

# Lualhati Bautista, the Poet

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Artists too often find themselves boxed inside singulars: those who managed to establish themselves in one field may flirt with hardship in the face of venturing into a different genre. Lack of versatility rarely is the cause; rather, it's whether or not their audience will accept such versatility.

Lualhati Bautista, however, is never one to fear—be it about her political convictions or growing her craft as a writer. Although, in an interview with *Art+ Magazine*, she shares in jest, “I am 75, hindi takot sa aresto pero definitely takot sa COVID.”

In November 2020, the award-winning novelist self-published a collection of poems entitled *Alitaptap sa Gabing Madilim*, a breath of fresh air for most readers who grew up reading Bautista's prose—acclaimed classics of Philippine contemporary literature. The new release comprises some hundreds of poems amassed in a span of decades, with pieces dating back to as early as the '70s.

“Poetry is always a ‘spur of the moment’ thing for me,” Bautista shares when asked about her relationship with the craft. “It is something that suddenly pops up like a ghost, often at night. When, for example, the image of people I loved and lost suddenly enters my mind and I feel a very strong connection with them, then I write poetry.”

“It becomes like a prayer for me,” she adds. “My way of telling them that they continue to live in my heart, that the golden thread that kept us together in the physical life remains strong and unbroken.”

Of course, Bautista can never withdraw the political from any of her work, regardless of its form. Dissent against the harrowing Marcos dictatorship shaped some of her most celebrated novels, notably *Dekada '70* and *Desaparecidos*. Revered as “a rare woman among a pantheon of men” in the earlier era of Philippine literature, Bautista critiqued the conventional roles of women and their plight surrounding motherhood in a predominantly patriarchal society through *Bata, Bata... Pa'no Ka Ginawa?*

Much like these works, poetry also serves as a vehicle to pin her activism into words. “I also write poetry when I am upset, like when I am angry with your president,” she says. “Then it becomes my way of speaking out my anger. There is no way I could say the many things I want to say to his face anyway.”

The difference, however, lies in the process: whereas her poetry thrives in immediacy, her prose takes its time to simmer. She explains, “In [prose], when the seed of an idea is planted in my mind, I wait for it to take roots and grow into me, which sometimes takes weeks, even months, until I am finally ready to

sit down and start writing. I do a lot of editing in my works of fiction. I will let the novel rest, sometimes for a long long period of time, and then go back to it.”

Take for example the author’s other self-published book, a memoir entitled *In Sisterhood: Lea at Lualhati*, which she started writing in 1993 and only finished in 2013. “By 2013, I knew exactly what I wanted to say in the novel,” she says. In this 20-year project, she tasked Lea Bustamante, the renowned lead of *Bata, Bata*, to serve as the narrator of her biography. This is the same with the English edition of *Dekada ‘70*, as translations were finished by 2018 yet only this year has she wrapped up on edits.

## Lualhati Bautista, the independent publisher

While *Alitaptap sa Gabing Madilim* serves as Bautista’s debut in poetry, it wasn’t her first time to self-publish. Unbeknown to most, Bautista financed the first 5,000 copies of *Bata, Bata* before she gave the rights to Cacho Publishing. “Hindi ko kasi kinaya,” she admits.

In the ‘90s, Bautista co-edited with Karina Bolasco, current Ateneo de Manila University Press director, “a series of ‘romance’ novels which was a cut above the rest” under the helm of Anvil Publishing. While it did not sell well as their non-traditional treatment of romance novels failed to win a market already so invested in formulaic, escapist plots, a lone Bautista chose to continue the project, commissioning manuscripts out of pocket. Still, the project fell apart for good when finances could no longer be sustained.

*In Sisterhood* was her first successful self-publication, having decided to move forward with working independently after she decided “I have made a name for myself big enough for readers to be interested in my other works.”

With this rekindled penchant for self-publishing, one might wonder how Bautista weighs in on the so-called “literary mafia”, one crucial reason behind the growing movement of radical, independent publishing in the Philippines. Writer Rogelio Braga describes it as the longstanding culture of exclusivity—to some, elitist—in Philippine literature today. When asked, Bautista casts doubt on the existence of a “literary mafia” today. “Young writers are not being closed out naman,” she says, noting how they are “most welcome” in the literary scene, be they as workshop participants, organization members, or even award winners.

“Of course, there were times in the past when you read, ‘Ang panitikang hindi isinulat para sa bayan ay basura.’ That, of course, is elitist. Meron pa nga, ‘all sounds and fury signifying nothing.’ At meron pa, comparing romance novels to nothing but spreading your legs to the public. And that *komiks* is not literature.”

“I reacted vehemently against those statements, especially when they are directed to young writers,” she says. “Writers, as all people, grow, and their writings grow as well.”

Bautista was 17 when she had her first story published. As she recounts, “I was writing about young people, their circle of friends, falling in and out of love, because that was the milieu I belonged [to] then. But as you grow older, you discover many things that may have been in the back of your mind all along but ignored because you were too preoccupied with the business of being young. Then you realize you are part of the bigger society, you become aware of the struggles of the different sectors in the society you belong to, you become connected.”

“What I am trying to say is, young writers should be allowed the time to grow,” she adds. “For all you know, one of them could in the future come up with something that would become a most important work of literature.”

## Lualhati Bautista, ever the political writer

Over the years, Bautista’s newer works have been incessantly compared to her earlier ones now lauded as classics. She recalls having listened to a discussion about her 2015 novel *Sixty in the City*. “Somebody in the group said that my novels are no longer as political as before, that *Sixty in the City* is a far cry from *Dekada ’70*,” she says. “That is not true.”

To her, there is no significant shift in her voice through the years, whether in poetry or in novels. “What I believed then is still what I believe now,” the writer says.

“When you talk about women, about the unequal relationship between women and men, that is political. Women are still treated badly in the home, in the streets, in their area of work, and as domestic helpers in other countries. The abuse of women is not limited to physical violence in the home. When you deny older women the right to leave their comfort zone and pursue their aborted dreams, which is the overall theme of *Sixty*, that is political.”

She continues, “Do people realize that the control of women is always transferred from man to man, from father to husband to sons? That the men in the family, and even women who have long imported men’s attitudes toward women, continue to dictate how other women should behave and conduct themselves in the home and in society? Sure, we have made some progress in terms of laws and ordinances which are not followed anyway, but mostly, women are still expected to prioritize other people’s needs, not themselves. They are, for the most part, still denied the freedom to live their own lives.”

There certainly is no denying that Bautista has made a name as a political writer, with her body of work often credited as protest literature. She reassures that this hasn’t changed, and likely never will. On social media, Bautista would be seen actively engaging in national news, posting loaded opinions on

her Facebook page, always challenging the brimming dictatorship of the Duterte administration, and always laced with humor—an entertaining, thought-provoking display of wit and bold resolve that shows exactly why Lualhati Bautista's relevance simply cannot waver.

“We claim our freedom of speech, no matter what,” she says. “We insist on our freedom of expression whatever it may cost us. For me, self-censorship is the worst kind of censorship.”

She recounts writing *Dekada* during the Marcos administration and the fear that ensued following this novel. “Even before it got published, I was already conditioning myself just in case I got arrested and tortured. I allowed my imagination to go really wild to fully prepare myself for any eventuality. Pero hindi naman ako naano. Hindi nga ako pinansin, e. The main reason I think is that rich people and people in high positions don’t think highly of Philippine literature. They are elitists; they only read the English classics. Some won’t be caught dead reading our literature, especially those written in Filipino.”

“Remember Duterte having said once, wala namang nasulat laban sa martial law ni Marcos? Social media was then bombarded with book titles that speak of the cruelty of martial law and the Marcos regime, with *Dekada* topping the list.”

Truly, beyond her artistic prowess as a multi-hyphenated wordsmith, what makes Bautista such a formidable force in Philippine literature is how she stands her ground and keeps her work aligned with her politics—something she considers a necessity as a writer.

“Generally speaking, if you are an actor and you happen to star in a project that is the voice of dissent, so to speak, and can be considered anti-government, it can be very exciting to you because you are going to tackle a role that is very much different from the usual fare,” she opines. “You get paid for the project, your eyes are on the awards that the role could give you. But overall, it is just one project [for] you. After it is done, you hop on to the next project. You move on. You remain apolitical. You can even accept a role totally in opposition to the one you once played. It can be disappointing to some people but that is the reality.”

“But when you are the writer, well... I don’t know just how you can contradict yourself. Because you write, or at least you are supposed to write, what you believe in; your principles and convictions necessarily come into play. You are one with your characters. *You* are your main character. You cannot stand on opposite ends of the pole. If in real life you get divorced from your art, your art diminishes its value as you also diminish your credibility as an artist. That’s how I see it.”