Listen to these lines from a poem written sometime in the late 1930s by a young Filipino woman, entitled "Muted Cry."

They took away the language of my blood, giving me one "more widely understood."
More widely understood! Now Lips can never
Never with the Soul-in-Me commune:
Moments there are I strain, but futile ever,
To flute my feelings through some native Tune ...
Alas, how can I interpret my Mood?
They took away the language of my blood

Shakespeare, Dante, Sappho, and the rest,
They who are now as poets deified,
Never their language being them denied,
Their moods could be felicitous expressed

If I could speak the language of my blood,
My feet would trace the path their feet have trod,
And stake me a niche within their Lot of fame,

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Of jade-and-gold, and carve me there a name.
Ah, could I speak the language of my blood,
I, too, would free the poetry in me.

These words I speak are out of pitch with ME!
That other Voice?——Cease longing to be free!

Forever shalt thou cry, a muted god:
"Could I but speak the language of my blood!"

No auditor can miss the irony implicit in the poem, for despite her protestation to the contrary, the poet is able to express her mournful mood, which she does, not in Filipino, the language of her blood, but in English, the language more widely understood. Is her lament of loss, then, real, or merely rhetorical?

A feminist review of Philippine literary history, dealing in particular with the relationship between the English language and Filipino women writers, reveals a situation that is as complex and as prone to shift through time, as the answer to that question would need to be. The intersection between that history and the period of American colonial rule in the Philippines is what shall come under consideration in what follows.

**English as an Instrument of Colonial Policy**

In 1898, by right of what then-President William McKinley characterized as its "Manifest Destiny," the United States annexed the Philippines. To facilitate its administration of the archipelago's 7100 islands, it established a nation-wide system of public schools, staffing it, initially, with American soldiers, and, subsequently, with professional civilian teachers. English was designated the official medium of instruction, and no time was wasted in teaching it to a native population of 7.6 million. To justify the enormous cost of so ambitious a plan, General Arthur MacArthur argued the point before the decision-makers halfway across the globe in Washington, D.C.: "This appropriation is recommended primarily and exclusively as an adjunct to military operations calculated to pacify the people and to procure and expedite the restoration of
tranquillity throughout the archipelago."² In plain English, English was to be propagated as an instrument of colonial administrative policy.

This strategy of the United States colonial government paid off. When the first official census was taken in 1903, the literacy rate was barely 5%. By the time of the second census, in 1918, that figure had increased to 49.2%; in 1935, to 65%.³ While the swift rise in the literacy rate was due in part to the arrival, in 1901, of 600 American teachers who were immediately fanned out throughout the islands to teach thousands of Filipino schoolchildren their ABCs, the greater part of the credit for it must be given to the Filipinos themselves, children and adults alike, who were eager to learn the new language as best as they possibly could.

In A String of Pearls: Memoirs of a Suffragist, Paz Policarpio-Mendez (1903-1995), provides an account of the reception given the American school teachers assigned to her hometown of San Isidro, Nueva Ecija.

When two American teachers [invited] parents to send their children to the public schools, they were met with questions. For instance, how much was the tuition? Everyone was agreeably surprised to learn that not only tuition was free, but also books, pencils and other supplies .... The new system was most acceptable to the lower middle class and poorer families who would never have been able to send their children to Manila. The only thing that disturbed them was that boys and girls were to mingle together. The co-educational arrangement was unheard of and shocking to conservative parents.⁴

But the same arrangement, adds Policarpio-Mendez, was greeted with enthusiasm by the young girls who crowded the classrooms, sitting alongside of the boys. Competing with the boys inside classrooms for the first time in Philippine history, the girls found to their astonishment that they not only could compete, but that they also were capable of outdistancing the boys intellectually, and, not infrequently they

²Renato Constantino, "The Miseducation of the Filipino" (Quezon City: Foundation for Nationalist Studies, 1982), p.3.
did, during the Friday contests in spelling, addition, subtraction, multiplication and division which were held instead of formal classes.⁵ Both girls and boys had fun as well being pitted against their parents, who were less adept in learning the new language. In her memoirs of the period, Paz Marquez Benitez (1894 - 1983) writes of her parents’ experience:

[For them] the English language ... was completely illogical and absurd. Father early bought himself an English-Spanish book by a German author and after diligent study was able to decipher the general import of business telegrams. That was as far as he went. My mother was immensely proud of our prowess in “the American language” and would listen to us with a satisfied smile on her face. That is until we had the bad manners to deliberately exclude her from the conversation. “Don’t talk English!” she would say sharply.⁶

But there was no stopping the young learners. Her daughter reports that by the time Paz Marquez had graduated from Lucena High School in 1910, she “had not only become proficient in the language of the new conqueror, but fortunately or unfortunately, it had become for her as for thousands of Filipino young people .... the language in which she could best express herself. Her Spanish was ceremonial, her Tagalog utilitarian. English had become for her the language of her heart.”⁷

**English as the Language of Power**

For Marquez Benitez and others of like sensibility, English may indeed have become the language of the heart. But for most other Filipinos, the attraction of English had to do with mainly pragmatic considerations: it was the new language of power.⁸ English was the passport to

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⁵ *A String of Pearls*, pp. 20-21.
⁷ *Paz Marquez Benitez*, p. 25.
⁸ That English was to be “the language of the century” was acknowledged even by those ideologically opposed to it. As American forces were pursuing him in Samar, General Vicente Lukban (a widower) wrote a letter instructing his brother to make sure that his children learned English (*Kasaysayan: The Story of the Filipino People* (Asia Publishing Limited, 1998), Vol. 6, *Under Stars and Stripes*, ed. Milagros C. Guerrero, p. 228.)
the brave new world that was opening throughout the Philippine archipelago. Whether you sought to walk the corridors of power in government or to try your luck in the mazes of the marketplace, you needed to be able to demonstrate a competence, if not a mastery, of English.

The use of English as the medium of instruction in the vast network of the public school system gave young Filipino women the same ready access to this language of power as the men. They sat side by side with them inside the same classrooms, learning the language from the same teachers and textbooks. Simultaneous access to the language put female and male students at the same starting line, so to speak. Put another way, the English language helped level the playing field. Viewed from this perspective, English operated during the first decades of the century as an equalizing factor between the two sexes, allowing women at least simultaneous access to the many opportunities, both professional and personal, that presented themselves to Filipinos during this period.

A typical case was that of Maria Salome Marquez, who was sixteen at the time the Philippine-American War broke out. When the Americans opened a public school in her barrio two years later, Maria was appointed a grade-school teacher and paid P30 a month. In the mornings she taught the young children in Spanish. In the afternoons, she studied English under an American teacher named Mr. Rigger. Within six months, Maria had learned the rudiments of the English language well enough to teach it to her grade school pupils. Impressed by her performance, Mr. Rigger assigned her to the public school in Sta. Ana, Manila, with a monthly salary of P35. Barely eighteen, Maria became the sole breadwinner of her family.9 Maria's success story was replicated many times over throughout the islands. Their acquired proficiency in English provided young Filipino women unprecedented opportunities to create a collective identity for themselves as La Filipina Moderna.

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9Nick Joaquin, Manila, My Manila (Philippines: City of Manila, 1990), pp. 142-143.
English as a Medium of Philippine Literature

For Marquez Benitez and her generation, for whom English had become the language of their hearts, it seemed only natural to use it as the medium for their stories and poems. There was neither skepticism nor scrupling on their part over the use of English as a medium for Philippine literature. The inaugural issue of *The College Folio*, dated October 1910, published by the students of the University of the Philippines, founded two years earlier, stated in its editorial that is aimed “to act as pioneers in ... the adoption of the English language as the official tongue of the islands [because of the] diversity of dialects and the imperfection of all of them ... unless we Filipinos mean to be cut off from the world of thought and action.” In 1927, the founding members of the U.P. Writers Club issued a manifesto claiming themselves to be “impelled by a noble aim to elevate to the highest pedestal of possible perfection the ENGLISH language in the Islands.” They wanted to be known to the general public as “the faithful followers of Shakespeare.” As much as, from the perspective of post-colonialism, such effusions may appear embarrassingly naive, they expressed the sentiment toward English which prevailed during that early period. Far from being seen as “the oppressors’ language,” English was both hailed and deployed by the writers of this period as an instrument of cultural advancement.

The Initial Impact of English on Pre-War Filipino Women Writers

During these early decades, the English language offered Filipino women writers the unprecedented opportunity to play a formative role in birthing a new body of work soon to be known as Philippine literature in English. With no tradition anterior to it, the creation of Philippine literature in English was completely open to anyone, male or female, who would nurture it.

I cannot resist at this point from drawing a parallel between this “birthing” process or development, and the Philippine creation myth, which, in a departure from the Judaeo-Christian myth, according to which Adam appears first, and Eve only subsequently, upon issuing from his rib, tells of the simultaneous springing into existence of *Malakas* (The Strong One) and *Maganda* (The Beautiful One), from the same piece of bamboo. For in the case of Philippine literary history, that is exactly the situation we are looking at, with Filipino women and Fili-
pino men writing literary texts in the English language at the same time.\textsuperscript{10} The significance of this historical fact cannot be overestimated, insofar as it accounts for Filipino women's confidence in themselves as writers. This first generation of women writers were thus spared the "anxiety of authorship" that Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar claim afflicted Western women writers. With no precursors, either male or female, to cause them anxiety, these Filipino women felt as free as their male counterparts to set the subject matter, style and standard of Philippine literature in English.

That Filipino women were present from the beginnings of Philippine literature in English is amply documented. Indeed, the first official record of Philippine poetry in English, the maiden issue of \textit{The Filipino Students' Magazine}, published at Berkeley, California, in 1905, by a group of \textit{pensionados} (government scholars) who had organized themselves into the Filipino Students Organization, featured four poems, among them a poem by Maria G. Romero. In the field of fiction, Paz Marquez Benitez holds the distinction of producing "Dead Stars," the first modern short story in Philippine letters, which appeared in \textit{The Philippines Herald Magazine} in 1925. This short story firmly established her reputation as the matriarch of Philippine fiction in English. In addition to producing works of fiction, between the years 1920 and 1950, she taught a short story writing course at the University of the Philippines that nurtured the talents of young aspiring writers who went on to become important figures in the Philippine literary canon, among them Arturo B. Rotor, Francisco Arcellana, Bienvenido N. Santos, Paz M. Latorena, Loreto Paras Sulit. Acknowledging his own debt of gratitude to Marquez Benitez, Arcellana, now National Artist, says quite simply: "She was the mother of us all!"\textsuperscript{11} Her two most gifted intellectual

\textsuperscript{10}This appears not to be the case with the Philippine literary output in the vernacular languages, with female writers emerging only at the end of the last century, driven by the revolutionary spirit of the period. For a survey of Philippine literature by women in the vernacular languages, refer to \textit{Ang Silid na Mahiwaga: Katipunan ng Kuwento't Tula ng Mga Babaeng Manunulat}, ed. Soledad S. Reyes (Pasig City: Anvil Publishing, 1994.) For a parallel survey of writings by Filipino women in English, read \textit{Songs of Ourselves: Writings by Filipino Women in English}, ed. Edna Zapanta Manlapaz (Pasig City: Anvil Publishing, 1994).

\textsuperscript{11}From an interview with Edna Zapanta Manlapaz on January 18, 1995, Quezon City.

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daughters were Paz M. Latorena (1907-1953), and Loreto Paras Sulit (1908-), who, with ten men, formed, in 1927, the U.P. Writers Club. Of the thirteen founding members, they turned out to be among the most prominent and prolific. Their achievement and that of other women writers did not go unnoticed. The Feb 28, 1935 issue of Graphic featured an article with the provocative title, "Will Women Dominate Local Literature?" and subtitle, "Lady Writers [Are] Not Only Increasing But Turning Out Better Stuff." It began as follows:

An American critic once said something to the effect that Edith Wharton, Willa Cather and Ellen Glasgow constitute a more distinguished trio of contemporary US novelists than could be formed by any three elected from the male fictionists.

It went on to assert that an identical claim could be made in the case of contemporary Philippine literature:

Paz Marquez Benitez, Loreto Paras Sulit, and Paz Latorena. Their best can equal anything that could be offered by Casiano Calalang, Arturo B. Rotor, Jose Garcia Villa, Manuel E. Arguilla.

During the 1930s, in the firmament of Philippine poetry in English, two poets shared stellar status: Jose Garcia Villa (1908-1997) and Angela Manalang Gloria (1907-1995). As students at the University of the Philippines, they vied for the coveted position of literary editor of the Philippine Collegian — a prize won, not once, but twice, by Manalang, but never by Villa, who was suspended for writing what his detractors had claimed was obscene poetry, and who in 1930 dropped out of college altogether. The rivalry persisted, however, as they contributed poems to the same magazines, and produced collections which they submitted to the poetry division of the First Commonwealth Literary Contest, conducted in 1940. Both lost to Zulueta da Costa's Like the Molave, though Villa's Poems by Doveglion received honorable mention. Manalang-Gloria's disappointment was exacerbated by disgust over the whispered allegation that she had lost the prize because the all-male jurors objected to the moral impropriety of several poems, specifically those dealing with female sexuality. They reportedly "saw red" when

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12For a biographical account of them, see Edna Zapanta Manlapaz, Our Literary Matriarchs, 1925-1953 (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1966).
reading "Revolt from Hymen," a strongly worded protest against the oppression of marital sex.

Among the second generation of Filipino fictionists writing in English, the name of Estrella Alfon (1917-1983) stands out. Alfon was the only female member of the Veronicans, a group of avant garde writers of the 1930s, which included Francisco Arcellana, N.V.M. Gonzalez, Manuel Viray, and Hernando Ocampo. Unlike the men, who at the time were all students at the University of the Philippines, Alfon possessed no academic credentials, having taught herself to write fiction. That did not stop her from producing story after story, which earned her the enviable reputation of being the most prolific writer during the period preceding the Second World War.

Mention must also be made of the women who, as readers, writers, and editors, contributed to shaping Philippine literature in English, in ways that male writers working alone could not possibly have.

A Change of Heart

The Filipino writers’ love affair with the English language, begun with passion in the first three decades of the century, suffered a perceptible waning during the late 1930s and early 1940s.

In response to an increasingly felt need to foster the creation of a national language, the government of the Philippine Commonwealth, in 1936, established the Surian ng Wikang Pambansa (Institute of National Language). In the following year the Institute recommended that Tagalog be made the basis for the national language, on the premise that it "occupied an intermediate position linguistically and geographically among the Philippine languages." Sometimes rancorous discussions and debates ensued, both within and without the Institute. A first-person account of the controversy over the national language is provided by Tarrosa-Subido who went to work at the Institute of National Language in 1937:

[T]here was no standard literary Tagalog then. They were still debating the national language, its grammar, its spelling. [But] I had the advantage of being right there with Tagalog giants like Lope K. Santos, Julian Balmaceda, Inigo Regalado and other well known established writers. These Tagalog writers, most of them old enough to be my grandfathers, used to scold us English writers.
They'd say, *Inglis an kayo nang Inglis an. Hindi kayo sumulat sa Tagalog. Sayang ang talino ninyo.* (You keep writing in English. Why not Tagalog? You are wasting your talent.) Once in a while we would really ask ourselves and one another,”Why don’t we write in Tagalog?”

Of course, it was not a simple matter of an inability on the part of Filipino women writers to write in their native tongue. It is just that they thought themselves less fluent in that language than they believed themselves to be in English. As we saw, in “Muted Cry,” Tarrosa-Subido gives expression to this frustration: “Moments there are I strain, but futile ever,/To flute my feelings through some native Tune.” In an interview she gave many years later, she supplied another reason for the hesitation on the part of some writers to switch to the vernacular:

But at the time writing for Tagalog readers was not an attractive option. Though Tagalog writers were well paid, they did not have as much status as the English writers. The thinking maybe was you did not have to be educated to write in Tagalog. Anybody could write in the native language but presumably not everybody could speak in English, much less write short stories, poems, essays in English. To do that, they would have had to be exposed to British and American masterpieces as well as the European ones that were available only in English. In short, they would have to be “cultured”. The English writers felt they had standards to live up to, to try to reach while the vernacular writers were not thought to have those at the time.

From a postcolonial perspective, this revelation — if true — demonstrates the extent to which the use of the English language had created a split within the community of Filipino writers, segregating the two groups not merely in terms of language but also by class. Those who wrote in English constituted themselves as an elite group of writers who unintentionally perhaps but nevertheless effectively alienated themselves from the majority of Filipinos who preferred their literature to appear in the vernacular.

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14Ibid., p. 44.
In poststructuralist terms, the English language had so constituted these Filipino writers as subjects that they were unable to recognize themselves as subject to their cultural colonization. The irony, of course, is that the more completely they came to be colonized as subjects, the more likely they were to be unaware of the fact of their subjection — and, therefore, the less anxious over their alienation from their traditional heritage. Some writers, however, Tarrosa Subido among them, began to suffer the stirrings of this anxiety. The poem “Muted Cry” is a *cri de coeur* of the deep-rooted anxiety experienced by at least some Filipinos writing in English during this period.

However, the question whether to write in English or in Tagalog was rendered academic when war erupted in 1941. Once again language became a matter of colonial policy, this time of the Japanese Imperial Government. Anxious to have Filipinos believe in its benevolent intention to bring prosperity to fellow Asians, the Japanese actively encouraged the use of the Tagalog-based national language. The language policy of the Japanese occupation gave an unexpected boost to writing in the vernacular languages. Writers who had previously written only in English found themselves having to switch to Tagalog. For some, the switch proved difficult, if not impossible. For others, it opened their eyes to the richness of the vernacular literary tradition that, earlier, they had either ignored or dismissed.

Over the course of nearly a century, the love affair between Filipino writers and the English language has gone through alternate phases of passion and passivity. In the first four decades of this affair, nothing less than an ardor was felt by Filipino writers, but especially by women, for English, the foreign language that had brokered for them a multifaceted liberation. There is little reason, for women at least, to anticipate the end of the affair. 
