

# **The Filipino Writer in Asia**

by **N. V. M. Gonzales**

**S**EVERAL well-known people, among them James T. Farrell, have opined that perhaps the time has come for books from Asia to come to the fore; Western readers have overlooked them (with the recent exception of Japanese writing); or if they haven't been overlooked Western readers have asked of the writers from Asia as Western a view of their material as can possibly be presented. This attitude has kept away many able writers in Asia from readers of the West—a situation hardly encouraging in the light of the current need to understand the so-called Asian mind.

All of which may be well taken, but the fact of the matter is that writers in Asia know each other even less than Western readers know them individually. Nick Joaquin attests to this shocking circumstance from his own experience at the International PEN Conference held in Tokyo last year. Not that nothing can

be done about it nor that what ought to be done need not be undertaken now; but we in the Philippines find ourselves burdened with the responsibility of acting out all sorts of roles. Some would have us act as a bridge between East and West, others would have us spearhead a Pan-Asian literary awakening of some kind or other. No one has so much as suggested that we write more and publish better books, or that we read more and cultivate a serious appreciation for things that literature brings.

We may not be prepared to admit it but there is in Asia a growing community of writers a good half of the civilized world (the Philippines included) do not know anything about. Nor is it a fact that these writers know one another quite well. Who has read the novels of Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan, Ooka, and K. S. Karanth? Who can speak with authority on the works of Chairil

Anwar and Asrul Sani? Not too long ago, at a Manila cocktail party, a twenty-seven-year-old Chinese novelist happened along, accompanied by an interpreter. Who was she? What things has she written? In English or in Chinese? She was wearing that evening the standard high-collared, amply-slit costume that Chinese women wear, and which proved more attractive than any literary performance her physical presence might have suggested to the senators, newspapermen, and serious writers in the company. She was on her way to America, it turned out. There her latest novel was being translated, and may soon be published. She has been writing since she turned nineteen. All these details had to be attested to, however, by a newspaper clipping—which, to my mind, was the least appropriate proof that the situation called for.

Japanese publishers, who have made big business of translations from Western literature into Japanese, have so far as I can ascertain up till now only one Filipino in their list. A *Japan Quarterly* report for 1952-1955 lists only seventeen (17) Chinese authors and one (1) Philippine author, as having had copyright translations published in that country during the three-year period.

On the other hand, a new situation has arisen. Carlos Qui-

rino's work on Ramon Magsaysay finds today as avid readers in Cagayan de Oro as in Seoul, while it may well be R. K. Narayan, the Indian novelist and creator of *Malgudi*, who will write the next Magsaysay biography that will be read the world over. "R. M.'s life has a story—a beginning, middle and end!" is how Narayan looks at his delightful commitment. All of which, in any case, has come about neither by accident nor by design, but rather "in the fullness of time."

**M**AGAZINES, as active galleries of culture, have been of immense help. After *Pacific Spectator's* pioneer interest in serious literature from Asia emerged such reviews as *Encounter*, *Vak*, *Comment*, and *Diliman Review*. Also, governments as well as private associations have made a program of exchange of writers possible. Australia, we may well recall, is soon to launch an anthology of Asian writing; and so will Japan.

If this is how things are shaping up, at no time then has the position of the Filipino writer become more promising. He has only to tell the Filipino story as he and his generation know it and be assured of a hearing. He may well take a lead from the writers of an earlier day who plucked the fruits with fingers crude, as a Milton might say,

aware of course that they were guavas and not apples, or that they were perhaps *atis* and not pears. Several displaced generations, though, were out looking for crab apples when coconuts were all over the place. Today, as we might well have done earlier, the Filipino writer has a lesson from American literature to remember when, in Dean Howells' day, he warned a compatriot imitating French symbolist poetry that a writer doesn't have a native country for nothing.

Force and relevance are the obvious benefits. But how resolve the many dilemmas peculiar to our time and place? Strictly on the level of communication, one pressing question is whom must he reach? Will striving for an audience at home suffice and automatically make possible a hearing abroad? Or, conversely, will a reputation abroad generate a hearing at home, among his own people? There are indeed a good many delicate questions, whose answers, however tentative, can point to a great number of delicate possibilities. But, speaking as a mere practitioner and at the same time thinking out my own problems aloud, I'd say this: That I'd work with whatever I have, and say what I feel I have to say in the best way I know at the present time. I'd sidetrack the communication problem entirely, give only a fleeting thought to

the audience question; but I'd come to grips, if I might, with something peculiarly Filipino—and the more particular the better. And I'd leave the rest to the devices of art and the grace of God.

We begin in 1958, I believe, the Age of Identity. "Who am I?"—an age-old question, of course—but an all-too-important one just the same. The possibility that in a nuclear disaster graveyards and markers will become terribly out of fashion makes for too awesome an inspiration. But on the more positive side, identity devices in due course a system of possibilities too exciting to miss. "Who am I?" means, actually, "What am I capable of?" And given the willingness to live as bountiful a life as the gifts of our good earth may provide, the answer comes readily enough. To carry one's identity card in the long run means setting up an embassy on behalf of the essential unity of man.

And this is not a truth too small for a writer to think about. The genius makes of it, as Tagore did, the center of his idealism. From there the import radiates. Kipling notwithstanding, East and West do meet. They have, in fact, no other alternative but to do so. By 1959, the Filipino writer ought to have begun in fuller measure his contribution to that inspiring certainty.