

PINANGGA: MGA SUGILANON SA GUGMA SA
PANAYON SA KAGOLIYANG

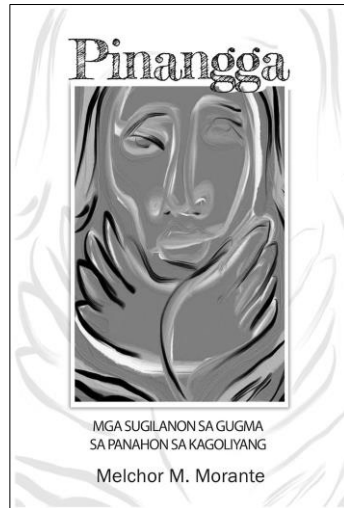
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**Between Nostalgia and
Memory**

I first encountered Melchor Morante's name in my "Pagbuo ng Pambansang Panitikan" graduate class under Bienvenido Lumbera over a decade ago. I was tasked to report on Sugboanon literature that extends its scope from Cebu, Bohol, and



Southern Leyte to some parts of the island region of Mindanao. Among the writers from Mindanao who use the Sugboanong Binisaya that I mentioned in my report were Gardeopatra Quijano, Pantaleon V Kardenas, Gumer Rafanan, Macario Tiu, Don Pagusara, and Melchor Morante. These writers affirm that the entirety of Sugboanon literature could be mapped out not only in the confines of Cebu and its adjacent provinces but also in the landscape and topography of Mindanao.

Morante, the playwright and novelist, has a notable body of work that ranges from plays staged by *Mga Magdudulang Mayukmok* (Theatre of Small Folk) and novel such as *Basin Ugma*, *Puhon*, *Junjun* (Someday, Soon, Junjun), which are known for exhibiting socio-political

conditions and realities in the Davao region during the tumultuous years of the Marcosian martial law. A curious feature in most of his works is the anthropological and historical details – both the quotidian and monumental – that point to the workings of the socio-political and economic forces that arbitrarily take hold of the lived realities and experiences in the cultural communities in Mindanao. In the discourse of Philippine national literature vis-a-vis Sugboanon literature in Mindanao, Morante constructs his important position around the complex web of unequal power interplay enmeshed in literary production, dissemination, and evaluation in Philippine regional and national literature. Morante, along with the other Mindanawon writers, is an affirmation that the regions should be the loci of national literature's *raison d'être*.

In an attempt to reclaim his stance in asserting how fiction can augur hope and resistance amidst corruption, state violence, and neglect brought by socio-political turmoil, Morante ventures into a new short story book that details the struggles, desires, dreams, and solitude of the common *tao* in Mindanao from the year 1983 to 2015. This period covers the atrocities committed by the Marcos Sr. government up to the war against the poor during the Duterte presidency. Morante's new work *Pinangga: Mga Sugilanon sa Gugma sa Panahon ng Kagoliyang* (2023) is a collection of five long stories (could also be read as novellas) in Sugboanong Binisaya that dramatize the different forms and shapes of affection ranging from romantic to familial to patriotic love. All of the five stories are able to capture the "zeitgeist" of the period using the idiolects and sociolects of the given year in each narrative. The idiolects

and sociolects employed by Morante follow the verisimilitude that makes the pieces more realistic. Indeed, the stories elucidate the command of the spirit and language of the age.

The first story “Kung Dili Karon, Kanus-a?” implicitly sets the direction of the book’s vision – how the personal is also political and how the political is also personal. It tells the story of two young petty bourgeois lovers – Lorna and Willy – whose aspirations to resist the dictator are coupled with youthful and zestful spirit. This piece is an informative and pedagogical story that would remind the younger generation how the “days of disquiet and nights of rage” during the Marcos dictatorship have wounded the nation. The succeeding story titled “Dadong, Asa Ka na Anak?” is probably the most remarkable among the pieces in the book. It dramatizes a father’s search for his activist son’s enforced disappearance. This nicely written and heart-wrenching story converses with Khalil Gibran’s famous adage, “Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life’s longing for itself.” This *desaparecido* story penetrates a father’s psyche while he grieves and reconciles with his emotions in a world that reminds us to ask, “What is to be done?”

The story “Kang Kinsang Gugma ang mas Palabihon” sketches out the various shades and tints of affection involving a priest and a journalist in a picket line against illegal logging. Here, Morante creates a complex plot where characters are entangled in different dreams and choices they need to make. At the heart of the narrative is the persisting desire for social and ecological justice guided by liberation theology. “May Kaugmaon ba ang mga Lumad” is an instructive story of what transpired in the



Indigenous cultural communities when the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Bill was enacted into law in 1997. It foregrounds a community of Manobo struggling with “marginalization” and “minoritization” in their *yutang kabilin* (ancestral land). The story posits that while state-sponsored laws were already enacted to give land titles, they have been proven to exist without any sharp pang. More than the titles, it is a must for the state to recognize the Indigenous peoples' rights to self-determination.

The last story in the book “Wala na Diay Bili ang Kinabuhi” narrates the gripping tale of a family victimized by the Duterte administration's “war-on-drugs” also known as “war-against-the-poor.” It demonstrates how ordinary people who live in poverty – like Tonyang, Boboy, and Junie – have become the primary target of death squads that roam the country. These death squads organized to “pacify” and “clean” Davao City in the 1980s reached other places when Duterte assumed the highest office in the government. In this piece, Morante depicts a society suffering from a symptom that has become a national malaise. A symptom endured by those areas in the peripheral of the nation's periphery that extended up to the national capital. It is the same symptom that created a historical mistake that is Duterte.

The power of Morante's stories derives precisely from their capacity to render characters realistically. In each story, you can hear the sobbing, smell the sweat, and feel the lamentations of each character. Purportedly, a reader immersed in creative writing might look for literary techniques and devices in Morante's book, usually employed in writing the short story form. But Morante's vision is more than these formalist elements, he is more

interested in telling the *history of emotions* that the common *tao* and their cultural communities are figuring and configuring in this current world of disinformation, falsehoods, historical revisionism, and state violence. Morante turns ethnographic data into stories. And the best way, perhaps, to read this book is to think of anthropologist Kirin Narayan's postulation that empirical details from ethnography could be combined with literary flair. With this book, Morante is certainly the interpreter of Narayan's statement.

Pinangga: Mga Sugilanon sa Gugma sa Panahon sa Kagoliyang (2023), indeed, is a work of fiction. But fiction here is not the opposite of fact and truth. The five pieces in this book are historical fiction – narratives that conjure us to remember, mobilize, feel nostalgic, or to quote cultural theorist Svetlana Boym, “mourn but perform a labor of grief both through pondering pain ... that points to the future.” Morante is a teller whose stories compel us to believe in the beauty of radical hope, and being hopeful, even in seemingly hopeless conditions.

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