



Poetic text and environmental crisis of the sea: An Ecocritical Study of the Select Contemporary Cebuano-Visayan Poetry

Cindy Arranguez Velasquez

Department of Communications, Linguistic and Literature, University of San Carlos, Cebu City, Philippines

Abstract

The Philippines is one of the seventeen megadiverse nations in the world. However, there are still Filipinos who have remained unaware of the biodiversity and its impact to the world's ecosystem. As an archipelago, the Philippines is known as the "Pearl of the Orient Seas," its seas have served as storytellers of the narratives of the Filipinos. The study aims to identify the poetic text and the environmental crisis of the selected poems. The study uses ecocriticism as the main anchor supported by formalism. Furthermore, the study focuses only on poetry which are written in Cebuano-Visayan language. This is to acknowledge the contributions of the Cebuano poets to the Philippine literature. This study uses a qualitative research method utilizing a descriptive research which specifically uses a content analysis. Based from the result of the study, there is an interrelationship among Cebuano poetry, physical environment, and culture.

Keywords: Philippine literature, Cebuano poetry, ecocriticism

1. Introduction

There is a need to heighten one's environmental awareness in reconstructing one's overview on habitat preservation. This is to strengthen some perspectives in protecting the natural environment particularly the sea. Needless to say, the sea has served as storytellers of the narratives of the past and even until the present. The water's existence is connected to the metaphorical life of the Filipino writers through their imagination and memory. Furthermore, the Philippines is recognized as the "Pearl of the Orient Seas." However, in the current period, the seas in the Philippines are not just dependent by its geography, aquatic resources, and inimitability. The seas have become an identity of the Filipino nation. It possesses its individuality: beauty, history, and even diminution.

In relation to the sea, the study uses ecocriticism as the main anchor for two major reasons. First, it is to understand the effects of the strong existence of anthropocentrism particularly in the 21st century. Humanity's superiority to nature has changed even the legal actions in protecting the natural environment. News about exploitation on the sea or even killing endangered marine animals for profit is becoming alarming. Indeed, environmental justice is a crucial topic to discuss and most especially to apply.

Another, it is to emphasize the concept of losing one's habitat and its socio-cultural effects. Through this viewpoint, it can be a way to emphasize a deep sense of place. Humanity has experienced the "losing" of their islands and homelands due to natural calamities, politics, and even their own mistake for not protecting it. Alienation to nature provides consequences that might affect a person's way of responding to the society and connecting to the culture that has shaped him or her.

Furthermore, the study focuses only on poetry which are written in Cebuano-Visayan language. This is to acknowledge the contributions of the Cebuano poets to the Philippine literature. It is reality that language is always

changing. Indeed, a language has its metamorphosis through inventing new words, borrowing terms from another language, or even decaying over time as people eventually stop using some words. This study aims to use Cebuano poetry to recognize poets writing in their local language despite of the changes of Cebuano-Visayan language over time.

Secondly, this study aims to document contemporary Cebuano poems. Poetry is one of the most compelling forms of art. In this case, by using poetry in this research, it tries to have a glimpse of the events and deviations of the 21st century. This divulges on how literature can be a historical diary of a society.

This research presents Cebuano ecopoetry and not just traditional Cebuano poems that are purely describing nature. The poems in the study articulate environmental crises. In this case, there is a greater concept of the natural environment. Cebuano poetry is traditionally affiliated with nature. Metaphors and other figurative languages deal with the presence of the "natural environment" but not all poems are revolving particularly on socio-cultural aspect. This is the final reason in pursuing the research.

By exploring the notion of the "sea" through the use of Cebuano poetry, it endeavors to register the complex interweaves of factors that relate to literary production as they are produced for consumption. This study not only aims to contribute to the corpus of literary criticism in the regional works in the Philippines but also to strongly encourage Filipino students, instructors, and scholars to recognize Cebuano poetry.

2. Materials and Methods

The main material of the study is *Kalihokan sa Bisayang Dakonga Katitikan* (KABISDAK). This website is the first and longest-running Cebuano poetry blog since its establishment in 2007. The study aims to promote the existing literature of this period so more people even the

next generation can be able to know the local writers. Moreover, the poems in the study are some of the best works from recognized and beginning poets regardless of their age and gender. The intention is to depict diversity. In this way, more perceptions can be explored in the richness of Cebuano sea poetry. Likewise, the Cebuano poets have used online technology or even social media in their quests of sharing their works to the world. This study is a way to eyewitness the evolution of practicing online publication and promotion through the occurrence of KABISDAK.

These are the following poems to be used in the study: "Mga baka sa dagat: mga manatee sa Homosassa" by Melquiadito Allego, "Boracay" by Simon Anton Baena, "Sa baybayon" by Ric Bastasa, "Pagtaob" by John Zabala, "Kining nagkamoritsing nga baybayon sa Dumlog" by Jeremiah Bondoc, "Didto sa amoa" by Maria Victoria Beltran, "Nganong wala ko nikuyog nimo larga sa syudad" by Jessrel Gilbuena, "Isla" by Jona Branzuela Bering, and lastly, "Dihang gabawod ang mga biniyaan" by Mechelle Centurias.

This research study uses a qualitative research method utilizing a descriptive research which specifically uses a content analysis. This determines the different literary theories used to bring forth on how literature of the contemporary period has incorporated environmental perspectives and socio-cultural effects.

3. Ecocriticism

The Cebuano writers have incorporated the presence of nature simply because it is the ideal characteristic of a *balak* (poetry). But over time, the Cebuano poems somehow become earth-centered, approaching a reaction to the environmental issues. This portrays hope: writing about the natural environment with social purpose and not just for the sake of the poetic language. There is a sense of unity between the literary value of the poem and the message on environmental issues. Likewise, the poems encompass equilibrium on the changes and the circumstances of the 21st century.

Cheryll Glotfelty describes in the introduction of *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. It explains that: "Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnection between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature" (19). Ecocriticism is also linked to ecological literacy. A procedure on how to seek for the ecological literacy of a poem is presented in the "Living Limestones and the Move to Refuse Resilience," an introduction of the first ecopoetry collection in the country which is entitled *Sustaining the Archipelago: An Anthology of Philippine Ecopoetry*. The introduction explains the four key parts in studying ecological literacy in literary works: "First, the unity of the writer's literariness and ecological knowledge; second, the body of work which understands the local environment; third, the act of educating the readers of the interrelationships, and finally, the intention of creating sustainable communities here on earth" (Chua xxxiv). These four elements can be an attempt in what makes local works particularly ecopoetry can be distinct. And how it is deserving of the "national" attention in the Philippine literature. Studying environmental literacy for the next generation might change the future of this country through awareness and sustainability.

Ecocriticism is not only a discipline but it requires

knowledge with various fields to fully comprehend the ecological narrative in a literary text. To study ecocriticism is to have new eyes, looking at the things differently in the perspective of education, teaching awareness of the environmental crisis. Richard Kerridge's *Writing the Environment* in 1998 provides a different point of view to truly deepen the concept of being an ecocritic and the main goal of ecocriticism. Kerridge explains: "The ecocritic wants to track environmental ideas and representations whenever they appear...ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis" (5). In this process, not all literary works are efficient as a facilitator in solving the ecological conflicts. The poems are required to be able to uplift the human spirit through awareness and eventually to move people on how to create solutions.

Ecocriticism has emerged because of the consequences of the various decision on the natural resources. There is a need to reconnect in order to have the urgency to take actions to save some of the frontiers of the natural resources, seascapes, and landmarks. Moreover, this is tackled by Zameerpal Kaur and Sandeep Kaur, they summarize the main goal of ecocriticism: "Ecocriticism emphasizes on the conversation of environmental and ecological balance" (32). Lastly, the study uses the second wave deals towards environmental justice issues and a 'social ecocriticism' that takes urban landscape as seriously as 'natural landscape' (Buell 22). The second wave of ecocriticism is used in the present study to investigate the environmental crisis. Indeed, the second wave is ideal in analyzing the environmental crisis in Cebuano poems particularly in the 21st century. This ecocritical study attempts to examine the relationship of literature, physical environment, and culture using the second wave of ecocriticism.

4. Characteristics of the Poetic Texts

The poetic text which is composed of the tone and imagery. For the tone, satirical/mocking and didactic are the two common approaches that are used by the selected poets in the study. This is found in the following poems: "Pagtaob," "Kining nagkamoritsing nga baybayon sa Dumlog," "Isla," and "Dihang gabawod ang mga biniyaan." The result implies that the satirical and didactic approaches can propose as effective methods in sharing serious topics like environmental crises. Both satire and didacticism are persuasive tools in transforming a nation's psyche. Clearly, there is the strength of the satire in manifesting societal problems. This articulates the effectivity of satire in issues like the environmental concerns of a nation. On the other hand, didacticism demonstrates its presence in the selected poems. This implies the moral obligation of humanity to restore faith and peace. To use didactic method through literature suggests in reinforcing a sense of remedy for disorder and decay in the world.

There are other tones that are expressed in the selected poems. These are pitiful, heavy-hearted, frightened, sentimental, upset, disbelieving, reflective, prioritizing details, nostalgic, informal, threatening, light-hearted, self-satisfied, straightforward, honest, disgust, and sad. And in one poem, there are mixture of tones that are present. This implies the ability of the poets to shift from one tone to another. This also explains that tone can affect the effectiveness of presenting the meaning of the poems. As it provides the key element in giving ways to grasp the

connotation or implication of the poems.

To sum up, satire and didacticism are the two common approaches that are used by the selected poets in the study. Moreover, this implies that the two tones are powerful enough in sharing awareness and concerns on the natural environment. On the other hand, poets indeed change their tones, creating an approach in understanding the message of the poem.

Based from the imagery, visual and kinesthetic are often repeated in the poems. This suggests the impact of the optical and emotional associations in delivering images to the imagination of the readers. Furthermore, the images are mostly related to nature. This reflects the pastoral tradition of Cebuano poetry.

Balak or poetry in English reflects two things: using nature as metaphor and describing nature. In short, nature and Cebuano poetry are intertwined as pastoral tradition articulates environmentalism. Furthermore, the presence of nature is still noticeably manifested even in the 21st century regardless of the changes of time. This suggests that Cebuano poets even the young writers are still in core with the traditional way of writing a *balak*.

Indeed, this period still articulates the emergent of ecological sensibility of the Cebuano poets through the existence of the pastoral tradition. According to Terry Gifford (1999) ^[4] and Greg Garrard (2004) ^[3], there are three kinds of pastoral. First is the literary tradition, involving a retreat from the city to the countryside. Second is any literature that describes the country or gives contrast to the urban setting. And lastly, an idealization of rural life that obscures the realities of labor and hardship.

Historically, pastoral tradition occurs as a response to the industrialization. This implies the need of humanity to reconnect with nature and to see the changes of the environment in the rural and urban settings. Moreover, Gerrard discusses that "Classical pastoral was disposed, then, to distort or mystify social and environmental history, whilst at the same time providing a locus, legitimated by tradition, for the feeling of loss and alienation from nature to be produced by the Industrial Revolution" (39).

On the other hand, the sense of hearing (auditory) is the next image that is often used by the poets in the study. Lastly, the sense of taste (gustatory) and the sense of smell (olfactory) are lesser used by the Cebuano poets. To summarize, imagery provides an ability to create the details tangible in the imagination of the readers. It gives also the poem more effectiveness in terms of its authenticity. Pastoral tradition is still present in the 21st Cebuano poetry. This denotes the necessity of humanity to reconnect with nature and to see the changes of the environment in the rural and urban settings.

5. Depiction of Environmental Crises

The second phase of the study identifies the persona and the theme to assist in examining the environmental crisis in the literary work. In identifying the persona and the theme, it is supported by the formalism approach. On the contrary, in examining the environmental crisis, it is purely reinforced using the ecocritical approach.

This phase has two goals. First, it attempts to respond to the environmental crisis (through the persona and the theme). According to Kerridge (1998) ^[7], he highlights that "Most of all, ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to

environmental crisis" (5). This illustrates the interrelationship of the persona and the theme in revealing the "responses" regarding the environmental crisis.

Secondly, it tries to identify the environmental crisis in the poems in providing somehow "resolutions" to the ongoing problems in the world. Garrard (2004) ^[3] concludes that "Thus ecocriticism cannot contribute much to debates about problems in the ecology, but it can help to define, explore and even resolve ecological problems in this wider sense" (6). This suggests that ecocriticism is not the substitute to the biological or scientific information regarding the problems in the ecology. But it only attempts to give possible effects to the threats of our environment.

For the personas of the poems, they are mostly locals. This is revealed in the following literary works: "Boracay," "Sa baybayon," "Kining nagkamoritising nga baybayon sa Dumlog," "Didto sa amoa," "Nganong wala ko niyukog nimo larga balik sa syudad," and "Dihang gabawod ang mga biniyaan." This implies the significance of the firsthand understanding of the people who have experienced the environmental changes. Indeed, the perspectives of the locals have contributed to the functional role of their voices in narrating some of the ecological concerns of our time.

These voices are coming from the area. As a result, this method suggests an effective way to obtain the readers' sympathy. Furthermore, these personas know their places well which suggests the authenticity of the narration. The readers might find themselves to relate and understand the integral part of humanity in providing ecological balance and sustainability. According to Chua (2017) ^[2], she explains that "the writer's understanding of the local environment or place, including our folk wisdom and beliefs, and the stories we have been told and have known all our lives about our islands" (xxxvii).

On the other hand, some of the personas of the poems are the following: a person with various experiences in life, a writer, an adult recalling childhood memories, and a concerned citizen. This suggests that regardless of the variety of the personas, their voices have constructed a possible documentation of our ecological concerns. The person with various experiences can precisely connote dangers of apathy to the environment. Likewise, a writer can move people through his or her creativity and subjective narration. Same with an adult who is recalling memories, he or she can capture the coherence of the portrayal and the past so humanity will not commit again same mistakes. And finally, the concerned citizen is also an effective persona to recount our environmental problems. He or she has the attributes of a leader in corresponding to the conflicts of our environment.

To conclude, mostly of the personas in the poems are locals. As a result, this method suggests an effective way to obtain the readers' sympathy. Furthermore, these personas know their places well which suggests the authenticity of the narration.

Environmental crisis also demonstrates the theme of the poems. Based from the table, majority of the themes revolve on the environment. The major themes are the following: reduction on the threat for endangered species, negative effects of over tourism, effects of climate change, ecological problem of the trashes in the seashore, deep sense of place, and the value of self-acceptance. The most common theme is the problem of garbage in the sea and on the shore. This is revealed in the following poems: "Dihang gabawod ang mga

biniyaan," "Kining nagkamoritsing nga baybayon sa Dumlog," "Pagtaob," and "Boracay." This implies that sea pollution is a crucial problem in our environment that it is manifested in the 21st century Cebuano poetry. The poems have directed its vital role in providing awareness on marine pollution as these poems attempt in preventing more damage to the biodiversity.

On the other hand, the minor themes are the following: sensitivity and self-awareness of the rights of the animals, ability of nature to provide sense of peace and beauty, changes of one's place and the neighboring areas, concern of the livelihood of the fishermen due to the ocean trash, guilt of not doing anything in protecting the environment, awareness of the importance of taking good care of the natural environment, differences of the city life and the island life, conflict between the city and nature, and the innocence of children. The result suggests that even in minor themes of the poems, there are still that are related to the natural environment. This is manifested in the following poems: "Mga baka sa dagat: mga manatee sa Homosassa," "Sa baybayon," "Pagtaob," "Kining nagkamoritsing nga baybayon sa Dumlog," "Didto sa amoa," and "Isla." In sum, the themes of the poems attempt in narrating the depictions of environmental crises in the literary work. Overall, it may be said that almost all the themes are enactments of ecological concerns.

Finally, it also tackles the environmental crisis of the poems. Based from the poems, it obtains the following environmental crises: lack of awareness/knowledge, no sustainability or not strengthening the current environmental rules by the government, lack of initiative to learn in preventing some environmental crises, pollution due to overpopulation, and over tourism.

6. Conclusions

Based on the findings of the study, there is an interrelationship among literature, physical environment, and culture in the selected contemporary Cebuano-Visayan poems about the sea and life. Without a doubt, this generation is experiencing various ecological conflicts and concerns particularly in the urban areas. On the other hand, the Cebuano poets have been known for their pastoral literary works, magnetizing the influence of the rural areas and its peaceful living. This is obvious in the images found in the traditional Cebuano poetry. This heightens how literature incorporates the intermarriage of earth-centered poetry and cultural involvement.

7. References

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