The vision which is never coherent and self-consistent, manifests its incoherence, fragmentation, and self-contradiction in cultural artefacts. Cultural productions are, therefore, hybrid, mixed and impure. Said writes: “[w]orks of Literature, particularly those whose manifest subject is empire, have an inherently untidy, even unwieldy aspect in so fraught, so densely charged a political setting” (68).

Said anticipated the utilization of contrapuntal reading on texts from varying historical contexts when he gave the caveat that “one must connect the structures of a narrative to the ideas, concepts, and experiences from which it draws support” (67). However, the extent to which contrapuntal reading has been used since the publication of *Culture and Imperialism* must have gone beyond expectation. It has been deployed beyond the genre of the novel for texts coming from historical conditions utterly different from his original object of study, and even for non-literary subject matter. In the paper, “Contrapuntal Reading of Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*: Theorizing the Raj through Narrativity,” Jamil Asghar and Muhammad Iqbal Butt read the workings of the law of the jungle as a metaphor of functioning of the British colonial Raj in India, thereby supplying a corrective to a prevalent apolitical reading of the text. In “Justice and Biblical Interpretation Beyond Subjectivity and Self-Determination: A Contrapuntal Reading on

the Theme of Suffering in the Book of Job,” Alissa Jones Nelson proffers a corrective to what she calls a “ghettoization of biblical interpretation” by proposing contrapuntal reading as a mode that can bridge the two general ghetto categories: the academic or idea-primary approach which drastically diminished the role of subjectivity and contextual concerns in the act of interpretation and the vernacular or experience-primary approach, which sees interpretation as a critical reflection of praxis. Nelson performs a contrapuntal reading on the Book of Job as an illustration of her point. Further in “Deconstructing Privilege: A Contrapuntal Approach,” Jennifer Logue performs a contrapuntal reading of “privilege” in the American classroom to establish the necessity of going beyond the “recognition approach,” which merely entails an acknowledgment of the granting of privilege of dominant subjects towards a “re-evaluation approach” that uncovers the dehumanization not only of the dominated subjects but that of the dominant subjects themselves.

This study employs Said’s contrapuntal reading on Joaquin’s *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*,” adding to a growing scholarship that endeavors to appropriate Joaquin’s oeuvre to speak relevantly to 21st century readers. In the midst of all this scholarship, this study is a modest project to swell the ground of textual evidence for the appropriative readings that are being done on Joaquin’s works and to draw out from the text of *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* its critique of freedom in post-independence Philippines, which bears out the absence of promised social transformations despite political transformations since the formal independence of the Philippines. The methodology of a contrapuntal reading especially allows for these objectives to be obtained.

The contrapuntal reading performed in this study seriously takes Said’s advice of vigilance in reading. Such vigilance is warranted and necessitated by the hybrid, impure, and complex character of the text (68). He calls for a reading that will “draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented” (66). It is because of the marginality of the presence or representation of contrapuntal voices that a vigilant reading is required.

In an essay titled simply as “Contrapuntal Reading or Analysis,” Lindsay Ferriter expounds on the vigilance of reading, saying that, “[s]ince what isn’t said may be as important as what is said, it is important to read with an understanding of small plot lines, or even phrases” (par.12). Ferriter further echoes the caveat given by Said when she writes that, “[i]f one does not read with the right background, **one may miss the weight behind the presence** of Antigua in *Mansfield Park*, Australia in *Great Expectations*, or India in *Vanity Fair*” (par.12; emphasis added). It is with this vigilance for details, particularly the marginal present counter voice, as well as the recognition of the weight of what is only marginal present that this study investigates Joaquin’s novel.

In *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*, there is to be found in brief digressions from the main plot a contrapuntal voice manifesting itself in few and far between moments yet remarkably consistent. Because it is an intermittent voice, it is easily overlooked and hardly taken into account in most previous critical attempts. Without recognition of this contrapuntal voice, the dominant narrative of nascent nation-building, national development, and national identity following a US-inspired nationalism and model of development has remained the prevalent and acknowledged thematic of the novel. The most popular interpretation of the novel, therefore, and that which is most utilized in Philippine classrooms is to regard Connie Vidal, the woman who claims to have two navels, as a metaphor of the Philippine nation struggling with questions of identity arising from its double colonization by Spain and the US.

Before proceeding to a contrapuntal reading of the novel, it is helpful here—both for illustrating how the prevalent interpretation of the novel is naturalized and for the sake of highlighting a contrast to a contrapuntal reading—to recall the main narrative of the novel.

The story opens in Hong Kong with Connie Vidal declaring to Dr. Monzon that she has two navels. Connie is the daughter of Concha Vidal and Manolo Vidal. Concha, the mother, is the daughter of a revolutionary against Spain and has married a young revolutionary poet. With the American takeover of the country and the ensuing shift to English as the language of the

educated and political elite, the career of Concha's husband flails and he then dies. Widowed and dirt poor, Concha turns to Manolo Vidal, a co-revolutionary of both her father and her husband, but one who has managed to remain in the halls of political power despite the change of colonial regimes by adapting himself as a willing ward to the American project of benevolent assimilation. Manolo agrees to give assistance to Concha but not quite in the manner she first expects: Manolo offers her marriage. After some hesitation, Concha accepts and her marriage to Manolo Vidal catapults her to the ranks of the Philippine elite. Connie Vidal therefore grows up in the comfort known only to the same social elite.

At a rather young age, Connie is married off to Macho Escobar, a scion of the sugar elite of Negros. A year after their marriage, she discovers letters that reveal that her husband had actually been the recent lover of her mother. The world Connie knew and loved crumbles, putting into question all that she has believed about herself. This discovery sends her flying to Hong Kong with her absurd claim that she has two navels. In Hong Kong, she gets a group of Filipino and half-Filipino expatriates entangled in her domestic crisis. Two of them, the Monzon brothers, are sons of yet another revolutionary against Spain, the old Monzon who has chosen voluntary exile over collaboration with the American colonial government. Thus, the Monzon brothers are born and raised in exile. Belonging to the same group of expatriates is Paco Texeira, a son of a travelling Filipino musician and who is himself a musician. Unlike the Monzon brothers who are raised by their father with great dreams of an independent, free Philippines, Paco grows up never hearing anything about the Philippines from his father. However, as an adult, he goes to Manila to play in clubs and while doing so, gets romantically involved with both Concha Vidal and her daughter Connie. It slowly becomes evident that Connie has gone to Hong Kong for Paco, but Paco keeps himself scarce for he is after all married and has a family.

On the eve of the Chinese New Year, Connie goes to the house of the Monzons. It happens that the brothers are out and she comes upon the old Monzon, the self-exiled revolutionary himself who, on her previous visits, had remained confined to his room. In that brief encounter, Connie experi-

ences a reconciliation within herself as their two generations meet in person. This meeting with the old Monzon somehow gives Connie a different sense of who she is. She then decides to set up an apparent death to put an end quite literally to her previous identity by driving her car over a cliff and into the sea. The next morning, the car is recovered by the police and its occupant presumed and announced dead. Meanwhile, unknown to the public but known to that small group of Filipino expatriates, Connie finally manages to get to Paco. Connie and Paco make a decision to leave their spouses and to run off together to start a new life, free from both their pasts.

With such a story line, Joaquin's novel quite perfectly fits into the generalization made about Philippine novels that were written in the 50's and 60's. The *Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literatures* offers an explanation:

Critics such as Leonard Casper and Joseph Galdon commented on the novels' preoccupation with protagonists forever searching for their identity in the midst of a fragmented world. Nick Joaquin's *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* (1961) focuses on the frantic quest by Connie, the protagonist, for some measure of stability and certainty in the world outside. Her inability to cope with the world is graphically represented in the image of her two navels. Connie is the product of the interweaving of legacies from the Spanish and American pasts. To be redeemed from her neurosis, she must undergo the pain of baptism by water, fire, earth, and air. (Reyes 1143)

This reading of the novel as a kind of allegory of a Filipino nation is the most popular interpretation used by English teachers in many Philippine schools. The interpretation undeniably has a strong drawing power for at least two reasons: First, it is indeed an interesting thought to have two navels as a representation of the consecutive colonizations of the Philippines. Second, it is quite likely that these teachers have not read the novel itself but a summary of it, a summary which in itself (like the one presented above) would have already been pre-disposed to this particular interpretation of the text.

A more vigilant reading of the novel can, however, allow a non-dominant voice emerge, a voice that is easily drowned out or overlooked in a cursory reading of the novel. It is a voice critical of the colonial project of the United States to civilize the Filipinos and take the Filipino people under

its tutelage for democratic self-governance. This non-dominant voice may not be easily heard. It is drowned out because it speaks intermittently in the novel; but it is noteworthy because it speaks on occasions that do not bring the main conflict of the novel—that is, the predicament of the main character, Connie Vidal, the woman who claims to have two navels—forward to a resolution. When it speaks, it is actually quite distinct and quite unequivocal. To establish the presence of this voice, it is necessary to get as close to the text as possible, hence a few rather extensive quotations follow.

A text passage that prompts a reader to “overhear” this voice is in Chapter Four titled “The Chinese Moon” where Connie Vidal describes the residence she grew up in:

But there was only the rose garden and the driveway and the tall iron gates, where a khaki-clad guard stood with arms akimbo, pistol sticking out from the hip. Round this big house that was once in the country still clustered the orchards and gardens of an older day, with a high wall now to isolate them from the city. *Beyond the wall were tenements, with crosses splashed upon their doors, for this was in the hungry 1930s, when terror walked the streets at night in the form of three hags.* (213-214; emphasis added)

In the chapter’s context, the third sentence in the quotation ought to be deemed non-essential in the sense of seeming like a mere visual embellishment of the element of setting rather than a substantial fleshing out of the structure of the main narration of the chapter. However, this apparently casual reference to the tenements beyond the wall turns on a switch that lights up textual links, connecting itself with other passages, both earlier and later in the novel. Upon closer scrutiny, we find in these passages that slowly and subtly link with each other a cogent critique being formed.

In this text passage, set in the economic and political center of the country, Manila, the development of the city is collocated with underdevelopment: development is remarked upon at the very moment that it takes note of the proliferation of tenements, conjuring up images that evoke a heightened sense of fear and menace among both the tenement and mansion dwellers. In this way, the narration seems to step back to distance itself from the narrative itself, provoking a critical stance toward the subject of narra-

tion; in doing so, it problematizes the kind of development that American tutelage had promised to bring into being with the violence of colonization.

Taking notice of the obscured, critical voice, a close reader of the novel realizes that the voice has, in fact, been “speaking” all along in passages scattered throughout the novel. One such passage is in Chapter 2, titled “Macho” after the name of Connie Vidal’s husband. This chapter describes Macho as typifying the men of the Southern (in particular, the Negro) elite:

After boarding-school Macho returned to his father’s hacienda for a year’s vacation, during which he was to decide what he wanted to do. Father and son became fast friends; they hunted, drank, and whored together, and lived alone with a flock of servants in the huge, ugly, rickety house that had been built in the 1860’s . . . (110-111)

And while the chapter is supposed to focus mainly on Macho, it almost unnoticeably digresses to a description of the larger society of the South:

After his father’s death Macho returned no more to the city, abandoned his studies altogether. He took up where his father had left off; and in the grass-shack villages the peasants felt again as generations before them had felt: that the old master had not died: that their masters indeed never died they merely grew old and then grew young again, but were always inescapably there—khaki-shirted and red-booted; whip in hand, pistol in belt; hunting, drinking, and whoring; and living forever in the big house that had been falling forever in an eternity of rot and rocking chairs. (114)

Yet again, the series of images drawn from the everyday lives of the peasants and their masters may not seem all that relevant to the subject of the chapter. But it is through these images that the novel manages to expose the unchanging history of Negroes. In particular, it is in the montage of images as the rhetorical strategy from which the voice emerges in this passage that the sense of social stagnation throughout history is captured so artfully and subtly that it does not even seem purposeful. And yet, through such a casual description, the novel summarizes more than a century of history and makes the reader feel the social stagnation in the midst of major historical changes

from Spanish colonization, to the 1898 revolution, to American colonization, and to the US-granted independence of 1945.

Another passage speaking in the same contrapuntal voice is found even earlier on in Chapter 1. The chapter is entitled “Paco” after the Hong Kong-born half-Filipino with whom Connie will elope at the end of the novel. The same critical voice quietly inserts itself in the description of the real lives of the Manileños. In this passage, the non-dominant voice emanates from the general description in which the mimicry of “The American Dream” is presented as a refraction not a reflection, an embodiment of a nightmare of “garish imitation” and the “unreal.” The passage describes Paco’s observations of Manila, which he perceives as being composed of two contradictory worlds between which Manileños crossed over, to and fro, without any sense of contradiction:

Paco sensed an unreality in both worlds: the people who occupied them did not seem to be living there at all. They denied the locale – but their denial was not the asceticism of the mystic nor the vision of the reformer, but merely the aversion of the opium eater. They stepped over reality as they stepped across their gutters—with the transient frown of the tourist, the neutral disgust of the foreigner. Their drugged eyes denied the garish imitation mansions no less than the patched-up tenements where four or five families lived huddled together in each room and did their cooking, eating, and washing in the foul passages; where there were no lavatories and people used the unspeakable roofless public outhouses – or any corner of the sidewalk. They denied the heat and the dust and the rats as well as the not quite authentic glitter of the downtown smart shops and the swanky clubs—for in the world of their mind, they moved with cool expertness, rich and poor, among marbled halls and ivory baths and luxurious wardrobes; through streets that were all Park Avenues, where the men were all Pierpont Morgans, and all the women unaging, unfading movie queens. One might have to eat cold rice and squat on a pail in the outhouse and sleep on a bug-ridden floor: one sighed and pressed a scented handkerchief to one’s nose and invoked the vicarious magic of one’s wrist-watch (just what all the Wall Street tycoons are wearing now) or of one’s evening dress (just what all the New York hostesses are wearing now) against the cold rice, the rank pail, the buggy floor One smiled and floated away, insulated from all the drab horror of inadequate reality by the ultra-perfect colossal, stupendous, technicolored magnificence of the Great American Dream. (47-48)

Through these descriptions, the voice exposes the sheer mimicry of the Great American Dream by the Manileños. It exposes the failure of the American project to educate the Filipino toward a U.S. model of development that was supposed to bring about economic and political freedoms. The superficial imitation of American culture and even of American government institutions gestures to the fact that despite historical, i.e., political transformations, there has actually been no social transformation. No political or economic freedoms have actually been obtained. Thus, to rephrase Joaquin's words describing the social stagnation in Negros, we might say: *The peasants and the urban poor still feel as the generations of them have felt, that their masters never died; they merely have begun to speak English rather than Spanish and to mimic the American democratic structure of government, but they are inescapably still where they have been all along.*

The contrapuntal voice in *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*, while dispersed and obscured as mere embellishments of setting, asserts itself consistently enough as to create a cumulative and distinct critique of the material relations and relations of power created by the long-standing and enduring tutelage of US-prescribed national developmental model. The contrapuntal is the voice of the subaltern who have remained where they are since the Spanish colonization through the American colonization past the formal independence of 1946 and into the various political eras of post-independence Philippines.

Being so recognized despite its quiet, marginal presence, this contrapuntal voice demands to be accounted for in understanding the novel's focal character, Connie Vidal. Within the frame of the contrapuntal voice, the figure of Connie Vidal represents more than just a search for identity and a desire for stability and certainty (as the *Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literatures* tries to summarize her character's significance). Rather, Connie Vidal becomes a figure of resistance who may indeed consequently require a redefinition of identity; she is a figure who is willing to forego stability and certainty as a cost of the resistance.

Within the frame of the contrapuntal voice, a revaluation of the character of Connie Vidal is in order. The first point to be made is that what is very commonly discussed as a mystery about her is not a mystery at all. It is not quite the mystery of the novel whether Connie really has two navels or not. She does not. It is not true she has two navels in the same way and with equal certainty that she has not just gotten married that morning of the day she walks into the office of Dr. Monzon and tells him these two untruths. The mystery, rather, is why she makes these claims. It is this mystery that, in fact, unfolds as the novel progresses.

To understand these rather hysterical claims, we take a cue from Juliana Chang's analysis of the female characters in *Dogeaters* by Jessica Hagedorn. In her article, "Masquerade, Hysteria, and Neocolonial Femininity in Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters*," (2003) Chang shows how masquerade and hysteria are symptoms of global capital and neocolonial relations. She explains that the family romance in the European and American bourgeois family to which masquerade and hysteria have been feminine responses has been cathected at the level of nation-states and then extended to the colony. In the Philippine experience of US colonization, the policy of benevolent assimilation posited the Philippines as having been orphaned by Spain and adopted by the US as a country of little brown brothers. Chang writes, "Colonialism was thus represented as a homosocial, paternal-fraternal relationship in which the United States would provide tutelage and protection . . ." (639). Furthermore, the enduring economic and military dependence of the Philippines on the United States even after formal independence in 1946 continues to figure the Philippines as a younger brother of the United States, thus extending the colonial family romance to a neocolonial family romance. Feminine masquerade and hysteria are recognizable responses to the multiple hegemonomies produced by the neocolonial order (639).

As responses to the neocolonial order, masquerade and hysteria are both ambivalent. They are ambivalent because each one simultaneously legitimizes and challenges the status quo. Chang describes masquerade as "a performance of femininity that masks feminine claims to power and covers over other contradictions of patriarchy" (638). It is a performance of

a patriarchally- sanctioned femininity, a fulfillment of patriarchal design that collaborates in concealing the contradictions of patriarchy but also comes with a covert claim to power. In *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*, such femininity is exemplified by Concha Vidal, the mother of Connie. Concha fulfills her role as the beautiful, elegant wife of the rising political star Manolo Vidal. Her social stature, drawn from and contributing to her husband's, is exemplified by the name by which she is known in the country's higher social circles: *La Vidal* (or "The Vidal"). The use of the definitive article "the" places her in a social position that is a cut above the rest. Dutifully, she fulfills the social expectations that come from her being the wife of a wealthy, powerful personage like Manolo Vidal. Dutifully, she denies the corruption imputed to her husband. However, her covert claim to power manifests itself in using her position to pursue extramarital relations with Macho Escobar and then later with Paco Texeira. She even uses her authority as mother to marry off her daughter to her lover, both to cover up their past relationship and to keep him legitimately proximate to herself. In Concha, the feminine masquerade accomplishes a simultaneous subversion and connivance with the patriarchal order buttressed by the neocolonial order.

The feminine hysteria, on the other hand, is a performance of femininity that maintains characteristics which are acceptable to patriarchal norms but carries these modes of femininity to extreme or excess. Chang explains, "The hysteric mimics the object of the other's desire, but to excess. Thus, the doubleness of the hysteric is that she apparently accepts her gender position while radically questioning it" (642). In Joaquin's novel, this is exemplified by Connie Vidal, with her excessive claim to having two navels. The navel, a physiological reminder of one's subjectivity and subjection as child to one's parents, also conveys the relations of dependence between the child and its parents. For Connie, the preoccupation with the navel and the excessive claim of having two are acts of resistance. These acts acknowledge the hegemony of her mother and father over her as their daughter, but these are carried to an excess so as to draw attention and to divulge the contradictions that her mother's masquerade has sought to conceal. Unlike Concha's masquerade where the continuation of the covert subversion relies on the

persistence of the status quo, Connie's hysteria seeks to divulge the contradictions of the hegemonic order and to dismantle it.

The subversive femininity of Connie Vidal finds resonance in the contrapuntal voice of excess passages of the novel. The character of Connie Vidal and the contrapuntal voice join in chorus divulging the lies in the patriarchal family order and the mimicry in the neocolonial social order. They create a metaphorical conflation of the personal life of the main character and the life of the nation. Connie does indeed emerge as a metaphor of the Filipino nation, but not so much to attest to a dual familial bond between the nation and its two successive colonizers, but rather to attest to the subjection by the patriarchal/neocolonial order. The hysterical claim of having two navels is an exaggeration, a surrender to her subjection taken to a degree of excess so as to transform the surrender to an act of resistance.

In Chapter 4 of the novel, Connie Vidal goes through a series of three fantasies or dreams in each of which she has a final conversation with her husband Macho, with her mother Concha, and with her father Manolo. Each fantasy places her and the person she is with in a situation of imminent death, which in fact ends each fantasy. In the first, she and Macho are swallowed up by the earth following a train wreck. In the second, she and her mother drown in water as the ship they are on sinks. And in the third, she and her father die in the air as the plane they are on crashes. In her conversations with each leading up to their deaths, the other tries to move Connie towards reconciliation, but in each case Connie expresses the impossibility of restoring the ties that have been broken. She severs their relationship even before the moment of death. The Chapter then ends with her car flying over a cliff into Hong Kong Bay. It is, however, an apparent death; but it is also a ritual death. Connie puts an end to her life as Connie Vidal. The next day she finds Paco and they elope, leaving their families behind. With Paco, Connie assumes a new identity and a new life, a life without the privileges of her previous life; therefore unwealthy and powerless, a life in the anonymity of the liminal recesses of society therefore unrecognized and unimportant. But with all the deprivations of her new identity, there is a sense of freedom.

The choice of Paco Texeira as partner in her new life is worthy of note. Paco the half-Filipino, whose Filipino musician father never told him about the Philippines and therefore never imparted the slightest sense of patriotism or nationalism, and whose other half of ancestry is not even revealed by the text, is a figure of nationless-ness. With Paco, Connie enters the nationless liminal spaces of a world organized by nations that are inescapably ordered by neocolonial relations.

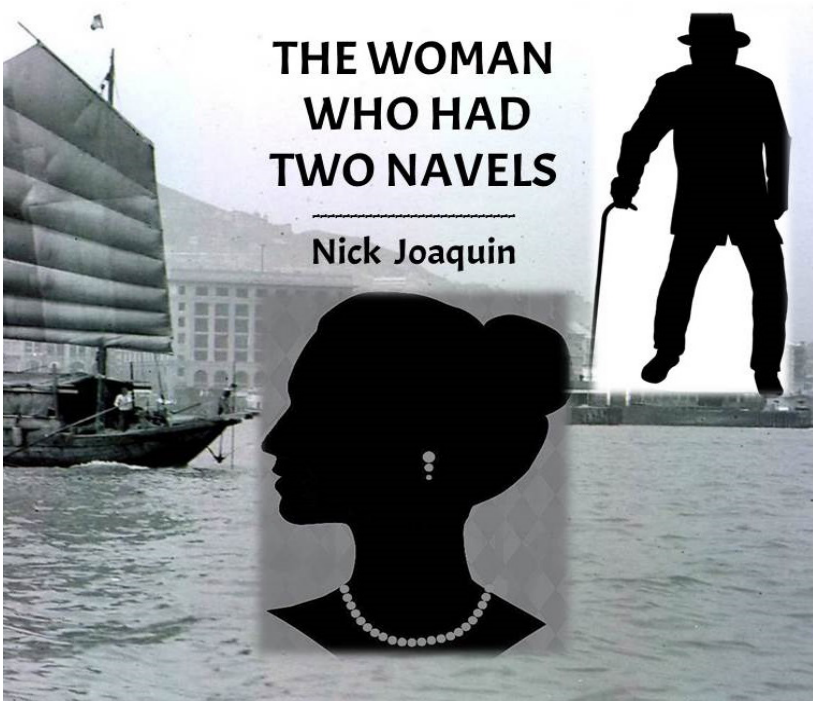


Fig. 1 "Two generations that had lost each other here met in exile." (*The Woman Who Had Two Navels*, 303). Image of this quoted passage as imagined by the author.

Connie, then, is a figure of resistance, divulging the contradictions of the neocolonial order, acting in unison with the contrapuntal voice of the novel to expose the neocolonial family romance that the Philippine nation-state has maintained with the US, a romance that perpetuates the former's dependency on the latter, that idealizes the development pattern of the US, and that maintains its subjection to global capital and its conniving hegemones. Herein lies the significance of the encounter between Connie and the old Monzon in the final chapter. The old Monzon who continued to live in the 1898 moment, that moment when freedom from the colonial family romance with Spain had been at last gained at the cost of many lives, is, to Connie, the father that she has been looking for. In her encounter with the old Monzon, Connie finds what she has been searching for. The encounter allows her to recognize the revolutionary turn that her personal life needs to take and she realizes that, just as the revolution had been successful at the cost of lives, the revolution she needs to undertake will also cost her own life, at the very least the life she has always known it to be. Only such a radical move can break her free from the family romance that she has been dutifully living out, and only such a move will allow her to regain her agency and power of self-determination. In her new life, inaugurated simultaneously with the Chinese New Year, her first act of recuperated agency is to find Paco and run off with him, despite the great uncertainty of their future together.

As the novel comes to its end, the Monzon brothers who have come to know the story of Connie in its various dimensions, through the confessions of Connie, La Vidal, Manolo, and even their friend Paco, are caught in a moral dilemma of how to judge and what to think of what Connie and Paco have done. Rita is quite adamant about condemning her for running off with Paco, a married man, but the Monzon brothers find themselves not quite able to either condemn or condone her. Tony Monzon says:

“Well, what did we think was the right thing for her to do: go back to Macho? However repentant he may be, he would always mean for her the world that almost destroyed her – the lies, the evil, the corruption—a world from which they couldn't have kept running away, in which sooner or

later they would have found themselves lost again. That was the world we wanted her to go back to—but that world was death, and the choice before her last night was between life and death. She chose life and, having chosen, was inevitably drawn to Paco, to our Mary’s Paco, because she wants to be like Mary, ordinary and decent and good. Don’t you see, Rita? If she had done what we say is the right thing, she would have been lost, she would have ended up a cynical and depraved woman. To save herself, she had to do wrong.” (317)

These words, notably uttered by a priest, acknowledges that it would not have been right to send her back to her husband, as Catholic religious precepts would surely and unequivocally require.

Fr. Tony continues:

“Oh I know it sounds outrageous—but, ultimately, this is not a question of right or wrong but of charity. We can play it safe, we can stick to our rules and say that everything is either black or white and that this girl is nothing but a bitch. Or we can be reckless, we can tear up our maps and say that charity is a *terra incognita* in which there are no hard and fast rules.” (317-318)

Through this dialogue, Tony Monzon as well as his brother Pepe acknowledges the inadequacy of Christian moral discourse, yet another hegemonic and prevalent reference of post-independence Philippines, in providing practical guidance on how Connie might have obtained life, for in fact adherence to the prevailing Christian moral discourse would have meant a living death for Connie.

However, Fr. Tony Monzon points to a more marginal reference within the Christian discourse, namely “charity.” He says that charity is, however, a *terra incognita*, meaning that charity is a rather vague, perhaps ambiguous, notion the moral and ethical demands of which need yet to be discovered and articulated. The authentic transformation in Connie’s life could be achieved only by abandoning a previously established ethical structure and venturing out to a yet unexplored, unarticulated moral field. Through this critique of the dominant moral structure, the novel then gestures to the necessity of a similar revolutionary act if an authentic social transformation in post-inde-

pendence Philippines is to be obtained. If the true freedoms that the people desire is to be obtained so that historical transformations will indeed signify real social transformations, there needs to be the readiness to abandon previously set moral structures and to venture into a *terra incognita*, even if such an initiative may seem outrageous or reckless at the outset. The contrapuntal voice of the text, therefore, not only uncovers the historical transformations as being bereft of authentic social transformation but it also points to the necessity for a restructuring of the state's dominant moral and ethical principles.

Like many other post-colonial texts, Joaquin's *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* does not end with a comfortable, heartwarming, back-to-equilibrium ending; rather, it ends at an open road, an uncharted and yet-untraveled road, a *terra incognita*. This open-endedness becomes doubly true and more understandable given a contrapuntal reading of the text. The contrapuntal reading allows a critical voice often overlooked or even ignored to finally be heard. The voice challenges the complacent presumption that historical transformations, that is, the changes in regimes of political power, automatically or necessarily result in authentic social transformations. Furthermore, apart from interrogating the dominant discourse of national independence and development, it uncovers the inadequacy of the dominant ethical structure to provide reference for effective actions that would lead to real and lived social transformations. While depriving the reader a comfortable and definitive closure, however, there is still consolation in knowing that we have at least recognized with certainty that the road we had been on was the wrong road and that the moment to enter *terra incognita* has arrived. The sense of closure comes from the understanding and resolution that a definitive and final severance with romance of the past must now be made.

NOTES

1. Nick Joaquin started to write *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* while on a Harper Publishing Fellowship in 1957. The Penguin edition appears on his birth centenary which is also thirteen years after his death in 2004. *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* was initially a short story that Joaquin later developed into a full-length novel. It is the short story version that appears in the Penguin edition.
2. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said writes in particular about British novels which he believes are unequalled in the regularity and frequency of their allusions to empire. He acknowledges the references to empire in the novels of other nationalities like those of the French and the Americans, but he observes that the British novels have a significantly higher frequency of such references. As such, the British novel serves well as subject matter for proposing the contrapuntal mode of reading, without excluding the possibility of its later utilization on other texts.
3. Said gives the example of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* which needs to be read in the context of *Africanism* as well as Conrad's personal experiences. He writes: "Conrad's impressions of Africa were inevitably influenced by lore and writing about Africa, which he alludes to in *A Personal Record*; what he supplies in *Heart of Darkness* is the result of his impressions of those texts interacting creatively, together with the requirements and conventions of narrative and his own special genius and history" (67).
4. Among more recent studies on the novel are Marie Rose Arong's "Temporality in Nick Joaquin's *The Woman Who had Two Navels*" that also argues that the novel should be read as a resistance to U.S. neocolonialism and as a critique of nativism; and, Miguel Antonio Lizada's "When She Started Acting Queer: A Queer Gothic Reading of Nick Joaquin's *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*" which explores the gothic tropes of doubling and monstrosity in the novel's main character Connie Vidal.

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