

THE CONVERSION By J. Neil Garcia

BACKGROUND

Teresa de Lauretis is the person who coined “Queer Theory”. During the 20th century, it was used as a derogatory term for gay people who were believed to engage in sex with the same gender.

Queer -- strange, unusual, out of alignment, not quite right

Gay/Queer Theory

It is a set of ideas based around the idea that identities are not fixed and do not determine who we are. Queer Theory is not the same as Lesbian or Gay Studies. The queer Theory challenges the essentialists’ notion of homosexuality and heterosexuality within the mainstream discourse, and instead posit an understanding of sexuality that emphasizes shifting boundaries, ambivalences, and cultural constructions that change depending on historical and cultural context. It can either mean tough love (the persona recognizes that event as for his good as he recounts that fateful day) or irony.

The Author

- He finished his undergraduate studies in UST in 1990.
- Graduated magna cum laude in AB Journalism
- He continued his education in UP Diliman.
- In 1995, he finished his M.A. Comparative Literature
- In 2003, he finished his Ph.d. in English Studies: Creative writing
- He is currently working in UP Diliman as a Creative writing and Comparative Literature professor
- Associate for Poetry at Likhaan: UP Institute of Creative Writing

Famous Works:

Our Lady of the Carnival (1996)

Kaluluwa (2001)

Essays in Philippine Gay Criticism (1998)

The Garden of Wordlessness (2005)

The Sorrows of Water (2000)

Philippine Gay Culture: The Last Thirty Years (1996)

Performing the Self: Occasional Prose (2003)

Misterios and Other Poems (2005)

He is the author of numerous poetry collections and works in literary and cultural criticism, including poems, essays and other works are mostly about homosexuality. His works contains representations of diverse varieties of gays and gayness in the country.

He writes comparisons on the western and eastern view on homosexuality. His latest critical work , Postcolonialism and Filipino Poetics: Essays and Critiques , is a revised version of his PhD dissertation in English Studies: Creative Writing, which he completed in 2003. He is currently working on a full-length book, a postcolonial survey and analysis of Philippine poetry in English.

Achievements:

Received grants and fellowships to deliver lectures in Taipei, Hawaii, Berkeley, Manchester, Cambridge, Leiden and Bangkok
British Academy Fellowship

Visiting ICOPHIL Fellow at the International Institute of Asian Studies, Leiden, the Netherlands

Procyon Poetry Prize

National Book Awards from the Manila Critics Circle

Palanca Awards for Literature

Philippines Free Press Literary Awards for Poetry

U.P. Gawad Chancellor for Outstanding Literary Artist,

U.P. Gawad Chancellor for Outstanding Literary Work,

U.P. Gawad Chancellor for Outstanding Research

U.P. Gawad Chancellor as Artist of the Year

Outstanding Thomasian Writers Award

29th National Writers' Workshop, Dumaguete

20th U.P. National Writers' Workshop

The Conversion

It happened in a metal drum.
They put me there, my family
That loved me. The water
Had been saved just for it, that day.
The laundry lay caked and smelly
In the flower-shaped basins.
Dishes soiled with fat and swill
Pilled high in the sink, and grew flies.
Too much to bear at times my knees
Felt like they had turned into water.
Waves swirled up and down around me, my head
Bobbing up and down. Father kept booming,
Girl or boy. I thought about it and squealed,
Girl. Water curled under my nose.
When I rose the same two words from father.
The same girl kept sinking deeper,
Breathing deeper in the churning void.
My cousins did not get washed that morning.
Lost in masks of snot and dust,
Their faces looked tired and resigned
To the dirty lot of children.
All the neighbors gathered around our
open-aired bathroom. Wives peered out
from the upper floor of their houses
into our yard. Father had arrived booming
with cousins, my uncles.
They were big, strong men, my uncles.
They turned the house inside-out
Looking for me. Curled up in the deepest corner
Of my dead mother's cabinet, father found me.
He dragged me down the stairs by the hair
Into the waiting arms of my uncles.
Because of modesty, I merely screamed and cried.
Their hands, swollen and black with hair, bore me
Up in the air, and touched me. Into the cold
Of the drum I slipped, the tingling
In the end I had to say what they all
Wanted me to say. I had to bring down this diversion
To its happy end, if only for the pot of rice
Left burning in the kitchen. I had to stop
Wearing my dead mother's clothes. In the mirror
I watched the holes on my ears grow smaller,
Until they looked as if they had never heard
Of rhinestones, nor felt their glassy weight.
I should feel happy that I'm now
Redeemed. And I do. Father died within five years
I got my wife pregnant with the next.
Our four children, all boys,
Are the joy of my manhood, my proof.
Cousins who never shed their masks
Play them for all their snot and grime.
Another child is on the way.

I have stopped caring what it will be.
Water is still a problem and the drum
Is still there, deep and rusty.
The bathroom has been roofed over with plastic.
Scrubbed and clean, my wife knows I like things.
She follows, though sometimes a pighead she is.
It does not hurt to show who is the man.
A woman needs some talking sense into. If not,
I hit her in the mouth to learn her.
Every time, swill drips from her shredded lips.
I drink with my uncles who all agree.
They should because tonight I own their souls
And the bottles they nuzzle like their prides.
While they boom and boom flies whirr
Over their heads that grew them. Though nobody
Remembers, I sometimes think of the girl
Who drowned somewhere in a dream many dreams ago.
I see her at night with bubbles
Springing like flowers from her nose.
She is dying and before she sinks I try to touch
Her open face. But the water learns
To heal itself and closes around her like a wound.
I should feel sorry but I drown myself in gin before
I can. Better off dead, I say to myself
And my family that loves me for my bitter breath.
We die to rise to a better life.

Literary Elements/Imagery/Symbolism/Meanings

The succeeding lines give us an image of how the household looked like that day, and how his family planned it to happen.

Of the drum I slipped, the tingling

Too much to bear at times my knees (Initial Alliteration)

Felt like they had turned into water. (Assonance) SIMILE

Waves swirled up and down around me, my head (Assonance)

Bobbing up and down. Father kept booming, (Initial Alliteration)

Girl or boy. I thought about it and squealed,

Girl. Water curled under my nose.

When I rose the same two words from father.

- In this part of the poem, the boy details the water torture that his family gives him, part of the “convincing” that they did for him to recognize his manhood. Uses descriptive language (i.e. up and down, curled, booming)

- From here we see that the boy truly identified himself as a girl, confirming his homosexuality

- This part of the poem demonstrates the breaking point of the boy’s will and his conforming to his family’s demands

- We get a glimpse of the background of this boy, on how he lost his mother may have contributed to his homosexuality

The same girl kept sinking deeper, METAPHOR (for homosexuality)

Breathing deeper in the churning void. (Consonance)

In the end I had to say what they all (Consonance)

Wanted me to say. I had to bring down this diversion (Initial Alliteration)

To its happy end, if only for the pot of rice

Left burning in the kitchen. I had to stop

Wearing my dead mother’s clothes. In the mirror

I watched the holes on my ears grow smaller, (Consonance)

Until they looked as if they had never heard (Consonance)

Of rhinestones, nor felt their glassy weight. (Consonance)

I should feel happy that I’m now (Assonance)

Redeemed. And I do. Father died within five years (Consonance)

I got my wife pregnant with the next. (Initial alliteration)

Our four children, all boys, (Consonance)

Are the joy of my manhood, my proof. (Initial alliteration)

Cousins who never shed their masks (Consonance)

Play them for all their snot and grime. (Consonance)

Another child is on the way.

I have stopped caring what it will be.

Water is still a problem and the drum (Consonance)

Is still there, deep and rusty.

- The main character sees his conforming as redemption.

- His detailing of his achievements (i.e. having kids, having a wife) seem like he is still trying to prove something to himself.

Are the joy of my manhood, my proof.”

- However, there is still a reminder of his past, the person within him he subdued by his mentioning of the drum.

Drum – symbol of the past that haunts him

Deep and rusty – just like his past

It happened in a metal drum. (Assonance)

They put me there, my family that loved me.

The water had been saved just for it, that day. (Consonance)

- Also, this part shows that when this poem was written the country was still very much patriarchal and very closed minded when it comes to unconventional genders.

The bathroom has been roofed over with plastic. (Assonance.)

Scrubbed and clean, my wife knows I like things. (Assonance.)

She follows, though sometimes a pighead she is. (metaphor, stupid)

It does not hurt to show who is the man. (Consonance)

A woman needs some talking sense into. If not, (Initial alliteration)

I hit her in the mouth to learn her. (Initial Alliteration)

Every time, swill drips from her shredded lips. (Internal Alliteration, Consonance)

I drink with my uncles who all agree. (Internal Alliteration)

They should because tonight I own their souls

And the bottles they nuzzle like their prides. (Consonance, idiom)

- There is a hint that the girl is still alive, perhaps still trying to reach out. And the girl here, being the symbol for his being gay. But “Better off dead” for “a better life”, he is concealing the girl’s existence for his family.

While they boom and boom flies whirr (Internal alliteration)

Over their heads that grew them. Though nobody

Remembers, I sometimes think of the girl (Consonance)

Who drowned somewhere in a dream many dreams ago. (Initial Alliteration)

I see her at night with bubbles (Assonance)

Springing like flowers from her nose.

She is dying and before she sinks I try to touch

Her open face. But the water learns (Consonance)

To heal itself and closes around her like a wound.

I should feel sorry but I drown myself in gin before

I can. Better off dead, I say to myself

And my family that loves me for my bitter breath.

We die to rise to a better life. (Assonance)

The laundry lay caked and smelly (Consonance)

In the flower-shaped basins. (Assonance)

Dishes soiled with fat and swill (Initial Alliteration)

piled high in the sink, and grew flies. (Consonance)

My cousins did not get washed that morning. (Consonance)

Lost in masks of snot and dust, (Initial Alliteration)

their faces looked tired and resigned (Consonance)

to the dirty lot of children. (Initial Alliteration)
All the neighbors gathered around our (Consonance)
open-air bathroom. Wives peered out (Initial Alliteration)
from the upper floor of their house (Assonance)
into our yard. Father had arrived booming (Consonance)
with his cousins, my uncles. (Consonance)
They were big, strong men, my uncles. (Initial Alliteration)
They turned the house inside-out for me. looking for me (Initial Alliteration)
Curled up in the deepest corner of my dead mother's cabinet, father found me. (Initial Alliteration)
He dragged me down the stairs by the hair (Assonance)
Into the waiting arms of my uncles. (Assonance)
Because of modesty, I merely screamed and cried. (Initial Alliteration)
Their hands, swollen and black with hair, bore me (Consonance)
Up in the air, and touched me. Into the cold (Consonance)
Of the drum I slipped, the tingling

- The persona in the poem recounts the story of his conversion that happened during his childhood.
- There exists a strong expression of anxiety of the persona, shown by how detailed he described that day.
- Use of exaggeration/hyperbole to emphasize the intensity/rage/importance of the event.
- The line can be a symbol of finally 'coming out of the closet' – by force, and eventually convert him.

An Analysis

J. Neil Garcia's poem *The Conversion* is the account of a murder. It speaks of the sad details of the killing of a little girl by a group of men who commit the deed in the name of love and the little boy who tried to protect her but lost. The perpetrators' justification lay in the fact that the little girl lived inside the boy; an unnatural spirit/being of which the boy must be exorcised and saved.

Garcia begins the poem in a straightforward fashion, describing the circumstances in which the offense was executed. "It happened in a metal drum." The economy of the first line is powerful in its restraint, painting only a picture of a functional cylinder of rusted metal and initially keeping the horrific function that the enclosure will host at bay.

Before detailing the act itself, Garcia, through the persona of the grown man recounting the story, tells us of the careful preparations (the premeditation) that the men in the family undertook, bestowing upon the crime the aura of occasion like a baptism or a confirmation. It is an event that must take precedence over banal affairs as washing clothes, dishes, or faces. These can wait. The salvation of a boy is at stake. "The water had been saved just for it, that day." Like the stench emanating from the neglected pile of soiled laundry, "that day" will leave a permanent stain on the persona, even as he has purportedly been cleansed.

More than an occasion however, the incident also becomes a spectacle, exposed to the curious eyes of neighbours and onlookers. That the men do nothing to conceal the event and even enter the scene "booming", hints that what they plan to do is also in their own interest – to showcase and prove their own masculinity in its violent but "righteous" imposition on a weaker party.

The persona as a boy though, while innocent, is not naive. He understands his father's and uncles' intentions and that contrary to the older males' justifications, he is not to be the object of their rescue. Instead, he is to be their sacrifice. Hiding "in the deepest corner" of his dead mother's cabinet, whose scents and softness offers him safety and refuge, the reader discerns the lonely and vulnerable condition of the child. He has no ally to protect him from an impending attack.

The boy is captured and dragged to the waiting metal drum where he is viciously dunked over and over again. "Girl or Boy" the Father shouts, a demand for a choice to be made but whose correct answer, the only acceptable answer has already been determined. The boy is defiant at first, speaking his self, even as water curls under his nose. But he knows that the brutal onslaught will not end until he conforms and with each submerging, the girl inside sinks "deeper in the churning void." He must renounce his self, banish the girl and emerge from that drum, reborn as a full blooded male.

The boy does convert and he learns how a man must act and feel. "I got my wife pregnant," the persona now boasts, telling not of love but of an achievement. "Our four children, all boys are the joy of my manhood, my proof." They are his testimony of his

heterosexuality. He also learns that “A woman needs some talking sense into,” just as his father and uncles “talked sense” into him with the help of a metal drum. Purportedly, his conversion is his redemption and now, everything he does with the force of his newfound masculinity is vindicated, just like his Father’s deed.

But Garcia’s poem is also a ghost story. The image of the drowned girl that he was then helpless to defend and save continues to haunt the man. “I should feel sorry but I drown myself in gin before I can.” Through another variety of liquid, the persona deadens himself – his denial of the girl within him making him as hollow as the now empty drum, a ghost of a man.