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Re-fictionalizing Philippine Fiction Writing: Alter(na[rra]tive) Platforms and Counter-Literature

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Panel: World Literature Today: Cross-currents

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**Re-fictionalizing Philippine Fiction Writing
Alter(na[rra]tive) Platforms and Counter-Literature**

In a Third World country like the Philippines, literature is a middle class concern (30% of the population). The average price of a book published in the Philippines is PhP200 (\$4.25), almost 40% of our daily minimum wage. But contrary to the claims of armchair critics, Filipinos are fond of reading. It's just that most Filipinos cannot read the literary acrobatic performances of certain luminaries. We read as the result of too many unemployed citizens enjoying the luxury of time and space. We read and we love to tell stories about ourselves and others (I'd call gossipers non-commissioned biographers).

More than 40% of the population of the Philippines is active in the use of social media. No wonder we are one of the texting and selfie capitals of the world! When it comes to literature, we look for alternative platforms. Young Filipino writers are hooked on online publishing, writing, and reading. They have built a community where they can share stories. Anyone can contribute as long as they have access, and it's free. Wattpad is the most popular.

Most of the contributors and readers are high school students. They write not for the literati, but for their community. Narratives are simple and plots are almost formulaic. Characters' main apprehensions are about their love lives, classmates, bullies, teachers, parents, and sibling rivalry. They don't talk much about ideological battles, melting polar caps, vanishing polar bears, world peace, and the meaning of life. They want the storyline, something they can relate to, in contrast to some novelists who write fifteen paragraphs just to describe clouds. Perhaps, for these young writers, loneliness is not falling leaves or the pale moonlight. But it could be a malfunctioning Wi-Fi or a favorite football team's losing streak.

They write cheesy lines, often borrowing/stealing from songs or movies. I surmise that they write this way because they're living in a world with multiple frames. While watching television, their laptops are open with multiple tabs and sites, downloading pirated films and songs; they are also sending texts and video chats, and playing online games while doing their homework. All while informing everybody through Facebook about what they're doing every thirty minutes. So, in the story that they are reading, if there is a tree, enough with the tree. They've had enough of tree imagery, tree symbolism. They leave symbols to the symbol-minded.

The Philippines is second to the United States in the number of Wattpad contributors worldwide. Most of the stories are garnering millions, if not hundreds of thousands, of hits. Some film companies even adapt the stories into films or television series, and some publishing houses turn stories into printed books. Contrary to the belief that once a story is popular digitally, it will no longer sell well if printed, it turns out that youngsters love to own hard copies signed by authors. Believe it or not, regular guys, construction workers, factory workers, and young professionals are into these online stories.

Some of the stories are a far cry from what is considered good literature. One critic said, "If this is literature, this is the end of Philippine literature." This blames the kids for their lack of literary prowess, and subtly and sometimes bluntly telling readers to stop reading Wattpad stories. Let me reiterate my humble observations. 1. Books are expensive; Wattpad online stories are free. 2. They are high school students—so long as they want to read and write, let's give them credit. 3. Wattpad is their alternative platform; that's why they don't bother knocking at the gates of literary circles. 4. Their intended readers are of similar ages and sensibilities. These young writers and readers and their content will mature. Or

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maybe the question is, do they really want to be literary writers, or they just want to tell stories?

As part of this growing phenomenon, some established writers are putting their work on online platforms for wider readership. Some classic Filipino masterpieces are now available on Wattpad, and educational institutions are uploading reading materials and lessons. Telecommunication companies are kind enough to let readers access stories in Wattpad even without credit. Established writers are getting involved by facilitating writing contests for this community. Just last year, a 21-year old Wattpad writer bagged the grand prize in the most prestigious and longest-running literary contest in the Philippines.

I hope these young literary enthusiasts will set the bar high for Wattpad and other online alternative platforms, and be an oasis for all thirsty incoming readers and writers who cannot be part of university life or literary circles. I'm also hoping that doors may open to these dreamers, whose purest desire is to tell stories.

If this is the future of the storytelling in my country, I cannot tell. Maybe, quoting from Bob Dylan: "The answer my friend is blowin' in the wind. The answer is blowin' in the wind."