

# Ethical Literary Criticism in Asia: An Introduction

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Collected in this special issue are papers delivered at the international conference on Ethical Literary Criticism held at the University of Santo Tomas, Manila, Philippines on April 27-28, 2019. Understandably, the papers mostly came from the Philippines, but also elsewhere in Asia, like Taiwan and South Korea.

Noteworthy is the affirmation in these papers exclusively from Asia by Asian scholars of certain theoretical orientations and methodological possibilities in the practice of what is now broadly referred to as “ethical literary criticism.”

First, and most dominantly, ethical literary criticism is multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary in its methodology:

“*Dreamweavers: Organic Reality in the Poetry of Marjorie Evasco*” by Hope Sabanpan-Yu considers Evasco’s poetry in *Dreamweavers* as a representation of an “ecopoetic style that conveys real nature.” Such a style, according to Sabanpan-Yu, “showcases nature that is freed from perceptions anchored on anthropocentric ideals. It is a way of blending nature and poetry and uses a language capable of expressing organic reality.”

“Literary Criticism as a Philosophic Praxis” by Jovito V. Cariño states that there is a need for philosophy in the Philippines to overcome a myopic disciplinal orientation. His paper proposes “a strategy” by which philosophy and literary criticism may be interfaced in the hope of prompting “philosophy in the Philippine context to be more different, critical and inter-disciplinary,” which, in these senses, might result in an ethical cross-disciplinary practice. It asks, “What can the interface between philosophy and literary criticism contribute to the advancement of doing philosophy in the Philippines?”

“The Poetry of Theory: Jean Baudrillard’s Philosophy as Fiction” by Gian Carla Agbisit addresses the conflicting critical and sympathetic readings of Baudrillard’s social theory by arguing that “to read Baudrillard is to take a double-bind that primarily operates on the context of fiction, the acceptance of which

enables a better understanding of theory.” This entails “recognition of the validity of poetry and literature as theoretical musings,” allowing for a recognition “the possibility of philosophical discourse as form, or genre.”

“The Wave, the Wound, and the Witness: Climate Trauma, Ethics, and Listening in *Les mains lâchées*” by Jocelyn S. Martin explores the ethics of witnessing in *Les mains lâchées*, a well-acclaimed novel by Anais Llobet (2016). A narrative that revolves around a survivor’s guilt, “the persona finds herself listening to survivors, while dealing with issues on voyeurism, witnessing and ethics.” It argues that *Les mains lâchées*, as a literary form, allows for empathic, ethical listening, and postcolonial witnessing.

Finally, “The Literary Roots of Critical Media Studies” by Joyce L. Arriola contends that “the basic tenets of ethical literary criticism have influenced the supposed ethical framework of media studies” owing to the rhetorical, semiotic, constructionist, phenomenological, hermeneutic and poststructuralist traditions that continue to propel and animate the discipline.

Second, ethical literary criticism is national, international, and transnational in its scope:

“The Ethics of Living in Diaspora in Filipino American Literature” by Ma. Socorro Q. Perez, demonstrates how selected Fil-Am texts consciously or unconsciously write from an “ambivalent” position and subjectivity shaped by “the ‘American dream’ or ‘desire to be white’” which is “an overarching mythos and aspiration for Filipinos and Filipino American immigrants.” Such ambivalence “can be recuperated,” however, “to serve as a site for questioning the constitutive power of the American dream and the ensuing Filipino American immigrant’s realization of what is right and principled.”

In addition, “An Ethical Reevaluation of Carlos Bulosan’s famous classic Filipino-American novel, *America is in the Heart*,” by Francis C. Sollano focuses on the ethical underpinning of the narrative as it focuses on “the relationship between the internal and external worlds of Allos/Carlos and his brothers, especially Macario.” It argues that Allos’s fraternal feeling toward Macario and his brothers is the primary condition and drive for his social and ethical self-making and search for “America.”

Third, and last but not the least, ethical literary criticism is embedded at the interface of text and reading strategies in the sense that its practice is cognizant of the text’s formal features as implicated in its ethics, as well as of its ethics as implicated in its formal features:

“Middleman Minority: Ethics, Ethnicity, and the Chinese Middleman in *The*

*Woman Who Had Two Navels*” by Iping Liang discusses *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* (1961), the novel by Filipino author, Nick Joaquin. She notes that while “the mysterious Chinese deity adds spice to ‘pagan fatalism,’ there is no doubt that the figure of the middleman minority plays an important role in the narrative tapestry” of the novel. In her analysis, she points out the postcolonial over-determination of ethics across multiple intersections of ethnicity and representation in Hong Kong as a site of “exilic agency.”

As well, “Why They Prefer Bartleby? Ethics of Theory in Political Critique” by Woosung Kang foregrounds *syuzhet*, the emplotment of Herman Melville’s famous novella, “Bartleby.” Critical of previous interpretations that focus on Bartleby’s “peculiar implication as a resistant political subjectivity,” by ignoring “the way he is represented as a part of a singular literary narrative,” this paper demonstrates” how theoretical analysis of a literary text often depends upon the cursory reading of the *syuzhet* of the text and how it drives the whole argument into its own ethical abyss.”

The papers, indeed, might serve to remind us all that ethical literary criticism has been rooted in Asia, nurtured, developed in and embraced by it as much perhaps owing to its indigenous moorings and configurations as in its continuing relevance to the complex socio-historical reconfigurations of the glocal-global nexus that is our contemporary world.