

Land Tropes and Resistance in Two Southeast Asian Agricultural Novels

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Abstract

The Philippines and Malaysia have ancient land traditions that express human affinity to the land. In Southeast Asia, land is sacred. The land is soil and is called the skin of the earth. But it has not escaped the grasp of modernity and capitalism, and humanity is complicit in exploiting it. This study uses ecocriticism to examine the response of land to human intervention and the break in the formerly symbiotic relationship between the two. The study examines the use of land tropes and expressions of resistance using the subgenre of the agricultural novel in Shahnun Ahmad's *Rope of Ash* and NVM Gonzales' *A Season of Grace*. The study will contextualize the friction between nature and human progress by showing the transformation in the cultural discourse pertaining to land as both countries face the demands of economic advancement and nation-building.

Keywords

land tropes, ecological resistance, agricultural novels, ecocriticism

In Southeast Asia, ecocriticism is a newly emerging field. Not that there are no concrete actions against environmental degradation or literature discussing the various issues and ideologies informing ecological preservation, but these matters taken as literary and critical materials are still rare. It is ironic that given that much of Southeast Asian culture is related to Nature—its religions, songs and dances, weaving, pottery, etc., its pursuit of progress and modernity seems to exclude its significance. Some countries subject to extreme natural disasters view the incidents as people disasters, often sidelining Nature as an important actor. It is essential to provide articulative space for the ecocritical concerns of Southeast Asia, mining its literature for ecological wisdom as well as questions, especially in the context of modernity and nation-building.

One of the most recent methods of understanding cultural phenomena comes from the field of science. Recent natural events that have affected lives worldwide such as climate change seem to have reignited interest in the role of nature, not only as a method of explaining the empirical but also as an articulator of the historical and the cultural. Not exactly new, this approach to literary texts has taken on refurbishment, combining with other disciplines to promote a more inclusive representation, not limiting discourse to a human one but including non-human elements as well (Tope 133)

At this point, a simple definition of ecocriticism is in order:

Ecocriticism examines the representation and relationship between the biophysical environment and texts through ecological theory. Environment and text are both inclusive categories: environment comprises flora and fauna, soil and water, climate and weather, industry and commerce; texts comprise artifacts as diverse as literature, film, the internet, journalism, policy papers, rocks, spoor and trees. (Mason, Szabo-Jones, Steenkampf 1)

As a critical lens, ecocriticism contains several tropes. One would be the land trope or land narratives. This trope pertains to the assumption of humanity's primordial attachment to land and how human incursion, technology, and industry have wrenched man's connection to it. bell hooks, an African American writer, claims that "black people 'were first and foremost a people of the land' with a strong love for nature before their lives were

fundamentally altered by industrial capitalism in Northern cities” (cited in Gerhardt, hooks 53).

This study examines one of Southeast Asia’s primordial constants that has been affected by the tides of progress and transformation of cultural values at the onset of modernity. Despite widespread economic development after independence, much of Southeast Asia has remained linked to its land—an economic resource as well as a cultural and ideological base. It is livelihood, it is tradition, it is precious. It is industry but it is also lifestyle and philosophy. The life of a farmer/peasant is inextricably connected to the land and history has proven that his socio-political identity is constructed according to the way s/he embraces the land or rejects it.

This study will look at the definition and cultural perceptions of land, from science to *ethnie*. It will examine the land trope specifically regarding the issues of land usage in agriculture in two Southeast Asian countries in the early post independent years. Two novels, *Rope of Ash* by Malaysian author Shahnnon Ahmad and *A Season of Grace* by Filipino author NVM Gonzalez, illustrating agricultural attitudes towards land will be the objects of study: the first for the Malays’ cultural affinity for the land stemming from tradition and religion, and the second for the Filipinos’ resort to slash-and-burn farming as a result of dispossession and poverty. The study will use an ecocritical lens to understand the land-agricultural issues of both Malaysian and Filipino societies in early post independent life and provide an ecocritical assessment of how the two novels address the issue of land.

What is Land

What is land? Land is soil. It is called the Skin of the Earth. It is a mixture of minerals, organic matter, gases, liquids and countless organisms that together support life on earth (*Encyclopedia of Soil Science*). Soil serves as a medium for plant growth, a means of water storage, supply and purification, a modifier of Earth’s atmosphere, and the habitat for organisms (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soil>). Soil is a major component of the Earth’s ecosystem. Following the atmosphere, the soil is the next largest carbon reservoir on

earth and is potentially one of the most reactive to human disturbance and climate change (Amelung, et al.).

Land is also bodies of water, flora and fauna. Land includes rivers, and other bodies of water where soil goes. Land includes the forests, the grasses and plants that provide oxygen to the atmosphere. Land includes the animals that are dependent on other animals and plants and on land for its habitat.

Land is an important and beloved resource but man has not been a careful client. In the past, there was little awareness of soil sustainability and man's agricultural practices often led to soil—and land—degradation. Man's neglect and abuse caused decline in soil fertility, carbon and biodiversity; lower water retention capacity; disruption of gas and nutrient cycles; diminished quality of water and air; threat in food and feed safety.

In a study titled "Soil Quality and Sustainable Evolution," authors Gergely Toth et.al. mention the existence of soil response. It is this that sparked my interest in the topic. In a sense, the effects of soil degradation listed above are already the land's language for payback time. The language of science elides the ethical dilemma that often accompanies the choices humans make in their relationship to the land. I would like to explore the complexity of this relationship and the process by which land responds to and resists man's incursions into the natural world.

The issue of land usage is an old trope and has often been seen as a socio-political issue. Its visioning as an ecological undertaking is perhaps even older as traditional communities have often practiced ecological prudence towards land but were certainly not bound to any theory. Land continues to be a contentious issue in Southeast Asia as it remains a flashpoint between communities and policy makers, and between tradition and industry.

In this study, I focus on the agrarian use of land, not only because much of Southeast Asia is still agricultural but also because it is an area that seems not to have received the attention it deserves. William Major points out that even in ecocriticism, there seems to be a neglect of agrarian issues and the plight of farmers is sidelined by the economic and political conversations about environment. "We fail to appreciate that there is a long-standing envi-

ronmental ethos inherent in a relationship with the land seen most notably in agrarian writings” (52). Advocating what is termed “agrarianism,” Major emphasizes the need to study man’s relationship with the land, not just as a source of inspiration and pleasure, but a source of work. In this study, two agrarian novels will be examined in terms of land philosophy, land use, and ecocritical conversations with the land. Land will be seen not only as a source of work but also as a living natural entity with a relationship with its tillers. What affects man affects it too but it is dependent on man for sustainability and protection.

The imminent incursion of industrialization and the solidification of the nation building process during the post-independence period have posed challenges to agricultural Southeast Asia. The colonial economic policies have proven that land is a vital component of economic development as a source of cash crops that will fuel food production but more importantly, serve as raw materials to industrial products. In early post-independent life, peasants who were used to traditional farming had to deal with economic policies that challenge long held traditions. To reap the benefits of the economic policies, which translates into higher income, better educational opportunities for their children, improved standard of living, farmers have to compromise or even release their long-held relationship with the land. This we see in the Malaysian novel, *Rope of Ash*.

When there is no land to till, one moves where there is land available. The farmers of archipelagic Philippines move from one island to another in search of land to till. More often than not, these are dispossessed peasants whose lands have been taken away by big landlords or big companies for cash cropping. Just as often, they are peasants who cannot afford to buy their own land. These farmers are pushed to the hinterlands where there are unclaimed lands. They practice slash and burn farming, burning forest lands so they can plant rice, the people’s staple. This we see in *A Season of Grace*.

In both novels, the discourse of the state and nation building underpins the narrative, more overt in *Rope of Ash* and implicit in *A Season of Grace*. Peasants’ relationship with the land is subject to the pressure of state desire

and the fictional direction of each novel is informed by each community's response to such pressure.

Admittedly, the issue of land usage especially in agriculture is essentially anthropomorphic in nature. Agriculture is the cultivation of land for survival and economic purposes, often relegating land simply as a resource or worse a commodity. In essence, agriculture is against land, against the environment, given the lack of mutuality between man and land. Be that as it may, the exploitative reality is revealed and countermanded by an ecocritical reading of these literary narratives, hopefully raising questions about cultural attitudes towards land resource in the two countries.

Rope of Ash

Ecocriticism allows a reader to take the point of view of nature, of the land, in the engagement regarding needs. Human needs take precedence, according to one argument, but can land resist? Is land completely passive and silent? How does land deal with human economic excess? The philosophy of land is explored in the first novel, *Rope of Ash*, by Malaysian author Shahnnon Ahmad. The novel is Ahmad's first, published in 1965 in Bahasa, and translated into English in 1979.

The novel is set in Banggul Derdap, a small and relatively isolated farming community that faces a crisis because the government has offered support for the community if they agree to plant more than once. The condition is that there must be 100% consensus among the villagers. The obstacle is the family of the main character, Semaun. This family has been living marginally, ostracized by the community because of acts of violence Semaun's father has allegedly committed. Semaun is regarded as a tough challenge because he is reputedly bull headed and belligerent. The village headman nonetheless attempts to convince Semaun to follow the village's decision to plant twice but is met with expected resistance.

The narrative is set in the context of Malaysia's efforts towards rural development in the 1950s and 1960s leading towards the New Economic Policy (NEP) that sought to eradicate poverty in the process of nation building (Abdul 60). As a reaction to the riots of 1969, the NEP has been largely

directed at the rural Malays. Its first objective was to be achieved by facilitating access to land, physical capital, training and public amenities for the economically privileged. The second would be brought about by reducing the dependence of the Malays and other indigenous groups on subsistence agriculture and by increasing their share of the country's wealth through greater ownership of the corporate sector (Andaya and Andaya 303).

Double cropping, along with other measures, was introduced to alleviate the burden of wasted opportunity in single cropping. Single cropping in *Rope of Ash* is shown as the Malay's manifest relationship with the land. The Malay farmer knows only too well that land can resist when abused.

The philosophical highlight of the novel is articulated by Semaun in his arguments against planting twice, as seen in the following lines from *Rope of Ash*:

We plant once a year, that's enough. We don't want to torture the land we've inherited. The fields are our soul. Our heart. We were made of earth. We return to the earth. What will happen if we torture the earth, our soul? It will be angry with us. And what if the earth is angry? The rice will fail. The earth will kill us. (31)

Mankind is too arrogant. He never feels compassion for the earth. The earth has feelings as well. But it can't tell us what they are. (32)

The land won't complain, Semaun chimed in. It hasn't got a mouth. There's no way it can cry out for mercy. (33)

Our ancestors cared for it, as carefully as they cared for their own children. (33)

The land needs to rest. The land couldn't take it. It would make us humans thin too.... (35)

Semaun's proclamations seem to suggest that Malay conversations with the land have been ongoing for centuries. These arguments come from Malay traditional thinking that reveals the Malay's epistemic connection to the land. First, land is inherited but not owned. The Islamic belief and even *adat* (Malay code of behavior) for that matter, enjoins man to be the custo-

dian of the land. A person is judged by his stewardship of the land; therefore, he must take care of it as if it were his child.

Other agrarian novels in Malay echo Semaun's sentiments. Exploring the Malay's relationship with the land, Zalima Mohd Lazim, in her study of Khadijah Hashim's novel, *The Wave of Life*, explains the primeval and perhaps indigene bond with the land. She concludes that the characters' central core in their identity is "linked to their strong connection to the land" (528).

To Awang and Milah, land is their birth right not just because they were born there, but most importantly because they have earned the right to live there as they had invested time and energy, working long, hard hours to claim the land. Land is not just *tanah pusaka* (ancestral land) that will be passed down through the generations, it is also a valuable commodity that could be utilized to produce goods that could be sold or bartered, and the proceeds used to better the lives of their family. They have a very close connection to the land as they become masters of their environment due to effective utilization of the abundant natural resources, utilizing nature in their farming methods and thus are able to reap the benefits of living so closely with nature (528-529).

There is a deep intimacy between humans and land. While there is in the passages above a personification of land and perhaps an anthropomorphic rendition of its language, one cannot ignore the presence of an emotional and spatial affinity between human and land. What is important is the conversation between human and land, the persona knowing and feeling the torture the land goes through because they are of one heart, one soul.

Historically, the Malay's affinity with the land and their refusal to leave it has led to the importation of labor from China and India, which altered Malaysia's demography unequivocally. The British needed workers for their plantation and railroads but could not persuade the Malays to leave their villages. Culturally, rural life is seen as the preferred pristine life, while the city is seen as a net of sin and corruption. For one who leaves for the city, land abandonment has cultural consequences.

There is also in this ancient wisdom the awareness that land must rest. Here lies the most interesting aspect of this land philosophy. According to Ismail Noor and Muhammad Azaham, in Islamic belief, man "does not have

the right to use any of the rich resources inherently found on the face of the earth to suit his personal caprice, whim or fancy, nor for the promotion of this own myopic, nationalistic, ethnic or tribal agenda nor for his domination of others” (89). Man “should not exceed his limits, nor feel overly rejoiced on embracing the force of nature” (90). This is the philosophy of Enough. Man extracts only what he needs from nature, allowing nature to recuperate and maintain its health and balance. This is sustainable use of Nature.

Science backs this up. Continuous farming can lead to land degradation: This causes erosion which commonly occurs following the conversion of natural vegetation to agricultural land—carrying away fertile soil and fertilizers, pesticides, and agrochemicals. When natural vegetation is cleared, and when farmland is ploughed, the exposed topsoil is often blown away by wind and washed away by rain (Toth et al.).

Traditional farming makes the farmer touch land, and thus the intimacy is created between the tiller and the tilled. The farmer knows his soil, his climate, and his plants. His knowledge of the soil allows him to decide what kind of rice variety to plant, where, and when to plant it. Traditional farming is compromised when farmers are promised a tractor if they plant twice.

This land philosophy or land ethic is unfortunately demonized by Malaysian politics as backward, anti-progress, anti-capital and is responsible for miring Malays in poverty and useless tradition. State narratives consider land philosophy a millstone around the Malay people’s necks and is a result of their lack of education, superstition, and valuing of rural life. In the novel, Semaun is criticized for his adherence to this land philosophy and may be blamed for his fellow villagers’ inability to receive government support. The prospect of a second or third planting is a government effort to alleviate poverty among the Malays, including wresting them away from their land tradition. Implicit here also is the state’s desire to raise the economic capacity of the Malays on par with the other ethnicities in Malaysia. Land tradition is a cause of Malay poverty, and the Malay’s economic lag behind the other migrant races. The state took Malay poverty in the rural areas seriously, that “massive public investment was shifted to the rural areas” (H. Osman-Rani 208).

Without ecocriticism, the Malay government seems to be right in its initiative to promote economic mobility among Malay farmers. In fact, in the novel, Semaun gives in to the decision of the village because of personal circumstances. Perhaps this is due to his debt of gratitude to the village headman, or maybe he is now complying with the Malay value of communality. But ecocriticism makes the reader confront an ethical dilemma. Must this deep spiritual and cultural knowledge of the land be laid aside for economic progress? Must this symbiotic even compassionate relationship with the land always be deemed backward? Must land always be sacrificed in the name of economic development? After all, where has progress taken us? How should we balance human and nature's needs? What is ecological knowledge teaching us? The ecological contradictions, ambiguities, ironies continue.

Land resistance is a concept recognized by the Malays. Can land speak? In her study of Mapuche poetry, Eva Palma suggests that it does. Man has to listen to it. Land can resignify man (145) by changing the viewing actor, meaning, land configures man. Land can get angry. In Malay philosophy, land can resist by refusing to yield. "And what if the earth is angry? The rice will fail. The earth will kill us" (*Rope of Ash* 31). Drought for instance may be climatic but it is land language too. When land hurts, it can withhold too. It can cause hunger and death. From being the great giver, land can deny. Land here is a main character, an object of contention, but also a participant in and articulator of resistance.

As stated, the discourse of agriculture remains anthropomorphic. Land is inherited, used with care as far as the Malays are concerned, but still regarded as a resource. The state's offer elides the human care for the land, acting as what Garrard et.al calls a "skeptic" agent that wants to prove land protective tradition to be baseless. The state's skepticism of the Malay tradition of land usage is proof of the state's distrust of human abilities to take care of the environment and adds another layer of anthropomorphic arrogance towards land.

A Season of Grace

Nature's resistance is more overt in the second novel, *A Season of Grace* by Filipino author NVM Gonzalez. Written in 1956, it chronicles the hardships of the slash and burn (*kaingin*) farmers in the Philippine island of Mindoro.

Slash-and-burn farming, swidden farming or *kaingin*, is defined as “a cultivation method of cutting living trees to clear land, burning the biomass after letting it dry and planting a crop in the ashes in an appropriate season. After harvest, the cultivated area is left fallow long enough for soil fertility to recover” (Myllantaus, et. al. 267-268). Farmers have practiced this kind of farming since ancient times but in later centuries, it has acquired a negative reputation as a cause of deforestation. “Because of their primitive methods of cutting tropical forests, burning the felled timber, planting crops for three or four years, until the soil nutrients have leached from the soil and they must begin the slash-and -burn cycle over again, forest farmers are considered the greatest threat to the world's tropical forests” (Kennedy 230).

The Philippines has a total land area of 30 million hectares (ha) covering more than 7,100 islands. 53% or 15.88m ha is forestland although only about 5.4m ha have forest cover. Deforestation is at an alarming rate of 100,000 ha per year that is partly blamed on slash and burn farmers (Bugayong and Carandang). Many years later, the Philippines will increasingly suffer from destructive landslides due to deforestation. Waters rushing down from the mountains due to typhoons will flood towns and cities and cause disasters.

While slash-and-burn farming sounds destructive, there are those who believe that it has actually been beneficial to Nature. Scott documents that the 16th century Visayans used this kind of farming but no harm on nature has been recorded. In fact, the real culprits of deforestation are said to be commercial logging and intensive farming.

Be that as it may, the early years of Philippine independence has seen how large-scale agriculture has pushed people to the upland areas. These are mostly poor peasants who have no land or whose lands have been co-opted by big landowners or companies. This can be seen in the light of the agricultural crisis in the Philippines during the early post-independence years.

By then, agriculture had shifted to cash crop production and cultivation for export.

Just to contextualize the plight of the *kaingero*, it is good to look at some statistics. “More than half of the Philippines’ 100 million people live in rural areas, and more than a third of them are poor. Agriculture is the primary source of income for poor rural people and the one source for many of the poorest households” (<https://www.ifad.org/en/web/operations/w/country/philippines>). While the incidence of poverty depends on the region, most of those in the rural areas, including the upland areas, are poorest due to low agricultural output, lack of access to resources especially financial ones, lack of infrastructure and unsustainable practices which leads to deforestation.

The upland resources are therefore the only free resource available to the farmer who has no land. There are no land titles involved, no taxes to pay. By dint of hard work, a farmer can eke out a small living, and begin somewhere. The *kaingeros* are pioneers cultivating unowned virgin land which they can leave any time or settle in if things are good.

Husband and wife, Doro and Sabel, join a community of pioneers in the tiring activity of taming the forests and laying claim to farmlands which they subject to slash and burn techniques. They are joined by migrant laborers who sail from other islands, suggesting the lack of farming opportunities in more populated places. There is even a crippled girl whose disability does not deter her from the back breaking work of the *kaingin*. The thing that binds the community is their poverty but it is alleviated by the communal help they give each other.

The novel however suggests that people like Doro and Sabel are forced to venture into the forests because this is the only way they can work the land. Implicit is the long history of peasant dispossession and the inability of the poor to acquire land through legal means. Slash and burn farming is done to stave off hunger. Unlike the Malay peasants, the Filipino farmer seemed to look at the land as a mode of production, his indigene relations to it broken by long years of servitude under the colonizers, landowners and corporations.

This situation probably also stems from the feudal practices imposed by the Spanish colonizers who treated the land as commodity, as a source of income. Land was also forcibly taken from the natives. The Spanish made the Filipino peasants work the land but not enjoy its bounties, cutting the affective ties between farmer and land. The land could have meant dispossession, oppression, yet it is much needed for survival.

Without ecocriticism, the novel reflects the courage, persistence and even nobility of the Filipino peasant. They want to survive, they turn to nature. They face grave danger when they fell trees, conquer the swamps, till their plots, practically will everything to grow. This is a testament to the strength of the human spirit. Gonzalez draws a lyrical tribute to the *kaingin* farmer as can be seen in what seems to be a paean or an ode to him.

Doro bundled the reeds carefully and took them to his new clearing. “To this year’s clearing!” he knew he might have said with a tickle of pride.

He kindled the twigs and leaves piled waist high over logs and tree stumps. With his torch he took the fire from off one pile to the next. The river wind breathed lusty life to the small fires, and these grew wild and ran about. Then the blaze built an arch from what used to be a stand of hinagdong and wild bananas reaching as far down as the dao tree. There was the clean smell of fire, and the parrots screamed ceaselessly.

The fire left the tall, old dao tree untouched. But it consumed, like a hungry beast, the lauan trees. Like the crater of a small volcano, the lauan tree-stumps that the fire had left last behind stood in the sun emitting puffs of smoke. Slivers of white ash slipped down their gutted sides.

A live crackling flame cut through the cleared portion of the second growth and it looked as if the fire would reach the bamboo brakes on the river bank. A breeze pushed the blaze indeed toward a growth of tall slim poles of bamboo at the edge of the clearing, and loud explosions rent the air. It happened that a thick growth of wild bananas came in its path and the fire could move no further. The bursting bamboo poles were silenced as they fell against the pulpy, wet stalks of the bananas, exuding a thickish earth-smell and sending the parrots that had come from nowhere it seemed, round the clearing again and again.

The heat lingered all evening and then the stars came. Doro sat before his plate of rice. Already Sabel had put Little Porton and Eloy to sleep. She joined him, sharing his plate of rice; she noticed that the food did not interest him.

“I’m too tired,” he explained.

Now through the open window, the river wind came. It swept past the eaves of the kitchen shed, crossed over the new clearing and there began raking up in the night the burnt leaves of lauan and hinagdong. The night became heavy with the smell of ashes.

Sabel spread a mat on the floor. She laughed when Doro crawled toward it and, a minute later was snoring. His body had the tang of burnt tree bark and the odor of scorched loam. (*A Season of Grace*, 149-150).

This is slash and burn farming. It cuts sections of the forest, burn it to ash, let the ashes seep into the ground, then plant crops (“Slash and Burn Agriculture”). Human effort and strength needed to burn the forest is emphasized here. Doro like a conqueror glories in the burnt trees that will later give way to rice fields. The destruction of forest is man’s victory over Nature. Unfortunately, Doro and Sabel’s community does not seem to know the damage they are doing, of the long term repercussions of their economic activities. The urgency of survival does not give the forests time to recuperate. Unlike the ancient Visayans, these Mindoro *kaingeros* are actually lowlanders whose knowledge of agriculture is lowland based. It will be decades before the government teach the farmers how to do swidden farming without harming the forests. It will also take decades before the government declares *kaingin* illegal.

The novel also mentions that capitalism has reached the isolated village of the *kaingin*. Commercial logging becomes a rival for land cultivation in the upland areas. The merchant catches the needs of the farmers, makes them indebted to him, and buys their labor with exploitative wages. This drives the farmers further into the forests. Land turns into a commodity that serves those with money and disadvantages those without.

As mentioned earlier, the farmers become the biggest threat to the forest lands. Agriculture becomes the nemesis of ecological balance. Without their knowing, the community of *kaingeros* engage in a battle with the forest. The relationship between land and humans is more violent with land at the losing end. The anthropomorphic aspect of the agricultural process entails a conquest of nature and unlike the Malay tradition, there is hardly

any cultural or spiritual affinity between land and humans in the farms of Mindoro. The struggle for survival is two fold: human and natural. Humans need the forests to survive, the forests struggle against human aggression. But the novel probably inadvertently records land resistance against human violent imposition. Land is not passive and is given agency by the narrative.

Sabel more than Doro feels the land's resistance. Her consciousness records the forest's hostility. The isolation in the homestead underscores that the humans are the intruders who have yet to learn that in the forest, they are the vulnerable minority. The jungle is an axiomatic presence, humans a contentious presence. The falling trees block their movement inland. Mosquitoes give them a dose of malaria, incapacitating the axe and the incinerating hand. The hawk that swoops down on their chickens is vengeful for its destroyed home and source of food. It too steals from the thief. The snake bites the intruding foot. The parrot screams not out of pleasure but out of distress, hurting human ears for its burnt habitat. Some trees refuse to fall, despite being burnt, defying human effort and needs.

The most gripping image is that of the black mice that come out at night to ravage the rice in the field.

"Better watch out. Those creatures have ears. Better say nothing ill of them," Nong Tomas said.

"They're vengeful," Blas Marte said.

"You mean they're good folk—they're the good folk," Sabel put in. For why speak ill of them? They're all God's children—we all are, she believed. And she almost said it aloud too. She was for saying that the mice merely paid a neighborly visit. They were the visitors, the little folk who remembered other little folk, and, remembering had not forgotten to come.... (*A Season of Grace*, p. 52)

Nature can exact land justice. As humans claim animal feeding grounds, so do the mice. The food raids not only starve humans, they also delay or stop further incursions. Sabel calls the mice the good folk to avoid antagonizing them. She humanizes the mice, calling them God's children. She acknowledges them as neighbors who have come for a visit. She subconsciously realizes that the mice, displaced by her and her husband, have every right to her rice grains, perhaps even suggesting that they are all unfortu-

nate creatures who are just hungry. The appeasement is meant not only to promote goodwill and stop the raids but also to acknowledge human vulnerability in the face of natural displeasure.

The novel then raises the issue of whose needs comes first. The farmer asserts his in his struggle for survival and forgets the need for sustainability. Probably, in Doro and Sabel's circumstances, they do not know they have a responsibility to the land and to the generations of Filipinos who will be connected to it. Their community does not seem to be aware of Nature fighting back. Slash and burn farming has almost come to a full stop in the Philippines. But the ravage on land resources has not. Mining, real estate, tourism and just everyday human activities will eventually take its toll on the land and we anxiously await its justice.

To conclude, land tropes provide a contentious site between the needs of man and those of nature. Economic development seems to have cut that precious intimacy between land and man every time the issue of survival and progress is raised. Land traditions do exist but could be abandoned for economic mobility. Land has been commodified by colonialism, human greed, and indifference. It has also become a resource to urgent but short-term alleviation of poverty. Ecocriticism has provided a lens by which pro-human novels on human grit and effort can be reread as containing Nature's language of resistance. It may reevaluate the significance of land traditions not as an obstacle to human progress but as a force towards it. Agriculture remains an anthropomorphic discourse and land usage is an anthropomorphic privilege. The Malay culture provides a tradition of land care and the Filipino forests resist agricultural incursion into virgin soil. Land speaks and resists so we must listen to it.

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