Taking Root in an Unfamiliar Landscape:
A Review of Marianne Villanueva’s Mayor of the Roses for the
Pacific Rim Review of Books

By Frances Cabahug

Fusing both ends of the Pacific, Marianne Villanueva’s book of short stories, Mayor of the Roses, collectively presents how the Filipino experience has increasingly become a matter of migration and survival. In a shrinking world rapidly turning into a global village where communication and travel have sped up the ability to connect one place to another, the eighteen stories in the book effusively point out that the insurmountable distance may not necessarily be a geographical problem, but a social one. The book explores the palpable aftermath of longing and frustration with the contradictions that rise up in the immigrant’s search for identity, family, and home in a strange new land.

Mayor of the Roses pinpoints the immigrant question as primarily a question of identity. In answer to the question of what it means to be Filipino, Villanueva humorously presents many cultural fixations; the stories “TV” and “BMW” revolve around the family’s preoccupations of acquiring television sets and high-end cars, while the story “Black Dog” almost dips into magic realism in explaining the pervasive belief in superstition. But these somewhat comical idiosyncrasies reveal a culture which places tremendous value on family, community, storytelling, and religion. Upon coming in contact with the Western world, the traditions that are kept are unavoidably challenged; for instance, “Wanting” explores an immigrant couple’s guilt over the burden of obligation towards the elderly parents whom they left behind. The ties that bind are predictably found insufficient and incompatible with the pursuit of the so-called American Dream.

The stories depart from earlier accounts of the Filipino immigrant experience; unlike the world of the 1940’s in Carlos Bulosan’s America is in the Heart, which revolved around the harsh working realities of being a bachelor immigrant at that time, Mayor of the Roses leans toward a more feminist
framework as it highlights instead the cracks surrounding the lives of immigrant women and the traces of interaction among families. The family is featured as the primary cultural stronghold; whether the story deals with waiting for a sister to die in “‘Lennox Hill, December 1991”, or in easing an old family servant unto his dying days in the story “Rufino,” the importance of being there for each other during the toughest times is emphasized.

However, the ties are breaking down as each family member becomes increasingly distant while facing individual pressures in assimilating to a different culture. In “Selena,” a husband’s midlife crisis coincides with the family’s cultural uprootedness. The failure to communicate is symptomatic as the characters draw even inward to brood over their problems. The three children in “Infected” become perceptively alienated when their mother dies and their father no longer knows how to deal with them. This breakdown of communication allows for abuse to occur, shown blatantly in “Silence”, which features a subservient woman who wrestles with her inability to stand up for herself against her husband. The problems that tangle the family ties in these stories are as tragic as they are seemingly portrayed to be inevitable.

Beyond the breakdown, there is a current of muted violence running throughout the entire book. “Mayor of the Roses,” the first story which the entire collection is named after, is a graphic account based on the true-to-life rape and murder of a hometown beauty queen by the mayor and his lackeys. Less shocking but equally disturbing is the subtleties of domestic abuse which evades any resolution in the story “Sutil.” The cold-blooded hostility that permeates these stories is altogether apt in capturing a cultural identity that has been equated with the overwhelming sense of outrage and helplessness.

But the entire book is handled with sensitivity and grace. Villanueva’s tales may cautiously walk over a thorny tightrope, but the stories mediate the tensions between idealism and disillusionment, community and withdrawal, cruelty and hope without falling deep into cloying sentimentality. Mayor of the Roses is a testament that coherent meaning can be drawn from the immigrant experience despite its contradictions, and that the clash of beauty and ugliness certainly adds a vibrant dynamics to the Filipino cultural identity.