

THE BORROWED TONGUE: THE FILIPINO POET IN ENGLISH FROM 1905 TO 2005

Abstract

Philippine poetry in English is the most recent and certainly one of the most important developments in Philippine literature. The Filipino poet started writing in English shortly after the introduction of the language into the Philippines by the Americans in the early part of the twentieth century. As a historical reading and analysis of the development of Philippine poetry in English, this thesis explores the Filipino poets' journey through poetry, from the inception of the English language in the Philippines through ongoing American efforts to "pacify and educate" the Filipinos. Considering the condition of the Filipino writer under two consecutive colonial masters ruling the archipelago for almost 400 years, it is almost the inevitable destiny of the Filipino poet always to be preoccupied with the idea of freedom so strongly manifested in his work. His longing for freedom from his former colonizer, the US, is best demonstrated in his conquest of the English language. He embraced the language as his very own (appropriating it from the grip of the colonial power) and turned it into an instrument to be used against his foreign rulers. The English language modernized the Filipino poet's perception and way of looking at things and it gave him a sense of freedom – all forms of freedom, so to speak – such as freedom from oppressive and endemically corrupt governments that reduced Philippine society to dire penury; freedom from poverty which drives him out of his land of birth to find a better life in exile; freedom from the bounds and limits of language; and freedom from the stultifying mentality instilled and forged in him by the Spaniards and their feudal lords; so allowing him to challenge the powers-that-be as well as the influential Catholic Church. Philippine poetry is thus a historical chronicle as much as it is an expression of a people's psyche and philosophy.