
Transformative Liminality: A Reading of Genevieve L. Asenjo's "Pangungumusta mula sa Balaan Bukid"

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ABSTRACT

In 2021, Filipino writer Genevieve L. Asenjo published her short story collection titled *Ang Itim na Orkidyas ng Isla Boracay*. Hailed as “Best Book of Short Fiction in Filipino” during the 40th National Book Awards, it consists of narratives that delve into the entanglement of the Philippines, the United States of America, and South Korea. Specifically, in the story “Pangungumusta mula sa Balaan Bukid” (“Pangungumusta” from hereon), South Korea is imagined as a liminal space for the “migratory,” namely, the migrant workers and refugees. In postcolonial thought, a liminal space is perceived as a threshold, a doorway, or a portal where waiting happens, interactions are exchanged, and decisions are made; and as such, in *The Location of Culture*, theorist Homi K. Bhabha describes it as an “in-between” space of ambivalence, a “third space” where there is neither self nor other. While existing discussions on migrant workers and refugees tend to focus on identity and mobility, the novelty of this paper lies in its problematization of the transformative point of their interaction: What happens when an Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) gets entangled with a Palestinian refugee in Seoul? How does their interaction offer new perspective on what a liminal space is? The primary method is a textual analysis of “Pangungumusta” through a postcolonial lens. The author argues that in such entanglement a liminal space becomes transformative; and so, it is that which “*naghatid . . . sa isang uri ng kaluwalhatian*” (ushered in a kind of glory; Asenjo, 2021: 69). This paper is composed of three primary sections: an introduction of Asenjo and her works, a presentation of the plot of “Pangungumusta” and commentary on its postmodern form, and a discussion of liminal space as imagined in the narrative, concluding that liminality is indeed transformative, that is, as the liminal space spatially brings the characters together, it at the same time spells out their ideological differences, which makes transformation possible.

Keywords: *liminal space, overseas Filipino workers, Palestine, refugees, South Korea*

INTRODUCTION

In 2021, Genevieve L. Asenjo published her latest book, the short story collection titled *Ang Itim na Orkidyas ng Isla Boracay*. Asenjo is a Filipino fictionist and poet who writes in Kinaray-a, Hiligaynon, and Tagalog. She is also a literary scholar, translator, and, at De La Salle University in Manila, a professor of literature and creative writing.

Asenjo was an overseas writing fellow of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of South Korea in 2009 and an honorary writing fellow during the 2012

International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. She is among the writers and artists featured in the 2018 Cultural Center of the Philippines Encyclopedia of Philippine Arts. Her books so far include: *taga-uma@manila* (2005); *Pula ang Kulay ng Text Message* (2006); *Komposo ni Dandansoy* (2007); *Lumbay ng Dila* (2010); *Mabaskog ng Hiligaynon 1* (2013); *Sa Gihapon, Palangga, ang Uran/Always, Beloved, The Rain* (2014); and *Ang Itim na Orkidyas ng Isla Boracay* (2021). Her novel *Lumbay ng Dila*,

received a special citation for excellence in fiction in a Philippine language from the Juan C. Laya Prize during the 2011 Philippine National Book Awards, while the short story collection *Ang Itim na Orkidyas ng Isla Boracay* received the Gerardo P. Cabochon Prize for Best Book of Short Fiction in Filipino during the 40th National Book Awards held in early 2023.

Ang Itim na Orkidyas ng Isla Boracay is composed of 10 short stories, offering a careful scrutiny of the interplay among the Philippines, the US, and South Korea as may be gleaned from the experiences of ordinary, “migratory,” individuals, namely: migrant workers, refugees, expats, and tourists. This is a theme that no one had dedicatedly explored in fiction until Asenjo. Thus, a formal study like this present literary analysis is apt and timely given that there exist between 50,000 to 70,000 overseas Filipino workers (OFW) in South Korea today (Lee, Asis, Choi, & Park, 2017: 38; Untalan, 2023; Walet, Dicolon, & Calimag, 2021: 98) whose narratives—and consequent issues like documentation, living conditions, labor problem, overseas community, love and family life, et cetera—also deserve representation because they can contribute to advancing discussions on current Filipino mobility and foreign relations. Within the last decade, for example, popular forms like documentary and feature films focus on narratives of Filipino migrant workers in Hong Kong as in *Sunday Beauty Queen* (2016), which premiered during the 21st Busan International Film Festival, and *Hello, Love, Goodbye* (2019), the highest grossing Filipino film to date. While there are Korean films and drama series that cast Filipino actors, they were assigned “very minor supporting Filipino characters’ roles” (Reyes, 2023: 311); and so it goes without saying that, while those stints offer professional work and filmographic visibility, the narratives and issues per se of the Filipino migrant workers in South Korea still require more attention.

It is worth mentioning here that the Philippines and South Korea are entangled with each other because of the respective histories of these countries with the US. The Philippines was under American colonial rule from 1898 to 1946, while South Korea was under American administrative control from 1945 to 1948. This period resulted from the conclusion of World War II when the Korean peninsula was liberated from Japanese occupation and got divided along the 38th parallel by the US and the USSR, which arguably served

as a prelude to the Korean War, which was active from 1950 to 1953 and where, as posted on the website of the Philippine Embassy in Seoul, 7,420 Filipino soldiers served. Perhaps the earliest documented Filipino movement to South Korea for professional work was after the Korean War where “Filipino engineers were dispatched to rebuild Seoul and were involved in building the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the US Embassy” (Lee et al., 2017: 31) but the “migration of Filipinos to Korea began in earnest as the Korean economy grew rapidly in the 1980s and labor shortages emerged in some sectors” (Lee et al., 2017: 130), which, on the Philippine end, was also a result of the “economic challenges, including balance-of-payment problems and high unemployment [rate]” during the incumbency of Ferdinand E. Marcos, Sr. (i.e., 1965-1986) that “turned to overseas employment as a strategy to cope with the economic crisis” (Battistella, 1995: 259-261; Lee et al., 2017: 6). These entangled chapters in the entangled histories of these countries pervade their entangled present. There are still US military activities and installations in South Korean and Philippine territories (e.g., the US Army Garrison Humphreys in Pyeongtaek, the Basa Air Base in Pampanga). Filipinos continue to go to South Korea for work, studies, marriage and tourism (Lee et al., 2017). Koreans go to the Philippines for pretty much the same reasons—for example the Department of Tourism logged 348,384 arrivals from South Korea on March 27 (Ong, 2023)—and not to mention via *Hallyu* or Korean Wave (Galang, 2022).

While the above mentioned data from statistics and reports give us a glimpse of the entangled histories and movement of Filipinos and Koreans, literary works like *Ang Itim na Orkidyas ng Isla Boracay* provide us a more nuanced approach, which could help us understand the experiences of Filipino migrant workers in South Korea. Through the circumstances faced by the characters in “*Pangungumusta mula sa Balaan Bukid*” (“*Pangungumusta*” from hereon), the sixth short story in the said collection, for example, we are able to take a look at the end-of-contract anxieties of migrant workers, their fear of “*pag-uulam ng asin at bagoong*” (having salt and shrimp paste for a meal; Asenjo, 2021: 67) again, their frustrations and aspirations, and so on—details that are not reflected in statistics and reports about them.

“*Pangungumusta*” was earlier published in *Kritika Kultura* No. 25 (2015) accompanied by an

English translation by fictionist Michelle Tiu Tan, who also translated Asenjo's other short story, "Norebang," for *World Without Borders*. Tan's translation is not used in this paper because to the author an act of translation is also, and always already, an act of reading. Indeed, as stated in her translator's note for "*Pangungumusta*," Tan believes that "[t]ranslation adds another layer" to the writing and reading (Tan, 2015: 601), which, according to Asenjo, in her response, allows "an expansion of our understanding" (Asenjo, 2015: 603) of the text we are reading and writing about. In other words, how the author translated the passages and would refer to later on in his discussion is already a reflection of how the author read, comprehend, and analyze the short story. You will notice that in the author's translation of the Tagalog passages into English some are directly translated—e.g., from "*tasa ng jasmine tea, na may honey*" to "cup of jasmine tea, which has honey" (Asenjo, 2021: 57) instead of "cup of jasmine tea with honey" in Tan's translation (Tan, 2015: 620) that did not exactly capture the emphasis placed on the said detail by the narrator who at the time was playfully recalling the first time the characters had tea—while in other instances, the author adds terms that may be used as equivalents as in the case of Asenjo's usage of the untranslatable Tagalog "*raw*," which signals that the statement is not of the narrator himself, which could also be read as a signification of ideological distance. In this case, for example, the author translate "*Wala raw sinumang may gusto ng giyera maliban sa mga tao at mga bansa at kompanya na kumikita rito.*" as "No one wants war, she said, except for people and countries and companies that make profit from it." (Asenjo, 2021: 63), which is different from Tan's "No one wanted war, besides the people and countries and companies that earn from it." (Tan, 2015: 624) that lost the subtlety of the narrator's articulation of "*raw*." This act of translation as reading is also an act of theorization of the text and translation, which as translation theorist Susan Bassnett rightly points out, "makes us all more aware of the secret dimensions to what we are reading" (qtd. in Bahrawi, 2011). Details, which may be minute, still contribute layers to one's analysis of the text.

So, why this particular piece? "*Pangungumusta*" scrutinizes not only the complex interplay among the Philippines, the US, and South Korea, as framed in the circumstances faced by the characters, which is

a preoccupation of the whole short story collection as established earlier, but also calls attention to the struggle for self-determination of the Palestinian people. It is worth mentioning that this short story was written during Asenjo's writing residency in Seoul in 2009 (Asenjo, 2015: 603), the year that saw the three-week war on Gaza Strip when Israel launched its Operation Cast Lead on December 27, 2008, "killing almost 1,400 Palestinians and wounding thousands more" (Stead, 2018). This slant is very timely because Palestine is actively under siege again, which resulted from the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023 that prompted a severe, punitive, and ongoing as of this writing, retaliation that is now seen as a "genocidal practice" and "textbook for genocide" (Butler in Democracy Now, 2023b; Mokhiber in Democracy Now, 2023a).

"*Pangungumusta*" revolves around the entanglement of three characters—namely, Mark, Fatima, and the narrator—who all met in the liminal space that is South Korea. What happens when a Filipino migrant worker gets entangled with a Palestinian refugee in Seoul? How does their interaction offer a new perspective on what a liminal space is? To address and shed a light on this, textual analysis is performed on the short story with Homi K. Bhabha's concept of liminal space as theoretical framework.

In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha picks up from Renee Green's *Sites of Genealogy* in articulating how we might perceive a liminal space. Bhabha writes:

The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white. The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.

(Bhabha, 2004:4)

In postcolonial thought then, liminal spaces are "in-between" spaces of ambivalence, a "third space" where there is neither self nor other. It is, from the Latin "*limen*," a threshold, a doorway, a portal; and,

as such, a space where waiting happens, interactions are exchanged, and decisions are made. Liminal spaces allow confrontations that cannot be fulfilled where hierarchies are fixed (Ritumban in *Critical Island*, 2023). They function as “connective tissue that constructs the difference between” two ends without becoming, or dissolving into, any of the two (Bhabha, 2004: 4). Bhabha further tells us that in liminal spaces, “the present can no longer be simply envisaged as a break or a bonding with the past and the future, no longer a synchronic presence: our proximate self-presence, our public image, comes to be revealed for its discontinuities, its inequalities, its minorities” (2004: 4); and so, because it allows such possibility, liminal spaces can be spaces of transformation.

To this end, as articulated earlier, the author makes use of Asenjo’s short story, “*Pangungumusta*,” as primary source of data. Since the data is in the form of a literary text about migrant workers and refugees in a liminal space, textual analysis is performed using Bhabha’s concept of liminal space as theoretical lens; and in presenting his findings, the author extracts telling and necessary passages from the short story, translates them into English, explicates them and, in some instances, integrates appropriate supplementary sources in the discussion to provide a fuller understanding of the issues that “*Pangungumusta*” is calling our attention to. From this, the author draws his conclusion that a liminal space is that which “*naghatid . . . sa isang uri ng kaluwalhatian*” (ushered in a kind of glory; Asenjo, 2021: 69): transformative.

Consequently, the primary objective of this paper is to follow through the conversation on Palestinian refugees and Filipino migrant workers in South Korea, which Asenjo started in “*Pangungumusta*.” This is a theme unexplored in fiction until the said literary piece. This needs to be problematized not only because it is a pressing global concern today, that is, Palestine is actively under siege again which, as of this writing, already “killed more than 20,400 Palestinians and displaced almost all of the territory’s 2.3 million people” (Jobain, Magdy, & Lidman, 2023), but also because there exist between 50,000 to 70,000 OFWs in South Korea today (Lee et al., 2017: 38; Untalan, 2023; Walet et al., 2021: 98) whose narratives and issues could use more representation in literary or popular forms, because, like the stories of OFWs in other host countries, Filipino migrant stories from South

Korea can also contribute to advancing discussions on current Filipino mobility and foreign relations. While identity and mobility are the usual points of inquiry when talking about these migratory individuals, the novelty of this paper lies in its problematization of their interaction in their host country, which following the author’s analysis of “*Pangungumusta*” can make ideological transformation possible.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

In this section the author offers an exposition of the form, theme, and plot of “*Pangungumusta*” and his analysis of it using the theory of liminal space articulated above. The findings are as follows: the short story exhibits hints of postmodernism; thematically, it reflects on migration and the liminal character of South Korea; unraveled through the plot, it negotiates the complex intersecting issues of migration, displacement, labor, state violence, dreams, and desires; and, as may be gleaned from the interactions of the Filipino and Palestinian characters, before a liminal space, a space of uncertainty, one is ideologically transformed.

“*Pangungumusta*,” as established earlier, revolves around the entanglement of three characters—namely, Mark, an OFW from Iloilo; Fatima, a Palestinian refugee active with advocacy group, “Friends of the Homeless”; and the narrating character, an unnamed male OFW from Guimaras—who all met in the liminal space that is South Korea. In terms of form, the short story is composed of three fragments with a nonlinear structure—which means that the plot or series of events is presented in a non-chronological order—and this is precisely because the narrative is told by an unreliable and self-conscious narrator. Unreliable because he is narrating from memory—that is, the narrator is narrating the events belatedly and from Balaan Bukid—and, in some parts, using second-hand information as some details were only shared with him by Mark (Asenjo, 2021: 66). Self-conscious because he is explicitly mindful of his unreliability and reflective of his own positionality (Asenjo, 2021: 66-70). In this regard, through this unreliable and self-conscious narrating character, the short story exhibits hints of postmodernism in that it contemporaneously, in the words of Linda Hutcheon, “highlights” and “subverts” the contradictions of the society of which it is a critique (Hutcheon, 1988: 1-2).

Thematically, *“Pangungumusta”* is one that reflects on migration and the liminal character of South Korea; indeed, as migrant workers and refugees, *“[d]umadaan lang sila”* (they were simply passing by; Asenjo, 2021: 61). The Filipino characters, Mark and the narrator, for example, had to leave their respective provinces to work as factory workers, even though Mark was a BS Marine graduate, in South Korea; and in this regard, they were simply passing by it because they would always be the ones with expiring contracts and “alien cards” (Asenjo, 2021: 62). While working there would mean more contribution to the family purse back home (e.g., Mark could wire 10,000 pesos for his sister’s civil service exam review and afford buying a flatscreen TV for their mother), the toll would be on their health. Mark and the narrator resided in an old container van and we know that in winter temperature in South Korea could drop into negative degrees, which could cause respiratory ailments. For the Palestinian character, Fatima, her movement to South Korea meant safety from potential persecution back home (since she was an activist with “Friends of the Homeless” and home has been struggling with Israeli occupation), but it also meant displacement and dispossession, a reminder of the reality that she cannot live freely at home as a Palestinian—a reality being faced by the people of Palestine for 75 years now (Amnesty International, 2017; Butler qtd. in Democracy Now, 2023b). Like Mark and the narrator, Fatima was also simply passing by South Korea because *“[w]ala raw ibang hangad ang bawat Palestino kundi ang maangkin muli ang kanilang bansa”* (each Palestinian, she said, had no other desire than to recover their own land; Asenjo, 2021: 61). Aside from this, Asenjo is also keen on mapping the areas where the characters move if only to show the space, if not the margins, they occupy in South Korean society as migrant workers and refugees. Mark and the narrator, for example, were based in Dongducheon, an hour away from the capital. You will see in this South Korean city the migrants from poor countries like the Philippines, Pakistan, Nepal, Africa, Vietnam, and Indonesia and some American military camps (Asenjo, 2021: 55). Fatima was based in Itaewon. This neighbourhood in Seoul, which had a “storied,” if not infamous past as “a hangout for American soldiers” after the Korean War (Park, Shin, & Choi, 2022), is lined by western restaurants and shops. These are some of the threads that Asenjo has woven together

in *“Pangungumusta”* and she rendered it in a simple, yet profound, story of friendship, love, and solidarity.

The story is simple because *“Pangungumusta”* has an uncomplicated plot: Mark and the narrator were paper crushers in a paper recycling company in Dongducheon. They resided in a container van. One Sunday, Mark accidentally met Fatima at the Filipino Market in Hyewa where Filipinos would usually gather. Fatima was a waitress at her aunt’s restaurant in Itaewon. Mark got infatuated with Fatima, prompting him to pursue her. He would regularly visit her at the restaurant and she would offer him a *“tasa ng jasmine tea, na may honey”* (cup of jasmine tea, which has honey; Asenjo, 2021: 57) and they would talk. Sometimes, Mark’s co-worker, the narrator, would hang around; the first time he joined them, he was worried because it was *“unang araw din ng pag-expire ng alien card ni Mark”* (the first day as well of the expiry of Mark’s alien card; Asenjo, 2021: 62). Fatima let Mark and then the narrator into her reality: A reality where burnt olive trees, ready for harvest, is taken as greetings from Israeli neighbors (Asenjo, 2021: 60; Perry, 2014; Vick, 2010) and so a reality that demands respect for one’s self-determination, freedom to flourish, and the right to govern its land and produce (Asenjo, 2021: 63). Eventually, Mark returned to his hometown in Iloilo, but only to return to South Korea after seven months.

During the second time Mark was employed in South Korea, he served as a machine operator in a factory of optical lenses. It offered a better housing facility—that is, he now resided in an actual room with a heated floor shared with two other Filipinos—but the work was more hazardous to his health due to exposure to chemicals. This time too Mark became a volunteer for a group of Filipino migrants; and while participating in a rally against human rights violations of the South Korean government at Gwanghamun, Mark died, a casualty of the *“madugong dispersal ng pulis”* (bloody dispersal by the police; Asenjo, 2021: 68). Mark’s death left the narrator, who at the time was working as an English teacher at a hagwon (i.e., small private school for English), shaken, prompting him to return to his hometown in Guimaras while still reeling from all that happened. And from Balaan Bukid, a holy mountain on his island province, he is narrating their entangled stories: Mark and Fatima and him. This is where *“Pangungumusta”* is also profound. It negotiates the complex intersecting issues of

migration and displacement, labor, and state violence, even dreams and desires, through a language that is familiar to us all: love and loss and living. A language that makes these issues more palpable "*dahil totoo nga pala: hindi na lamang kuwento*", because it is indeed real: no longer just a story; Asenjo, 2021: 64). There exist "[a]pproximately 374,000 non-professional migrant workers" legally working in South Korea with an E-9 visa today (Lee, 2023), while in 2021, the UN Refugee Agency reported that "3,575 people have been recognised as refugees or granted humanitarian status by the South Korean government." It is not so much to say that we see glimpses of their faces in Mark, Fatima, and the narrator.

As pointed out earlier, South Korea, as a setting of the events in "*Pangungumusta*," where the three characters met and got entangled, is by default a liminal space. As such, it is where waiting happens, interactions are exchanged, and decisions are made, which, following Bhabha, also functions as a connector that spells out the differences (Bhabha, 2004: 4) between two ends without becoming, or dissolving into, any of the two and without imposing a sort of hierarchical connection between them.

As connective tissue, South Korea spatially connected Mark and the narrator first and foremost as the host country where, as migrant workers, the two could legally live and earn money within the duration of their employment contract and the validity of their E-9 visa and alien card. They were, prior to their employment as paper crushers, unknown to each other having come from different, but neighboring, island provinces, Iloilo and Guimaras, and, prior to Mark's involvement with Fatima, not exactly friends despite being workmates in the paper recycling company and housemates in the container van in Dongducheon in the last two years and six months. "*Ang totoo, naging malapit lamang kami sa isa't isa nang magsimula na ang kanyang pagkabuang kay Fatima*". (The truth is, we became close to each other only when his mad infatuation with Fatima began; Asenjo, 2021: 62), the narrator confesses from the holy mountain. It follows that South Korea spatially brought Mark and Fatima together as well. The narrator tells us that after Mark and Fatima first met that serendipitous Sunday at a banana stall at the pop-up Filipino market in Hyewa, which led to a conversation over a "*tasa ng jasmine tea, na may honey*" (a cup of jasmine tea, which has honey; Asenjo, 2021: 57) at Fatima's aunt's restaurant

in Itaewon, "*bumabalik-balik [si Mark] kada Linggo sa Itaewon pagkatapos ng misa sa Hyewa*" (Mark would return every Sunday to Itaewon after hearing mass in Hyewa; Asenjo, 2021: 62). If Mark and the narrator were spatially connected by the work they had found in South Korea initially, Mark and Fatima were spatially brought together by attraction, which to the former, leaned towards the romantic type. "*[N]gayon ko lang naramdaman 'to p're,*" this is the only time I've felt this, man; (Asenjo, 2021: 62), the narrator remembers Mark remarking. These spatial connections that South Korea, as connective tissue, created or made possible also constructed, if not spelled out, the ideological differences between the characters.

The interactions of the Filipino migrant workers, Mark and the narrator, with the Palestinian refugee Fatima, which could only happen thanks to their spatial connections made possible by the liminal space that is South Korea where they were respectively working and seeking refuge, provide us with points of view that could help us approximate the considerations these migrants and refugees considered, which called for the choices they committed. The Sundays Mark (and occasionally the narrator) spent interacting with Fatima were moments of realization. Fatima made Palestine real to Mark. To Mark, the narrator tells us, Palestine was "*pamilyar ngunit pambihira*", (familiar but extraordinary; Asenjo, 2021: 64). It was familiar because he knew of it as a setting of biblical events having come from a predominantly Christian country, the Philippines, not to mention being a Catholic who regularly heard the Sunday mass. But to the woman before him, Fatima, Palestine can only be home: one that she and her fellow Palestinians would return to "*kahit pa kaaway na maituturing ang kapitbahay*" (even though enemies are what they could consider their neighbors; Asenjo, 2021: 69), a reality that made Mark realize: "*Oo nga ano, bumaba nga pala sa lupa si Hesukristo at nagpakatao. Hindi pala sa langit ang Palestine, ang Israel: narito sila sa mundo!*" (Oh right, Jesus Christ really came down on earth and lived like us. Palestine is not in heaven after all, Israel: they are here!; Asenjo, 2021: 60). The Jesus, which Mark knew as the Son of God made man, indeed walked on earth and, verily, suffered in the hands of his neighbors like the woman before him, suffering displacement and dispossession of land, whose father died during an encounter with their neighbors. The narrator relates

what happened that fateful day: “*Napatay ito sa bugbog, noong panahon ng tag-ani ng olibo ng mga Palestino, na panahon din ng pagbaba mula sa burol ng mga Israeli para humarang sa kanila*” (He died of severe beating, during an olive harvest season of the Palestinians, a time also for the Israelis to come down from the hills to block their way; Asenjo, 2021: 60). Fatima also made Mark realize why war could never be the solution to the conflicts like the one between Palestine and Israel as well as South Korea and North Korea and Filipino Christians and Muslims. The narrator again shares with us:

Wala raw sinumang may gusto ng giyera maliban sa mga tao at mga bansa at kompanya na kumikita rito. Ang kailangan daw ay ang pagrespeto sa likas na katangian ng bawat bansa, ang pagbibigay ng kalayaan sa mamamayan nito para lalong maging produktibo, kung paano kailangang maangkin ng magsasaka ang kanyang lupa at hayop. Tulong daw ang kailangan ng indibidwal mula sa kanyang pamilya, gobyerno, simbahan—hindi ang pag-angkin ng kanyang imahinasyon at isipan at katawan.

No one wants war, she said, except for people and countries and companies that make profit from it. What is needed is respect for the inherent traits of each country, according freedom to its people to become more productive, like how it is necessary for the farmers to possess their own land and animals. Support is what an individual needs from their family, government, church—not the control of their imagination and mind and body.

(Asenjo, 2021: 63)

This ideology, which Fatima shared with Mark and the narrator, is that which made Fatima certain about her decision to come home “[s]a ayaw man daw o gusto ng kanyang ina at tiya” (whether her mother and aunt like it or not, she said; Asenjo, 2021: 61), which she thought Mark and the narrator must also do because “[d]umadaan lang sila . . . sa Korea” (they were simply passing by . . . in Korea; Asenjo, 2021: 61) and they were smart and capable. Indeed, these interactions exchanged in the liminal space that is South Korea made Mark realize that he could also pave another path to explore other than the routes already laid out before them as migrant workers, especially

upon expiry of their work permits: look for a new job, move to another city, or hide, that is, go undocumented (Asenjo, 2021: 62), which needless to say is a cause for concern. That there were undocumented Filipinos getting caught was not news to the narrator; and in fact, in a “crackdown” in August 2022, out of 887 illegal workers apprehended, 11 of them were from the Philippines (Lee, 2022). This is why the narrator described Mark as “*pambihira*” (remarkable; Asenjo, 2021: 62) because he chose to come home unlike him and the many others like him who simply took the routes already laid out for them because “*hindi na nila kayang bumalik sa pag-uulam ng asin at bagoong*” (they can no longer take having salt and shrimp paste for a meal again; (Asenjo, 2021: 67). Mark, sharing his decision with the narrator, said: “*Di na lang ako bibili ng flat screen TV para sa balay, p’re. ‘Bili ko na lang ‘to ng manok pag-uwi. Ma-poultry ‘ko, a. Abi, subukan din nating magnegosyo*” (I’ll no longer buy a flat screen TV for the house, man. I’ll just use this to buy chickens when the author come home. I’ll try poultry, ah. Hey, let’s try starting a business, too; Asenjo, 2021: 64).

Put differently, Mark’s decision to start a business is a decision to take possession of oneself, an attempt to break free from a culture of servitude that has become an industry, which is not always fair in its ways. Only in that liminal space, which hosted Mark’s spatial connection with Fatima, who through their interactions shared her ideology, did Mark admit his situation by opening it up to Fatima. The narrator informs us: “*Kay Fatima lamang naipagtapat ni Mark na sa container van kami tumutuloy. Kay Fatima lamang niya naikuwento ang hirap ng aming obra*” (Only to Fatima did Mark admit that we were staying in a container van. Only to Fatima did he share the difficulty of our work; Asenjo, 2021: 61): the daylong lifting of bundles of books that each could weigh around 10-15 kilos and the manual slicing of the binds and pages of these books at an open working site and the routine collection of books from publishing houses in Seoul and neighboring cities twice a week. Mark’s reality, which as a breadwinner, he could not share with people at home, one that he had learned to downplay with laughter (Asenjo, 2021: 55). The liminality of South Korea provided that space for Mark to confront his situation—but then we might ask: Does he really have to be away to realize he wanted to take possession of himself and set it free from a culture of servitude? The liminality of space compels one to

confront oneself whether to continue or not: to cross the threshold or not: to enter through the portal or retreat from it. What is more is that liminal spaces and interactions exchanged therein allow confrontations that cannot be fulfilled where hierarchical roles are fixed. In that liminal space called South Korea, Mark and Fatima are both an other, migrant worker and refugee, and this otherness before each other brings forth a transformation, especially on the part of Mark, which constructed his ideological difference with the narrator who as articulated earlier took one of the usual routes laid out for migrant workers like them: to look for a new job upon expiry of present work permit. The narrator found a teaching job at a hagwon.

The narrator does not say whether Mark's poultry business was successful or not or whether Fatima and Mark continued communicating after the Palestinian came home or not. All he tells us is that Mark returned to South Korea after seven months and started working as a machine operator at a factory of optical lenses. During their reunion, Mark described his new job to the narrator: "*Mas magaan kumpara sa dati nating obra, pero mas mataas ang panganib ng kemikal sa katawan*" (Much lighter compared to our previous work, but with higher chemical risk to the body; Asenjo, 2021: 66;). He also shared that he has been volunteering with a group of OFW, which, with Korean workers and other migrant workers, would engage dialogues "*tungo sa pag-unawa ng sitwasyon ng mga lahi na biktima ng giyera, gayundin ang pagsulong ng pagpapabuti ng kondisyon ng mga manggagawang dayuhan sa Korea*" (towards understanding the situation of people who are victims of war, as well as advancing the improvement of the condition of foreign workers in Korea; Asenjo, 2021: 66). Little did they know that it was not chemical exposure that would claim Mark's life, but his activism. He was among those who died during a rally at Gwanghwamun Square because of the "*madugong dispersal ng pulis*" (bloody dispersal by the police; Asenjo, 2021: 68). Here we might ask again: Does Mark really have to be in a foreign land to decry human rights violence? Let us consider that while liminal spaces are spaces of waiting, they are not spaces of passivity. In fact, the very liminality of a space urges one to do something so that decisions can be made. Before a door, we knock—and whether it would be opened for us or not, a decision is made and another one has to be made. Mark's death was

that knock, not only on the door of South Korea which hosts thousands of migrant workers, but also on the narrator, who was inconsolable. "*Tingnan mo, Fatima, tingnan mo ang ginawa mo kay Mark!*" (Look, Fatima, look at what you've done to Mark!; Asenjo, 2021: 68-9), howled the narrator that night.

In truth, it is no longer about Mark—that lamentation of the narrator—but about him. What Fatima did to Mark, Mark did to the narrator who was unmistakably shaken by the death of Mark, precipitating his return to his home in Guimaras, seeking healing from its saltwater, reeling over from their entanglement, which was only possible in the liminal space that is South Korea, which allowed the "temporal movement and passage" (Bhabha, 2004: 4) of Mark and Fatima and the narrator and made possible their spatial connections that spelled out their ideological differences because before each other each of them is an other. In the end, the narrator recognized what South Korea, as liminal space, considering what the author have discussed thus far, brought to Mark. It is that which "*naghatid sa kanya sa isang uri ng kaluwalhatian*" (brought to him a kind of glory; Asenjo, 2021: 69). He saw Mark's glory in his death. And we know what an encounter with glory could do. To continue the biblical undertones of "*Pangungumusta*," there is conversion, which is a painful process. The extremist Pharisee Saul, for example, had to be blind first before he could be transformed into the great Christian missionary Paul. Before a liminal space, a space of uncertainty, but opens up to glory, then, one is transformed.

CONCLUSION

The author brings this paper, which is arguably the first formal textual analysis made on Genevieve L. Asenjo's "*Pangungumusta mula sa Balaan Bukid*," to close with a recapitulation of the key ideas presented above.

"*Pangungumusta*," as part of the collection *Ang Itim na Orkidyas ng Isla Boracay* published in 2021, brings to our attention the anxieties and reservations of Filipino migrant workers as well as the Palestinian struggle for self-determination, a narrative slant that we can only read in this short story as of this writing. With South Korea as the setting of the events being told in the narrative, we are able to reflect on how the interactions of the characters—Mark, Fatima, and the

narrator—offer a new perspective on liminal space.

A liminal space, Homi K. Bhabha teaches us in *The Location of Culture*, functions as “connective tissue that constructs the difference between” two ends without becoming, or dissolving into, any of the two, which reveals the present “for its discontinuities, its inequalities, its minorities” (Bhabha, 2004: 4) thereby making a transformation possible. Thus, the author's analysis of “*Pangungumusta*” using Bhabha's theory presents liminal space as that which “*naghatid . . . sa isang uri ng kaluwalhatian*” (ushered in a kind of glory; Asenjo, 2021: 69): transformative.

This transformative liminality is seen at work in Mark's decision to return to the Philippines, to pave a new path for him to tread by breaking free from the culture of servitude, instead of taking the cyclic routes already laid out for migrant workers like him. The liminality of the space that is South Korea compelled him to confront his situation and take possession of himself. It is the same liminality that urged him to fight for labor rights not only of OFWs but also of other migrant workers and war refugees. Mark's premature death was that knock on the door from where new decisions would still have to be made. Would the South Korean government listen to the ones on Gwanghwamun Square? Would the narrator continue what Mark has begun? “*Pangungumusta*” gives no definite answer to these questions, but it is certain about one thing: It all started with the interactions Mark, Fatima, and the narrator exchanged while they were in South Korea, the liminal space, the connective tissue, that spatially brought them together, without dissolving them into a mold, and instead spelled out their ideological differences, which made transformation possible. Such is transformative liminality.

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in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. While revising this for *Poetika* a month later, Israel is still carrying out a severe retaliation, punishing Palestinians whom their Defense Minister Yoav Gallant calls “human animals,” which Jewish philosopher Judith Butler describes as “genocidal practice.”

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