

Remembering the War: A Glimpse of Women War Memoirs

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ABSTRACT

Believing that there is a gender dimension to war memories, this article explores some characteristics of women war memoirs such as the primacy of the family as context of the narrative, rendering the memoir more personal and intimate. Another characteristic of women recollections of the war is its description of everyday life making it a rich source of social history of the war. An attempt to establish a semblance of normalcy in the face of trying times is also evident in the stories of women during the war.

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Lastly is the self-effacing character of the narrators, decentering themselves in the historical narrative instead of being the principal protagonist in the story.

KEYWORDS

war memoirs, women, Japanese period in the Philippines, social history

INTRODUCTION

War has more often than not been associated with men. But women are much a part of the war and it is an injustice to exclude them in the war narratives. Using selected war memoirs penned by women, this paper aims to underline that there is a gender dimension to memories of the war. Discussed in this article are some characteristics of women war memoirs. Women have a tendency to narrate the events of the war within the context of the family which would inevitably lead to a description of family relations. The resulting narratives, therefore, become more personal and more intimate. Moreover, women narratives tend to document everyday life in a war situation, an aspect often absent in war narratives written by men. Women narratives attempt to establish a sense of normalcy in the face of trying times. Lastly, evident in the women narratives is the self-effacing character of the narrators, the result most likely of the socialization they are exposed to.

The article examines these characteristics and demonstrate how these are evident in the selected war memoirs.

INTRODUCING THE AUTHORS OF WAR MEMOIRS

The war memoirs used in this article are the following: *Breaking the Silence* by Lourdes R. Montinola; *Living with the Enemy* by Pacita Pestaño-Jacinto; *Comfort Woman: Slave of Destiny* by Maria Rosa Henson and *Memories of the War Years: A Teenage Girl's Life in the Philippines Under Japanese Rule* by Helen N. Mendoza.

Lourdes Reyes Montinola, author of *Breaking the Silence* was the daughter of Nicanor Reyes, founder of Far Eastern University and the sole survivor of the family who were massacred on 9 February 1945 during the liberation of Manila. Lourdes was the third child among five siblings. A younger sister and brother perished with her parents on that fateful day of 9 February 1945.

Pacita Pestaño-Jacinto, author of *Living with Enemy* was a young bride of a medical doctor in Manila when the war broke out.

Maria Rosa Henson, author of *Comfort Woman: Slave of Destiny* was an illegitimate daughter of a rich hacendero of Angeles, Pampanga and was 14 years old at the start of the war.

Helen N. Mendoza, author of *Memories of the War Years* was 16 years old when her family moved to Iloilo as her father assumed the position of Collector of Customs of the port of Iloilo. Her family hailed from Zamboanga City. She spent the Japanese occupation in Iloilo.

The narratives of the four authors open with how they received news of the war.

NEWS OF THE OUTBREAK OF THE WAR IN THE AUTHORS' NARRATIVES

Each war narrative describe how they received the news of the war. Montinola remembered the day:

. . . I was with Mother and Lola Maria on the way to Antipolo to hear an early mass on December 8, 1941, it being the feast of the Immaculate Conception. We sensed something was wrong as crowds huddled in many stops and even traffic policemen seemed to be distracted. When we inquired what was going on, we were told that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. War had been declared by America! This meant that the Philippines was also at war!

We turned back home to the great relief of Father, who was anxiously waiting in our carport. I wondered why Mother and Father were so alarmed. To me, Pearl Harbor and America were far away. All I could think of were the *suman* and Antipolo toy claypots that we had missed buying.¹

A newly married wife, Pacita Pestaño-Jacinto wrote that she was with her husband on the way to their farm in Novaliches for a picnic. Her diary entry on that fateful day of 9 December 1941 read:

We were taking it easy and coasting down Jones Bridge towards Escolta when he caught my eye. There were many other boys like him, but I singled him out because he was quicker. I watched him run towards our car, coming up so close I could see the beads of sweat on his flushed little face. He pushed a single paper at us. It read, 'Extra, Extra!' and below it, an ominous black ink, was printed 'Pearl Harbor Bombed. America declares War.'

I shall never forget the moment. The car had stopped for only a short while, and then the newsboy was gone. But by the time the motor picked up and we roared away, the world had changed completely.²

Both Helen Mendoza and Maria Rosa Henson were in school when they received news about the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Helen Mendoza recalled:

Every Monday morning in school, we gather for the flag ceremony. At 7 a.m. of December 8, 1941, we stood before the flagpole waiting for the usual ceremony to begin. We stood there for some time while the teachers were talking excitedly among themselves. After almost half an hour, the teachers told us we were dismissed and could go home because something had happened in Hawaii and it

seemed that war had begun. I walked home quickly and found my siblings already there.³

It was also during the school flag-raising ceremony that Henson learned of the start of the war. Henson recounted the following:

On December 8, 1941, a Monday, I went to school as usual. I was in the seventh grade and would have gone on to high school. I was surprised to see so many students outside the gate. The nuns had just announced that the school was closed because war had been declared. So I walked back to our house, which was about half a kilometer away.⁴

In short, two of the narrators were in school when they learned about the start of the war. One was on her way to Antipolo to attend mass, the date being a religious feast, while the other was with her husband on the way to Novaliches.

A common thread among the four women is that all the narratives unfold within the confines of the family.

SAFE IN THE ARMS OF THE FAMILY

Since three of the narrators were of school age, they recounted how the family responded to the declaration of the war.

Montinola recounted that fear and excitement enveloped her. She recounted that drapes and newspapers

were used to blacken out windows and glass door of their house located on Agno Street. She added that the family stayed together in the second floor of their house and literally slept with their shoes, ready to escape when necessary. Air raids became frequent which found her family seeking refuge in the house library with sandbags lining it from the outside. Whenever the air raid siren sounded, she reminisced: “We crouched in fear, speechless, with rosaries in our hands, as the first bombs were dropped by the enemy and anti-aircraft guns were fired by our defenders. Mother was praying loudly, *Sagrado Corazon de Jesus, Sagrado Corazon de Jesus.*”⁵

Montinola recalled that her mother prepared a knapsack for each of them children containing a few canned goods, water, first-aid kit and a flashlight. Soon, the house was filled with friends and relatives who sought refuge in their house. Montinola marveled how her mother was able to feed some 60 people in their house as well as provide beddings for them.

With the news that the Japanese were entering Manila, she remembered that her unmarried aunts started to make themselves ugly by wearing the clothes of her grandmother and applying charcoal to their faces.

Later, Montinola’s family house on Agno Street was commandeered by the Mitsui Mining Company and the family was forced to vacate it and rented a chalet house in Paco. The family was to become a neighbor of Jose P. Laurel and his family.

For Pestaño-Jacinto, her doctor-husband had been on a 24-hour shift which left her practically alone in their house on Otis Street. She was convinced by her husband to leave their home and join his family at the Avenue Hotel, a concrete seven-story building. She wrote:

...We occupied a whole wing on the fourth floor. During the day, life took on a little color with the happy sounds of children enjoying the company of many playmates. But the nights were dark and long and fearful. As soon as the siren went off, occupants of the hotel would rush out of their rooms and race for the stairs. The hotel manager would say "You will please go down to the third floor. It is safer. It is halfway between the top and the bottom. And you will be calm, please."⁶

For Helen Mendoza, there was concern for three of her siblings who were studying in Manila. All students of the University of the Philippines, they were taken in the house of Tio Pedrito, brother of their mother as all dormitories closed down. Tio Jesus, another brother of their mother, decided that it was time to leave Manila and arranged for transport of Helen's siblings together with the children of Tio Jesus. A sailboat was chartered from Bauan, Batangas destined for Capiz. The sailboat was blown by the wind to the coast of Antique. The group was given food and lodging for the night by the parish priest of the town. Below is a diary entry of Mendoza recounting the reunion of the Mendoza family:

March 7, 1942. In Capiz, a town official who was my father's friend, phoned my father in Iloilo. He relayed the news that members of his family had arrived from Manila. My father told him that he would drive to fetch them immediately. Our car was a large one, an Oldsmobile. Papa loaded some food and was rushing to go when Mother ran after him and gave him a saint's medal for a safe journey. Perhaps, who would know, that saint kept him from harm because as my father sped towards Capiz, the car hit something and overturned. Papa emerged from the car without a scratch and the car's engine was not damaged. He proceeded to Capiz where he picked up the evacuees from Manila.⁷

Henson was with her mother and their relatives when they evacuated to Ipo Dam in Bulacan. Her uncle happened to be truck driver of a cement quarry there. She recalled:

He (uncle) took all of us, with all our belongings, on board his truck. As we were driving out of Manila, I thought of my father. I saw the other children who had their fathers with them. I wondered whether my father was also evacuating like we were. Was he with his wife and his children? My father was very old, seventy two when the war broke out.⁸

Henson recounted that after a month's stay in Ipo Dam, they moved to a cave in Norzagaray where his uncles Juan, Miguel, Felino and Ando and her aunts Consing and Laria stayed.

Although it was December and a joyful Yuletide season was anticipated, it was a somber Christmas of 1941 for the four women narrators. Henson remembered:

We spent Christmas and New Year in the cave. It was very cold. The place was swarming with mosquitos, and we lit small fires so the smoke would drive the insects away. We were not in a mood to celebrate. We had usual meal and then went to sleep.⁹

For Montinola, it was the first time that there was “no Christmas tree, no Santa Claus, midnight mass or *Noche Buena* to mark the blessed season. But on Christmas day, there were toys and parlor games galore in the vestibule and the steps of the *porte cochere* which was as far as we were allowed to wander.”¹⁰

Mendoza remembered her first Christmas in Iloilo this way:

It was a sad Christmas for everyone. Nevertheless, we observed *Noche Buena* and the New Year midnight dinner, albeit sadly. President Manuel Quezon sent this greeting to the Filipino people: “An inspiring Christmas and brave New Year.” In times past, this day was the happiest time of the year. Never did we experience such a gloomy Christmas.¹¹

Pestaño-Jacinto for her part, recalled that her mother-in-law insisted on celebrating Christmas Eve dinner the usual way in an attempt to create normalcy. She wrote:¹¹

Tonight is Christmas Eve. There will be enough candle light. Perhaps a little music. We will sit down to food properly, soup bowls, and all. My mother insists on it. "In thanksgiving," she said briefly with that break in her voice, "war is nothing to me. It is to show the Lord that I am thankful. But first the Holy Rosary, all of us."¹²

But as the war progressed, the lives of our women narrators settled down and they confronted the tedium of daily living.

THINKING OF FOOD IN TIMES OF WAR

It is said that women are gifted with episodic memory, a type of long-term memory based on personal experience. A study added that women excelled in verbal episodic memory task such as remembering words, objects, pictures or everyday events. Our four women narrators all exhibited this kind of memory rendering their narratives a rich source of social history.

Food supply was one major concern of our women narrators. During the evacuation in Norzagaray, Henson recalled that they survived by helping the villagers with planting rice and harvesting vegetables while the menfolk fished in the Ipo Dam. When Henson's family returned to their home in Pasay walking all the way from Bulacan, she recalled that "food and money were hard to come." To make some money, Henson's uncles, brothers of her mother, sold firewood which they gathered from Fort McKinley, an American military reservation. It was in one

of these forays that Henson was raped at the age of 14. Henson recalled she did not even have her menarche. This incident made her mother with her in tow leave Manila for Angeles, Pampanga. Henson recounted how they survived:

My mother raised chickens so we had eggs to eat and sometimes meat. We also had a little pig. But one day a member of the Makapili went to our house and took everything—the eggs, the chicken and the pig. He said that his Japanese companion instructed him to get out animals. But we never saw his Japanese companion. My mother did not protest, she did not say a single word, she just gave him all we had. That was the way things were in our barrio.¹³

As for Mendoza, upon hearing that Bataan has been surrendered to the Japanese, her father decided to evacuate to the town of Alimodian, 30 kilometers from the town of La Paz. Mendoza recalled that her father brought with them sacks of rice, mongo and dried fish. While in evacuation, Mendoza wrote:

...the maids cooked our meager meal of rice and mongo, sometimes with a piece of roasted or boiled meat which we bought from an itinerant vendor. Frying the food was out of the question as there was no cooking oil available. Needless to say, we could not eat much as we did not know how long we would be in the mountains and how long our food stock would last.¹⁴

Mendoza recalled that after supper, the family would discuss life before the war and what would be in their bucket list once the war is over. She said: "Food was our favorite topic because food was scarce."¹⁵

Montinola mentioned that imported items disappeared from the store shelves. She recalled vividly:

...There was no more butter, no refined sugar, no fresh milk; there was a lack of most canned goods, and even good soap and toothpaste. My young cousins were fed powdered milk bought from the black market at atrocious prices....A substitute for toothpaste was rock salt, but it tasted awful and only ruined one's teeth.¹⁶

Montinola's mother according to her went to the wet market herself to buy fish and poultry so that money would go a longer way. Montinola added that one needed bushels of "Mickey Mouse" money to buy a week's food provision. Incidentally, Montinola's family did not leave Manila during the duration of the war.

Pestaño-Jacinto who belonged to the same social class as Montinola decried the scarcity of imported goods particularly imported milk as needed by her newly-born baby girl. Her entry in her diary read:

Milk, canned or powdered, has gone the way of all imported commodities. The black market has become an inexorable tyrant, dictating prices that

make my head swim. Money not being available, the man in the street has come to the rescue. The cow and the carabao have come to their own. The milkman is again an institution. The grocer, on the other hand, caters only to the rich.¹⁷

Apart from the diminishing supply of food, shared by the four women narrators, everyday life did not escape their pens.

EVERYDAY LIFE DURING THE OCCUPATION YEARS

From the war memoirs of the four women, two spent the occupation period in the provinces and two in Manila. Mendoza spent the war years mainly in Iloilo and the liberation in Bigaa, Bulacan and Manila. Henson was in Pampanga during the duration of the war and the liberation period. Montinola on the other hand witnessed the occupation and the liberation of Manila while Pestaño-Jacinto spent a major part of the war in Manila and the liberation in Malolos, Bulacan.

Mendoza wrote: “As we waited for the war to end, we followed the normal routine of life. We ate, slept, rested. We sometimes had parties and visitors. We went to the movies, visited friends (or friends visited us) or went on excursions.”

Going out was one pastime for Mendoza. She wrote:

Once in a while we went to Iloilo City either to see a movie or to dine in a restaurant. Dainty Restaurant was our favorite. Sometimes we went to a restaurant named Chin Yet. The routine of keeping to the house had to be broken by going out to the city. It could be pretty boring just staying at home and waiting for war to end. But every so often, we were reminded that a war was going on for we heard the sound of explosions or gunfire. One afternoon Japanese planes bombed the other side of the river. We watched the bombing till the end. The USAFFE were firing at the planes.¹⁸

Visiting and receiving visitors and hosting parties broke the monotony of daily living. Mendoza wrote of their family hosting a dance party and being invited to a birthday party where she danced all night. She remembered:

We held a dance party at home once and we had a grand time dancing. The affair was livelier because the Cervantes girls joined us. When Lolita celebrated her birthday, we were all invited to the party. There were many people and there was dancing. I danced most of the time and refused no one who asked me to dance. It seemed everyone had a good time.¹⁹

Mendoza mentioned not only fun times but also serious activities such as learning the Japanese language through a booklet distributed by the Japanese propaganda corps and reading as well. She recalled that her father wanted them to stay home and read. Near their home according to Mendoza was a home abandoned by an American and was

guarded by a Japanese. This home had a large library and one day, her brother ventured into the house to borrow some books. The Japanese guard caught him and slapped him hard.

The war had the effect of leveling off social classes but at the same time of creating the divide between “insiders” and “outsiders.” One time, Mendoza visited the mansion of Don Vicente Lopez which was called “Nelly” named after the wife of Don Vicente. Tiking, son of Don Vicente who befriended the Mendoza family as well as other families in the compound invited them to form a choral group. Every afternoon, choral practice took place in Nelly’s garden. On one occasion, Mendoza recalled how daughters of a rich family from Bacolod made snide remarks about people from Mindanao, referring particularly to them. Mendoza wrote:

During one of the rehearsals, we met some daughters of a rich family from Bacolod who said nasty remarks about us because we came from Mindanao. They regarded Mindanao as a wild place. Besides, we were not hacenderos whose wealth came from owning large sugar plantations. My two brothers and Ping de Vera lost their temper and were about to start a fight with the sons of the hacenderos. Tiking Lopez intervened. This ended our involvement with the choir.²⁰

As for Henson, everyday life for her was working as a courier of the Hukbo ng Bayan Laban sa Hapon or Hukbahalap before her unfortunate life as comfort woman

of the Japanese. Her involvement with the Hukbalahap was due her having lived with an uncle—a cousin of her mother—who was known as Kumander Pinatubo. The house of Kumander Pinatubo which was in the middle of a forest was a meeting place of the Huks. She narrated how she got involved in the Huk movement this way:

One day he asked me if I wanted to be a member of the Huk. I said yes because I was angry after what had happened to me. But I did not tell anybody that I had been raped. Only my mother and my uncles knew.

The organization assigned me to collect food, medicine and clothes for the guerrillas.²¹

Henson knew that her role was dangerous as she had to be careful with both the Japanese and pro-Japanese Filipinos who were called “Makapilis.” She noted that movement had the participation of not only adult men and women but children as young as seven who were assigned as couriers. She acknowledged that the happiest moments of her life was when she was with the Hukbahalap collecting medicine for the guerrillas. Proof of this feeling is a song which she remembers vividly. The lyrics of the song originally in the Kapampangan language has been translated into English as follows:²¹

Once a group was formed
Beneath the banner of our beloved land
To free from slavery
The Philippines, our country.

Men and women,
Young and old,
Let us together unite
To fight the Japanese.
We must vanguish the fascist Japanese,
The scourge of our race.
They seized all our wealth,
Raped our women and killed our men.
Viva Hukbalahap! Let us shout.
They shattered the dignity of the oppressed land.
They blighted our people with misfortune.
They killed those who opposed them.
Yet they say they are not our enemy
Because we belong to one race.²²

For our women narrators who remained in Manila, everyday life took another form. Montinola recalled that she continued to attend school and that her parents enrolled her and her siblings to painting classes under Anita Magsaysay. They also had Spanish lessons from an uncle on her paternal side. She wrote:

School went on, and Father arranged for me to take extra subjects to catch up on the time that I had lost when classes were suspended. I was accelerated by one year. Mother thought of painting lessons too. It was a treat to ride in our horse-drawn carriage, the dokar, along Dewey Boulevard, now called *Heiwa* (Peace) Boulevard, all the way to Villaruel St. in Pasay where Anita Magsaysay, now our foremost female painter, taught my sister and me and many young boys and girls the rudiments of painting. We

also walked a couple of blocks away to the house of an uncle from my father's side to take up Spanish lessons. The idea was to keep us busy while waiting for the war to end. Soon it became necessary to limit our activities. The streets swarmed with soldiers. Judging by the increasing number of beggars that roamed the city and looters who victimized homes, people were having a harder time to survive.²³

Montinola added that life at the start of the war was "fairly normal" despite the food shortages. Nonetheless, people adjusted and she reported that Hilarion Henares and Felix Maramba invented a charcoal-fed car. The buy-and-sell business, she added, was brisk.

Pestaño-Jacinto chronicled the daily activities of the members of her husband's family. She mentioned her mother-in-law getting emotional or crying whenever the latter recalled a younger brother of her husband who was part of the Death March but who eventually was reunited with the family. She also wrote about her sister-in-law who was making plans for her forthcoming wedding; her husband being head of the Neighborhood Association which was organized by the Japanese; and her views about the Filipino leaders at that time. Pestaño-Jacinto had opinions about Manuel Roxas, Benigno Aquino, and Jose P. Laurel. She also had entries in her diary about the arrival of a new baby and the idea of raising a goat to provide milk for her children. She also mentioned the active buy-and-sell business, the existence of black market, and the atrocious prices of food particularly rice, then costing 25 thousand pesos a sack.

The four women included in their narratives their experiences with the enemy. Of the four, only one seemed to have had pleasant memories of the Japanese soldiers while the rest did not.

Mendoza recalled that her first encounter with the Japanese was when she accompanied their house help to the hospital to have her wound treated. Upon their return home, they had to pass a sentry composed of a Japanese soldier, a Japanese officer and an interpreter. She narrated:

On our way home, we passed the guards again to be able to cross over to La Paz. As usual we bowed to the guards. When I raised my head, I met the gaze of the Japanese officer who was there the first time. Without giving us time to turn away, he asked me a question. I could not understand what he was saying until the interpreter asked if I had a husband. I shook my head and said no. The Japanese officer interrupted saying “Naika bana, naika bana?” (“Do you have a husband?”) I said “Naika” taking it to mean “none.” When he heard me, he laughed.

Then I was asked how old I was. I replied “Seventeen.” Was I of Japanese descent? I said “no.” “Not even a mestizo Japanese?” came the next questions. “Definitely not,” I replied. After a while the officer said something in his language. The interpreter said, “He says you are lovely.” This surprised me. I didn’t know the Japanese had any aesthetic sense.²⁴

The Japanese officer must have been smitten with Mendoza that he handed her his calling card with the name Captain Kunio Tsutsita, Kempeitai.

Mendoza took pains to learn the Japanese language justifying that it was one way of knowing the enemy. She and her family became friends with the Japanese. She wrote:

One late afternoon, two Japanese officers with swords hanging from their belts on their left side knocked at our front door. They greeted us politely and we asked them to come in. Their names were Capt. Shinpo and Capt. Nakashima. Since I had learned some Japanese, we managed to converse. Capt. Nakashima liked playing the piano, but he played badly. Capt. Shinpo spoke about his family. His mother it seemed was a wealthy woman and had her own business. He never spoke of his father.

Capt. Shinpo would come regularly, even twice a day, and he made himself useful. Sometimes he helped us hoe the garden. He became close to my brother Ben and brought him along to dine with him.

One evening, two Japanese soldiers quartered in the school nearby came the back way and knocked at our kitchen. They gave their names as Kawanishi and Shibata. They were army cooks. Sometimes when they visit, they would bring us some *manju* or Japanese cakes and Japanese cigarettes called Akibono. Another time they brought rice and kapok.

They would stay in the kitchen where they played cards with the maids or we would play Chinese checkers with them. These two soldiers taught us a lot about their customs and language.²⁵

Apparently Capt. Tsutsita courted Mendoza and paid her visits at home. Tsutsita gave his picture to Mendoza and asked for her photo. Mendoza informed Tsutsita that her family was leaving Iloilo and moving to Manila. The closeness of the Mendoza family to the Japanese made them suspects in the eyes of the guerrillas. Mendoza related that one day, two guerrillas wanted to talk to the family but no one was home. "They had doubts about our loyalty" according to Mendoza but her brother Celina assured them "we were as loyal and patriotic as they were."²⁶

The experience of Mendoza with the Japanese is a sharp contrast to that of the three other women narrators. The most unpleasant was the fate of Henson who wrote about her being a sex slave of the Japanese for nine months. She was forced to provide for the sexual needs of Japanese soldiers. She described a usual day for her in this manner:

At two in the afternoon, the soldiers came. Some of them were brought by truck to the garrison. My work began, and I lay down as one by one the soldiers raped me. At six p.m., we rested for a while and ate dinner. Often I was hungry because our rations were so small. After thirty minutes, I lay down on the bed again for the next three or four hours. Every day, anywhere from ten to over twenty soldiers raped me. There were times when there were as many as thirty:

they came to the garrison in truckloads. At other times, there were only a few soldiers and we finished early.²⁷

It was in 1992 when Henson responded to the call of the task force on Filipino comfort women to tell their story. On 12 September 1992, Henson told her story to the task force and on 18 September 1992, shared her sad lot in a press conference. Henson became the first Filipina to admit publicly that she became a comfort woman. Her story became proof of the existence of comfort women in the Philippines. Henson wrote her own story which was published in 1996 by the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism.

Montinola's encounter with the enemy took place on 9 February 1945 when 10 Japanese soldiers stormed into their house at four o'clock in the afternoon. Montinola recalled how her father said to her "be brave" and how her mother blurted to the Japanese "We're only civilians." Montinola was the sole survivor of the massacre which claimed the life of her father, mother, a brother, a sister, an uncle, aunt and their son. The Japanese bayoneted the occupants of the house and then set the house on fire. Montinola locked herself in one of the rooms and was spared from seeing family members being bayoneted. Montinola attempted to save her father from the burning house but was unable to. The burning house became the furnace which claimed the lives of her father, sister, and brother. Her mother succumbed to her wounds a few hours after she and her managed to crawl out of the burning house. Very poignant are the words of Montinola as she recounted

how she tried to bring down her father from the burning house. She wrote:

I struggled to carry Father down the stairs from the tower, his left arm on my shoulder, my right arm around his waist, the way we had walked countless times during the war. This time his legs were not helping. His lifeless body weighed heavily on me. Dusk has set in. Smoke from the fire in the lower floors reached the entry to the top floor, making my steps precarious in the dark stairway. I was afraid we would fall headlong down the steps. When we were halfway down, Vicenta appeared. Father and I collapsed together and I laid him down on the steps. Vicenta and I struggled to lift him up, but his leadened body was immovable.

Vicenta's voice still rings in my ears. "It is useless—useless! He's dead! He's dead!" She ran away as the leaping flames reached us, half-crazy from her wounds, shock, fear and anxiety over her son, Atanacio.²⁸

Montinola's encounter with the enemy proved to be very traumatic and will painfully recall it when a book on her father was to be written by Nick Joaquin. She will bravely recall the moment when she published her war memoir aptly titled *Breaking the Silence*.

Based on her diary, Pestaño-Jacinto had rare encounters with the Japanese. The only incident mentioned in her account was when the Japanese knocked at the

house of her husband's family house in Bustos, Bulacan. Her husband was suspected as a guerrilla by the Japanese. Her 31 January 1945 diary entry read:

...This afternoon we thought it was the end. The boy in charge of the gate had to run up to get the key. They did not like the delay. From our window I saw the point of a bayonet pass through the sheet iron covering the grills. When the door was opened they came in at a run. Three of them took positions at strategic spots in the garden, then two ran up the stairs, bayonets fixed. I nearly screamed but I choked it back in time. I saw Oscar [her husband] leave the room, his face white. I ran out in time to see him meet the first soldier. I heard the Japanese snarl "Guerrilla?"

There was a table beside me. My hand on it went cold, as cold as the marble top. A loud ringing broke my ears and my heart pushed against my breast till it seemed to hurt. I heard Oscar say in his low careful voice: "No, not guerrilla." Almost at once, his uncle came out of his room, bearing papers. He was only half-dressed. Behind him stood his wife. The Japanese with the bayonet stepped a pace. He started shouting. Then I saw that the second one had been covering retreat from the side porch. This second snatched the papers. The first did not release his finger from the trigger of his gun. After a careful perusal of the papers, the second one said something. Only then did the first Japanese relax.

Both the soldiers bowed, their faces breaking into grins. They stamped out, satisfied.²⁹

Having reproduced excerpts from the narratives of the war by four authors, some insights may be gleaned from their memories of the war which lead the author to some reflections.

CONCLUSION

All of the women narrators recount their experiences within the confines of the family. There is warmth exuded by their narratives as they recall how safe they were in the arms of their respective families during the duration of the war. Montinola had vivid memories of her mother and father; Mendoza had her family intact in Iloilo; Henson had her mother and her uncles with her; Pestaño-Jacinto had the warm company of her husband and children as well as her in-laws. This being said, their narratives, therefore, become a treasure trove of recollections: varied and perhaps even complicated dynamics present within the family. Thus, one reads about Henson as an illegitimate child seeing secretly her father and being given material support. Pestaño-Jacinto related how her mother-in-law resented their decision to return to their old home. Mendoza amusingly shared how the family reacted to the news that she received a marriage proposal which she did not accept. She wrote: "Mama cried as if I had accepted the proposal. As for Papa, I could see he was trying to suppress his amusement."³⁰

In other words, family dynamics in the context of a war are brought to the fore and are re-lived in their narratives. Hence, their narratives have the effect of being personal and intimate.

The narratives of the four women writers, moreover, provide us a rich documentation of everyday life which hardly figures in the usual wartime stories penned by men. Women tend to remember details—about food, recreation, and the ways or patterns of daily life that follows semblance of normalcy in times of war. All their stories can be sources in the writing of social history during the Japanese occupation in the Philippines.

As a process, writing can be cathartic and therapeutic. It can be said that women experience their utmost freedom through their consciousness. The four women did just that. Through writing, one is able to retrieve from one's consciousness memories of the past which have long been suppressed and which eventually lead to resolution and closure. This is true in the narratives of Montinola and Henson. Writing the book *Breaking the Silence* enabled Montinola to put closure to the massacre that befell her family. Henson's story in *Comfort Women* put closure to a traumatic past. With closure to a painful past comes healing.

For Mendoza and Pestaño-Jacinto, their memories though not as traumatic as those of Montinola and Henson are etched in their respective lives: for Mendoza as a teenager and for Pestaño-Jacinto as a new wife and mother.

The stories of the four women demonstrate as well the dimension of class. Montinola and Pestaño-Jacinto reflect an upper middle class background; Mendoza, a lower middle class background; and Henson, her peasant origin. Embedded in these memories is the socio-economic origins of these women.

Though all four women narrate events through their eyes, there is a foregrounding of the male members of the family as can be seen in Montinola's fond recollection of her father; of Henson's constant mention of her hacendero father; of Mendoza's description of the activities of her father and brothers; and of Pestaño-Jacinto's constant mention of her husband, her father-in-law and brother-in-law. All four women narrators relegate themselves in the background which has a self-effacing effect on the rendering of their narratives. One may attribute this to the socialization of women who are taught to remain in the background.

The war memoirs of the four authors privilege women who can write or who are literate. To capture a rich tapestry of women experiences during war time, oral history must be conducted in order for other women to tell their stories.

It was a pleasure and a privilege sharing the memories of Henson, Mendoza, Montinola, and Pestaño-Jacinto. All four women have rightly claimed their space in the narrative of the 75th anniversary of World War II in the Philippines.

NOTES

- 1 Lourdes Montinola. *Breaking the Silence* (Diliman, Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1996), 38.
- 2 Pacita Pestaño-Jacinto. *Living with the Enemy* (Mandaluyong City, Philippines: Anvil Publishing, 2002).
- 3 Helen Mendoza. *Memories of the War Years* (Quezon City, Philippines: Pantas Publishing and Printing, 2016).
- 4 Maria Rosa Henson. *Comfort Women: Slave of Destiny* (Metro Manila: Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, 1996), 37.
- 5 Montinola, 39.
- 6 Pestaño-Jacinto, 7.
- 7 Mendoza, 23.
- 8 Henson, 38.
- 9 Henson, 39–40.
- 10 Montinola, 40.
- 11 Mendoza, 11.
- 12 Pestaño-Jacinto, 12.
- 13 Henson, 51.
- 14 Mendoza, 31–32.
- 15 Mendoza, 38.
- 16 Montinola, 47.
- 17 Mendoza, 53–54.
- 18 Mendoza, 54.

- 19 Mendoza, 54.
20 Mendoza, 65.
21 Henson, 43.
22 Henson, 46.
23 Montinola, 46–47.
24 Mendoza, 48–49.
25 Mendoza, 50–61.
26 Mendoza, 78.
27 Henson, 64.
28 Montinola, 75.
29 Pestaño-Jacinto, 228–229.
30 Mendoza, 56.

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