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# Sexual/Textual Politics in the Women of Ophelia A. Dimalanta's Poems\*

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## Abstract

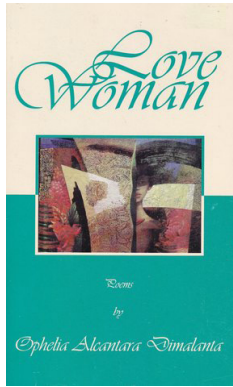
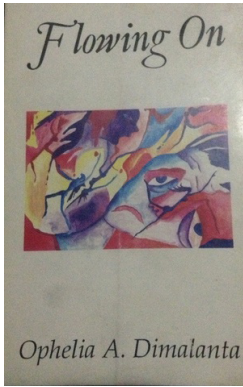
The study attempts to show that while Ophelia A. Dimalanta's excellent New Critical training and education have rendered her a quintessential poet conscious of form, technique, and craftsmanship, which in turn, has been foregrounded by her equally New Critical-trained colleagues, this New Critical tradition has limited the study of her oeuvre to artistic structure and form, glossing over myriad concerns that the poems may have. The present study, in turn, has recuperated form, technique, and genre to encode the feminism that undergirds her poetic vision. Foregrounding Dimalanta's vision enflashed in art, the study recuperates the sexual/textual politics in Dimalanta's *Lady Polyester: Poems Past and Present* from the lens of Toril Moi.

## Keywords

"Female," "Feminine," "Feminist," Dimalanta's poetic process, tugging between feminine and feminist

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\* This is her thesis for the degree, in MA Literary and Cultural Studies, English Department, Ateneo de Manila University, 1996.



Poetry Collections of Dimalanta: *Flowing On* (1988), *Love Woman* (1998),  
*Lady Polyester: Poems Past and Present* (1993)



Ophelia Alcantara-Dimalanta

## Introduction

Surprisingly, despite Ophelia Dimalanta's reputation as one of the best poets of the country, few studies have been undertaken on her body of work. For example, just one dissertation on Dimalanta's three books of poetry has been written and the rest are short commentaries on her poems. The dissertation and the short commentaries on the poems cover four topics: the poet's craft, the transcendental predisposition of Dimalanta's poems, the elision and breakdown of communication and meaning, and finally, the multifaceted experiences of women. But out of the four topics, it is on Dimalanta's poetic craft that poets and critics largely enthuse on. Cirilo F. Bautista in his Foreword of Dimalanta's *Time Factor and Other Poems*, points out that "she is the best woman poet writing in the country today" (1983). He describes the writer and her craft in superlative terms: "she is indeed a magician, the highest rank attainable in the hierarchy of the poetic profession. Magic in the sense that these poems leave one stunned in graceful realization of the aesthetic possibilities of the word. No overwhelming pyrotechnics here, nor foisting of cathedral truths; but here is the unobtrusive movement of sounds whose beauty strikes one only in the ensuing silence after they are gone" (1983). Nick Joaquin, commissioned to write the introduction of the same book, also touches on her craft. He speaks about the aural effect of her poems which approximates that of music: "at times a music so elfin it becomes audible on intent rereading. But as one reads and rereads one begins to catch an undercurrent overtone of melody, very subtle and delicate as if the words were being not so much spoken as hummed (1983). In Dimalanta's *Flowing On*, her third collection of poems, Edith L. Tiempo raves over the poet's creative power. She describes the flow of her line as an "explosion of utmost boisterous energy" (1988). But according to her, it is Dimalanta's creation of tension and paradox that makes her the supreme poet. It is where her "artistry shows up best" (Tiempo, 1988). Fideliza Noel also talks about the poet's use of tension as an artistic device. She argues that there is a meticulous attention devoted on craftsmanship, creating poetry that is a beautiful balance between art and heart. She says, "there is never a poem nor line which repels because it is gross, which jars because of careless structure,

which sates because it is cloyingly sentimental. Dimalanta in all her poetry is ever the restrained, disciplined craftsman rendering the romantic outpouring of the sensitive, sensuous, sophisticate” (177, 1976). Like the rest of the critics that reviewed Dimalanta’s poems, Alfred A. Yuson also talks about the sense of tension that largely characterizes her poems. In *Flowing On* he says that the tension is “like the measured systole and diastole of consummate control” (4).

On the other hand, some commentaries on Dimalanta speak of the transcendental hankering and predisposition that the poems ultimately take. For instance, in her doctoral dissertation on Dimalanta’s earlier collection of poetry, Bernadette Racadio argues a reading that posits the presence of transcendental elements in the poems. Racadio defines transcendence as a “quest for meaning and justification of life to see things in a different light by attempting to rise above reality “ (1). Her thematic approach sees the persona caught in a complex swirl of life. In the midst of this swirl of stifling complexity, the persona copes by rising above, “ towards some kind of a moral order, an invisible world which provide the steadfast and permanent values “(Racadio 1). An article on Dimalanta’s book of poems, *Flowing On* by Merlinda Bobis shares an affinity with Racadio’s transcendence. She asserts that the persona (whom the writer insists is also the author), is in a state of flux, perpetually in search for meaning. In the quest for life’s meaning, the persona “ hankers for inner order, a flowing on into inner landscape” (Bobis 1991, 277). Both Racadio and Bobis share in the observation that it is in the spiritual order that can only satiate a human being’s hunger, otherwise, s/ he will always be in a constant flux. Josephine Pasricha’s commentary on Dimalanta’ poems leans towards that of Racadio’s and Bobis’ arguing for the poems’ metaphysical strains. Instead of zeroing in on the persona however, she talks about what one can do with the poems. She posits that the poems are capable of being read from differing hermeneutic approaches (historical, textual, aesthetic, etc.), but in the final analysis, she maintains that “each poem transcends the psychosocial conditions and opens it up to an unlimited and multi-leveled series of readings” (Pasricha 127).

On the other hand, Gemino Abad and Isagani Cruz frame their reading of Dimalanta from the lens of Jacques Derrida, positing the slippery nature of language, in turn, a constant deferral of presence and meaning happens. Abad asserts that to read the collection *Lady Polyester: Poems Past and Present* is made privy to the poet's private life as well, "what private ritual chiefest of all? Herself, both what her words construct and her living attests..." (9). Yet Abad laments the inadequacy of words to encapsulate and ensphere the woman that is Ophelia. Isagani Cruz, on the other hand, zeroes in on the poet's most recent Iowa poems where Dimalanta served as the Philippine representative in the workshop.<sup>1</sup> Like Abad, he also posits the elusive nature of language, and consequently, such characteristic negates certitude, failing to pin down meaning. He argues that the constant theme that the Iowa poems propound, is essentially the failure to communicate. This breakdown of communication is illustrated in some poems: In "Mayflower Pilgrims," the man is not listening to the woman, and in "Closing Doors," Miranda does not have the slightest clue on what is going on inside the person's head.... This kind of communication breakdown is also propounded in "Poetry Reading at Prairie Lights," where the persona who keeps saying the wrong words or the right words in the wrong way, feel[ing] terrible about her inadequacy... and in the "Heart of Waiting," the conversation between two people is kept to a functional minimum (116).

Abad and Cruz posit the opaque characteristic of language following Derrida's "difference." Differance renders the inaccessibility and the perennial flickering of meaning. Given this formulation, this undermines the position of certitude upon which patriarchy rests. The metaphysics of presence, a philosophy that has dominated western thinking, posits that meaning is understood in terms of binaries, where the privileged position is accorded to the dominant order, like men for example, and the subordinate position relegated to women. Women, therefore, are assigned to the negative valuation.

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1. It must be noted that Ophelia Dimalanta first attended the Iowa Poetry Workshop in the late 1960s where her first collection of poems, *Montage*, won the Iowa State University Best Poetry Award (1969).

The underlying assumption in this kind of thinking foregrounds that men come in first, and women come second only in the hierarchy of thinking.

The last two studies on Dimalanta touch on female experience and that “genderedness” has much to do with perspective, which includes one’s style of writing. In a book forum on *Lady Polyester*, Cristina Pantoja- Hidalgo talks about the multifacetedness of women and their various experiences. She posits that the collection, *Lady Polyester*, celebrates pregnancy, childbirth, wife in different sub-roles and moods: “escaping, enigmatic, elusive, never quite there, not even in her diary... and a woman sensuous, sensual, sexual” (123-124). Moreover, in the essay “Should Writing be Gendered?” by J. Neil Garcia,<sup>2</sup> he posits that the category gender is central to one’s writing. He asserts that Dimalanta possesses a unique voice, a voice that is hers alone: “this uniqueness may well be attributed to Dimalanta’s own brand of poeticizing — her own verbal stamp on the page of the poetic medium... But I would like to think that her gender is partly to blame for the singular character of her verse. The lines are dynamic, flowing and passionate- so different from the strictly regular and fixed prosodies of many of the male poets of Philippine literature in English, and her gender is inarguably central to her poetry’s meaning” (252). Garcia’s statement conflates the female persona in the poems of Dimalanta and Dimalanta herself as the female poet, artist and person. What binds the last two critics (Pantoja-Hidalgo and Garcia) is their foregrounding of a uniquely female experience and thus, consequently, the observation of a unique kind of female writing. Both celebrate the capacities of women which are different from men’s—not necessarily inferior but unique and different, nonetheless.

The commentaries’ penchant for transcendence and the metaphysical straining, this floating in circumambient gas or a search outside the realms of reality into an invisible world or an inner landscape, it seems, is removed from reality. It approaches the individual work as a well-wrought urn, independent from context, precisely because the literary critics studied above embody and propound a vision of art and life that is New Critical in form.

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2. Written on the occasion of De La Salle University’s Literature Week.

Moreover, the preoccupation with Dimalanta's technical expertise which these critics had singularly focused on has eschewed other concerns, especially those issues pertinent to women in the poems. It fails to grapple with the grit of life, especially in confronting concerns relevant to the women and their plight. On the other hand, though the last two commentaries assert of a uniquely feminine experience and writing, a clear-cut feminist stance and project are not quite present. It is on this note that I bring in the objective of this essay. The essay attempts to expand the discussion on female experience and posit a reading of Dimalanta's poems from a feminist lens, central of which is in the articulation of the sexual/textual politics in the poems. Implicit in the writings of Dimalanta is the second wave form of feminism which this study re-encodes. The poststructuralist lens that underpins the reading of Abad and Cruz on Dimalanta's poems is refunctioned to foreground the ambivalence and ambiguity of identity, positing a rereading that questions the patriarchally-entrenched definition of such categories as "female" and "feminine." The poems posit that the women in Dimalanta's collection of poetry, *Lady Polyester: Poems Past and Present* show traits that are fraught with contradictions, oscillating between polarities of the "feminine" and the "feminist" impulses and orientation, suggesting unstable and problematic gender identities and orientation whose present shape comes from a contingency and the very situatedness of the female persona, contrary to the notion of "femininity" as natural, innate, and intrinsic—as natural as the color of our eyes one is born with. In other words, these subjectivities are performed by women when such occasions call for it. These are not intrinsic nor innate in women, but more so and necessarily, in conflict with each other, as generally, women or men are incessantly confronted by different tasks, expectations, roles, etc. Women are constantly negotiating multiple subjectivities and positionalities: One minute the "feminine" is foregrounded and in the next breath, the "feminist" polarity; one sees the complex seesawing of such subjectivities. Both may also merge into a new, reordered subjectivity, as dictated by the contingency.



## Laying down the theoretical framework

Patriarchy's domination over all aspects of knowledge, practice, discourse, and signification is all –pervasive and much entrenched in the society, presenting a “male perspective assumed to be universal” (Greene and Khan 1985,1-2). Since time immemorial, men have always been the writers, critics, inventors, explorers, scientists, theorists, providers, leaders, heroes, and the list goes on. Such set-up has hardly opened up a space for women, in turn, investing on patriarchy with the crucial position of determining and defining the truth, worldview, relations of sex, which includes the image and place of women. Patriarchy posits a concept and definition of “women” as necessarily “feminine,” forwarding the notion that there is a “given female nature” that women are born with, and therefore, making them inherently feminine (123). Thus, by virtue of the fact that women are born female – defined as a biological fact, as opposed to a biological male, has in turn, invested on them the essential feminine qualities- among which are refinement, modesty, subservience, passivity, and sweetness, etc. In other words, femaleness is defined as a biological fact showing sexual difference to its male counterpart. Thus, based on these premises, being born female, automatically and essentially invests her with femininity. The refusal of a woman to conform to feminine standards, or by dint of an accident, moves away or behaves outside these said expectations earns her with labels, such as “unfeminine” and “unnatural.”

Toril Moi, however, argues that there is no automatic connection between the categories “female” and “feminine.” She asserts, “though women are undoubtedly female, this in no way guarantees that they will be feminine” (123). Women may conform to these patriarchal prescriptions on them but this does not mean that they possess the essential feminine qualities. Moreover, she points out that the feminine stereotypes “invariably deconstruct themselves” (Moi 36). Thus, the notion of a woman or a mother as the “light of the home” or an “angel of the house” gets distorted once the woman slides away from these images. The stereotype dichotomizes to become “both ideal and horror... the mother as a stereotype slides from a venerated idol to castrating and aggressive bitch” (Moi 37), dismantling the rigid prescriptions

on the woman as a mother, with expected traits and behavior that come with the biological sex.

In order to show the artificiality and the essential disconnect between the categories “female” and “feminine,” Toril Moi cites Simone de Beauvoir’s famous statement: “one isn’t born a woman, one becomes one....it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature” (52). The discourse of femininity which is imposed on women as early as birth and hails them to behave in a certain way, is primarily reinforced by the family or the home, education, and other mechanisms such as the workplace and the church, etc. However, such assertion is both an ideological and social construct as “biological sex does not directly or even at all generate the characteristics conventionally associated with it. It is culture, society, history that define gender, not nature” (Jehlen 263). Contrary to the common notion, the oppressive patriarchal structures and strictures that regulate women are not monolithic and unassailable. There are gaps that provide openings for ingress and regress allowing some space for agency, and self actualization, challenging in turn, the hegemonic practices and norms. According to Simon de Beauvoire, while the foregrounded “commonsensical” notion of gender is supposedly innate, women’s inevitable sliding away from these expectations are expressions of the need to realize and define themselves.

Feminism, a critical, theoretical, and political practice and project committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism rejects such cultural constructions on gender (Moi 117) as it is “grounded in male attempts to control female sexuality.” The feminist movement asserts that the conflation or merging of femaleness and femininity is necessary to serve the interest of male supremacy. It is a subtle way of regulating the action and behavior of women-- a “natural outcome of masculine values and needs, more than a convenience (which it is); the subordination of women is a necessity in patriarchy, a formulation in which the entire structure rests” (Ruth 54). Thus, an ideological understanding that is asserted here is that as long as this set-up remains intact, men and women co-exist, “the whole system can function effectively” (Ruth 54). Feminist political movement, however, undertakes to “deconstruct the social construction of gender and

the cultural paradigms and infrastructures that support ” (Greene and Khan 3) such commonsensical and hegemonic view. Consequently, feminists have refunctioned and appropriated male theories to pursue their anti-patriarchal project. Moreover, Helene Cixious, a French feminist critic expresses exasperation over the male/female or masculine/feminine binaries which implies the subordination of the second category. The underlying paradigm in this kind of thinking results in the female category’s relegation to the negative valuation, rendering the status of women as the other, the non-man, or the “second sex.” The biological opposition man/woman is ideological deployed to “construct a series of negative feminine values which then are imposed on and confused with the female (Moi 124). Cixious argues that the construction of a new set of female values to subvert the relentless binary opposition that attaches feminine stereotypes on all biological females is playing the patriarchal game which believes in the metaphysics of presence, a philosophy that has dominated western thinking even to this day. Cixious, therefore, appropriates Derrida to substantiate her formulation.

While the female persona or the female subject in the poems of Dimalanta is constrained by the injunctions of patriarchy, the instability of identity deconstructs such regulatory injunctions. This paper attempts to show the tension and the push and the pull between the polarities of the feminine and the feminist impulse in the female or women in the collection of poems, thus illustrating the instability, fluidity, complexities, and situatedness of gender identities. The tugging of binaries or the tension of institutions characterizes the poetry of Dimalanta, which then is appropriated to illustrate the feminism of the poet.

### **Dichotomizing the stereotypical images of women**

As pointed out by critics, what makes Ophelia Dimalanta a quintessential poet-artist is her commitment to form. This preoccupation with technique is a dominant feature and strength that characterizes her craft and creative impulse. Hers is vision en fleshed through art. Thus, in foregrounding a feminist reading of her selected poems from Lady Polyester collection, the complexity of the poetic process will first be studied, which in turn, will be

employed to further understand the female sensibility, the woman's experience, and Dimalanta's brand of feminism.

The ironic title, "Finder Loser,"<sup>3</sup> illustrates the way the female persona runs her life. Hers is a life characterized as "one perpetual lifetime probe," an existence of finding and losing objects, people, causes, etc., by turns, then "losing them again." Dimalanta's preoccupation with conscious craftsmanship awards her with a precise, dead-center image to illustrate the subject or the point of the poem, in this case, the ambivalence of the female persona. The persona's preoccupation with the act of searching (paper, receipts, old letters, pills, causes and the rest), suggests a movement, fluidity, a constant flux and transition, skillfully shown and foregrounded through the use of the progressive form, "ing" (searching, losing, finding, rummaging, seeking, collecting). But the bigger irony that marks the persona's life is inadvertently stumbling on objects she does not need or not looking for, and "losing what she can't almost have."

She asserts though, that for now, death is not in her list of finds. In other words, death is out of the question- "not till then for she has still a lot of searching to do in this world." She says, "I shall go on seeking out/lost faces and faiths in the/ cold, collecting, calculating crowd." But what one finds ironic is her ambivalence towards death. While she eludes it, she is also quick to acknowledge its inevitability, and thus, giving strange instructions about her burial arrangement, that is, in the wake of death finding her, or her stumbling upon death. Thus, her instructions to the living is "to keep vault unlidged." The woman's ambivalence is strongly shown here, because even in death, one foot persistently remains in the world. She makes a note that when she finally goes, she "shall surely sit up and look/ around to pursue this search/ holding on to dear life/dear death."

The persona's turn of thought is marked by ambivalence and dialectics- in keeping with the title and the poem's vision. She looks at death as possessing two simultaneous possibilities: first, as a "final irretrievable

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3. The poems used for this essay are taken from Dimalanta's *Lady Polyester: Poems Past and Present*. Manila: University of Santo Tomas Press, 1993.

loss.” With death, everything goes. Here, death viewed as a **loss** suggests her attachment to the transitory world. But “unbreath away,” the persona acknowledges the other, “kinder” face of death, which she admits though, is a “a flowing final find,” something that cannot be eluded. Death ends all searching.

This paradox that essentially characterizes the woman’s life- of losing and finding objects and faces by turns, may be symptomatic of over-determined forces acting on her. The woman is largely a product of social, historical, cultural constructs, simultaneously and even contradictorily shaping and acting on her, explaining this perpetual state of oscillation. The female persona’s compulsion of “forever rummaging through/ bureaus and drawers and pages” for misplaced things may be read as suggestive of this desire to systemize her life, which she describes as one of “my life’s past disarray.” Finding lost objects and “pinning them down” may be symptomatic of a deeper impulse, an ordering act and fixing things, tantamount to planning one’s life. The subject, who is a woman, appears to subscribe to the ideology that a woman’s “natural” and “desirable” goal is putting some semblance of order to her life. In our culture, putting things in “proper” perspective is understood as “settling down.” A common sense notion that seems to be implicit here is that “settling down” is equivalent to the idea of “coming home,” a reaching of one’s final destination. This view is conflated with the notion that the “natural” course of a woman’s life is to settle down and to lead a more quiet life- understood as marriage and raising of a family, with home as the woman’s center of existence.

But the woman asserts that the “find” is not the end, even if the goal has been reached. For her, after the act of finding, the inevitable action that follows is the act of losing- “I shall lose them all again/ as I was wont.” Even she herself recognizes the inescapability of the losing act that will inevitably ensue after the find. The blurring acts of finding and losing are foregrounded here. These are pursued with much fervor by the woman. While there is an exhilaration that accompanies the search, the losing act presents a bigger challenge for the woman, as this constitutes the continuity of the blurring of the finding and the losing act. In order for fluidity and constancy of motion

to happen, the subject has to concoct a seemingly inadvertent act of losing, upon which the blurred acts of losing and finding must be smoothly maneuvered, if the woman persona were to oscillate between these two acts of losing and finding. The act of finding brings cessation to movement. Once the search is done, movement also ends, which, essentially entails living and settling in a quiet, more sedentary kind of existence. Losing anything and everything, therefore, becomes a compulsion for the woman as it provides the impetus for the search, in “one perpetual lifetime probe.”

The woman’s act of “losing” may be read as a refusal to be centered, to be pinned down and in turn, live a more conventional, passive kind of life expected of women. Losing things, on the other hand, necessitates a perpetual mobility, if one were to go in search of lost objects, “causes and the rest.” The pull of motion which comes with the idea of freedom, exhilaration, restlessness, and a stricture-free life presents a stronger attraction for the woman than the pull of inertia which follows after every find. This connotes a slowing down and the possibility of stagnation. The promise of natality and its corresponding opening up of the unknown holds a more compelling attraction for the woman, pulling her to the blurring acts of losing and finding. On the other hand, the singularity of the finding act and its resulting action of inertia and a slowing down has also its attractions, as it promises a more unruffled but secure kind of existence, tantamount and may be conflated to the “security” marriage supposedly provides which many believe and work towards its attainment. These choices are loaded with sexual and political undercurrents that configure much in the life of the persona and on women in general. This tugging, the push and pull is again illustrated in the next poem, “Montage.”

“Montage” is one poem that clearly illustrates the tugging of divergent opposites: the feminine and the feminist. This is shown in the juxtaposition of two contrasting images: the “Monday world” and the “Sunday world.” These are the conflicting worlds the woman in the poem is caught in. The poem starts with the woman waking up to a heavy hangover, “she bogs down, a ragbag/ splayed off at tangents.” This bogging down is brought about by the “stupor” of the “spree” of last night, which takes place in her

Sunday world. However, the Monday world dictates that she dons on her “old dimensions-” that is, to shed off traces of her Sunday world and must take on the role expected of her in the Monday world, probably to start off with the week’s chores. This old dimension that she needs to go back to is punctuated by the “flecks of faces” she sees from her bedroom window and aggravated by the clock in her bedroom, mercilessly reminding her of reality, that she must get up to start the day’s chores perhaps, or to prepare for office work.

The female persona finds it extremely difficult to shake off the events of her Sunday spree, as evinced in the line, “piece by piece she puts on eight o’clock.” Thus, instead of patting the pillows and bedcovers in place, she is slapped into place, illustrating her badly “splayed off” sensibilities as she gets up this morning- an effect of last night’s spree. If one were to imagine the immediate scenario, a picture of a clumsy, sluggish, suffering-a-bad-hang-over woman comes to mind. The woman finds herself in this Monday world reeling (both figuratively and literally), still steeped in the “stupor of the previous spree.” She can only long for a lingering breakfast in bed and the “clearest cutglass of grapefruit juice teetering on a silver tray for breakfast in bed exigencies” looms large in her mind, instead.

The woman goes through the motions of the Monday world, albeit slowly, as vestiges of her Sunday world keep intruding, keeping her from completely donning on the Monday persona. She, in turn, does not dispel these errant images but “stalls the stupor of the previous spree.” Once more, she relives the events of her Sunday spree. Here, the reader is afforded a glimpse of the woman’s Sunday self and Sunday world, as totally different from the harried “ragbag” that wakes up in a Monday world. This secret, private Sunday self reveals a woman “beautiful in blank spaces/ wandering trauntlike in private regions.” In her secret, Sunday world, she is enigmatic, elusive, perhaps a little wilder in this “trauntlike” space where she had too much alcohol and fun. One is aware that in the wake of inebriation, one’s proper sensibilities are abandoned. The inebriated becomes more daring, bolder, perhaps. Thus, the woman in her Sunday world becomes trauntlike,

emboldened both by the alcohol and the excitement of the spree afforded by this vaunted Sunday world.

As the morning and the stupor wear on, the persona's mind also clears up. As she comes to a sober state, she realizes the little indiscretion she had of the previous night. Awash with alcohol she was a little of a vamp, a little of a wanton. Thus, confronted by this little guilt caused by her Sunday actions, she tucks away the fateful moment in the dark recesses of her mind, however, she does not erase and forget these images and memories but tuck them "in her private regions of the night," retrieving them later in her dreams. Meantime, she faces the immediate demands of her Monday self/world without quelling the images of her Sunday world. She then proceeds to order these two conflicting worlds, and attempts at a psychological ordering, "piec[ing] them into a single total perspective."

The second stanza shows a woman who is a combination of two dimensions, of two different worlds- "she exudes it now becomingly/ as she glides and putters about/ by turns." In the act of reordering, she emerges neither a "ragbag" of the Monday world, nor a wanton of the Sunday world, but a "montage" of the beautiful and desirable facets of both worlds. She comes out a "nameless jewel/durably ensphered in mist, constantly reborn/solid whole in ever renewing shades."

The tension between the feminine and the feminist polarities is apparent in Montage. Her role as a dutiful woman who must abide by the Monday world expected of her dictates her to shape up pronto- sober or drunk. Thus, lingering a while more in bed is out of the question. The expectation of the woman who must be up and about to take on not just the chores and delivered properly, but embracing as well, the attitude and stance of the Monday world, is dismantled here. Firstly, since she cannot entirely shake off the tipsiness, she bungles with the little chores- she is "patted in place by the pillows." Thus, there is a sliding from the conventional image of an "efficient" woman/housewife, perhaps, to a clumsy, sluggish, woman with a bad hangover. Secondly, this supposedly dutiful woman/housewife, possessed with the approved, ideal traits, incorruptible and free of vice (since indulging in the latter takes her away from being an ideal, efficient woman),



is deconstructed here. Portrayed in *Montage* is a woman who had too much of a drink, consequently bungling her duties in the house. When she finally comes to, she realizes her little vagrancies of last night, slipping from the proper female decorum and expectation, to somebody “trauntlike.” A truant as defined by Merriam-Webster dictionary is a person that neglects his/her duty. There is a dereliction of duties, thus, by extension, a straying away from bounds. The female persona strays or deviates from the proper conduct as befitting a “good” woman, brought about by both literal and figural intoxication in her Sunday world.

The feminist impulse is clearly expressed here. This alternative, repressed polarity, which is the opposite of the feminine polarity fractures the prescribed feminine behavior (ranging from refinement, decency, correctness, caution, modesty, etc.) imposed on women. Thus, the behavior of the woman during the Sunday spree is considered unfeminine and improper. Moreover, this feminist impulse, symbolically represented in the woman’s Sunday persona, characterized by freedom, license, and unrestraint, fascinates and holds a stronger pull for the woman than the Monday polarity, especially since Monday reality is prescriptive and bound by feminine expectations and stance. However, her upbringing as a woman, her role as a wife and mother forbid her from sliding into this “loose” behavior, as patriarchy’s term.

Stanza two reveals a woman who has sobered up, illustrating the stronger pull of patriarchy – the feminine pull. The violent image, “cluttering sounds of slapdash,” in the penultimate lines of the first stanza, suggests an obvious effort on the part of the woman at curbing and negotiating this feminist / Sunday impulse to render it acceptable to judgmental eyes. Thus, instead of a “ragbag” of a woman caused by a heavy hangover- a disparaging unfeminine trait, the woman that emerges is a lady- someone now possessed with grace, elegance, refinement, propriety, enigma, as evinced by the lines:

A scent  
Ambiguously enwombing her, her form  
Dissolved in semi-tones, nameless jewel..  
Solid, whole in ever renewing shades.

The altering image of “gliding and puttering about” in the second stanza which characterizes this new person as she reemerges in stanza two, illustrates the blurring of the feminine and the feminist polarities. This new identity, in turn, dismantles the patriarchal ideology and injunction that women are inherently and necessarily feminine. Moreover, “montage,” as the title suggests, is the superimposition of pictures to produce a merging/emerging image, sharply illustrates the woman’s multiple and ambivalent identities. The persona and behavior that she puts into perspective is not singularly the feminine pull. The woman is constrained to submerge her Sunday persona and identity (symptomatic of license and freedom), and foregrounds instead a “new,” negotiated Monday and Sunday selves, that seem to show the feminine pull, but which, is neither of those polarities but a “renewed” in-between self.

Just like the poem, “Montage,” and “Finder’s Loser,” the next poem “Snap” shares in the female persona’s preoccupation with the juxtaposition of two contrasting worlds: fact and fancy- worlds the woman personally flits in and out, by turns. By a snap of a finger, depending on the mood or the need, the female persona is transported to a totally different world:

After dinnertime,  
She snaps a finger...  
She herds herself into the patio,  
Out into the lush forests  
Of a wildly pulsing vagabond heart.

This secret, fantasy world she is often caught wandering into is dream-like, painted in “soft dark apricot shade-“ roseate shades that lend the fantasy world mystery and excitement. Images of her dreamworld (lush forests, dark apricot shades, swirling naiads, surreptitious hills) suggest some lovely, ethereal, gossamer-like- images that disappear in a snap.

On the other hand, reality, “one little world apart,” is starkly opposed from the woman’s dreamworld. Reality, described in terms of solid images (dinnertime, awash with tap water, dishes) is juxtaposed with her evanescent

dreamworld. Such images bespeak of housechores, like laundrywork, dish-washing, cooking, cleaning, mothering- an unending cycle of housework- the glare of the woman's reality. The readers now understand the female subject's intermittent escape into this fantasy world.

If reality spells unrelenting housework and oppressive expectations, this secret world the woman has created becomes a reprieve from the grueling world of reality. The woman in "Snap" is beset with domestic chaos, chores, and concern, reducing her into a harried and beleaguered ragbag. If she is compelled to create a fantasy world where she is transformed into someone else, a totally different woman, the reality she escapes from must be inhospitable and oppressive, negating or invalidating the woman's growth, individuality, and happiness. In the face of reality, represented in the house she lives in, she is forced to submerge her individuality to yield a patriarchal ideology that is deemed "noble." The female subject inhabits a world that legitimizes and gives priority to others- in this case, the man or husband, and her children. But in her secret world, she imagines herself as a totally different woman, Here, she is transformed into a "gypsy," a "whirling wanton." In her secret world, she is wild, exciting, unrestrained, playful, autonomous, and "sovereign." She is her own woman.

This secret, fantasy world she oscillates to in a snap, illustrates the need for the feminist polarity, as a reprieve from the feminine constraints. The prescriptive character of the feminine polarity, the norm that dictates the ideal of a woman, a mother, a housewife, etc., is the woman's source of oppression, the latter of which is relieved by the creation of a "notorious," unfeminine world, where she can be herself- autonomous, uncontrolled, unpressured by idealizing feminine demands. This evanescent dreamworld, the feminist polarity she escapes to, serves as reprieve from a withering, inhospitable, and prescriptive climate. Sometimes she is caught being remiss from housewifely duties: "Mom, isn't it your turn to do the dishes?" which in turn, snaps her back to reality, abandoning this private region, from which she draws sustenance and strength. The woman's habit of oscillating from one contrastive world to another is a survival tactic, otherwise, the feminine world would reduce her to a wreck. This secret, private, fantasy world she

has created serves as a buffer zone against the stifling, shriveling character of the feminine zone, the Monday world, or reality. Thus, as it is the mom's turn to wash the dishes, from her heightened fantasy (feminist/sunday world), she reemerges and comes down to take her feminine role.

The compulsion on the part of the woman to create an imaginative world that runs counter to reality is also deployed in the next poem. In the "Rat Story," Dimalanta has uncanilly captured the unspeakable horror and revulsion one experiences at the "sight of a scudding rat" (72), unhinging reason, borrowing Pascal.<sup>4</sup> The poet unleashes a torrent of emotional harangue about this "vilely moving" thing, deploying the narrative format, drama, and lyricism. In this poem, the woman in "Montage" and "Snap" reemerges as a combatant of this rat- a no ordinary rat for it is the "size of a house." From the female persona's "flight with swans/through clouds of sleep," she bogs down "at the sight of a scudding rat." From her heightened dreamworld, this intention of "gliding" through the demands of the day is violently crushed as she "sags down at the sight of rat." One can almost hear the thud of the rat- of reality confronting her at this point. Thus, shedding off her "gliding" wanton self she puts on earlier, she is forced to don on the "housewifely" role: she rolls her sleeves /ready for the battle royale of the day." Her greater concern lies not in the rat's vileness but in controlling its growth, lest "a whole pack of them/ is bound to hold dominion."

Further in the poem, images of the rat become flagrant as the persona describes its willfulness:

No ordinary less-than-mortal  
Enemy here, and wily, almost  
Reasoning... as forbidding  
As the day's load  
And twice as sinister,  
It seems to know exactly what route  
To take, to trace, retrace.

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4. Dimalanta 's inspiration in writing this poem comes from a line by Pascal: the sight of rats unhinge reason, written as a epigraph in the poem.

But what makes the rat even more of a formidable enemy is its shrewdly clandestine character:

In its wicked wake, scheming as it  
Skims over surfaces, with an almost  
Human passion, until it quietly seethes  
And settles in its chosen cranny  
    To lie in wait.

The woman (as subject of the poem) and the almost-human rat make a tacit “mutual pact... it goes when she comes.” However, today, the rat chooses to be willful. The encounter between the woman and the animal is fraught with literal and figurative struggle:

They cross each other’s path, they meet,  
Her eyes upon its vileness, its mind  
    Upon her fear.

Both frozen in their tracks as they calculate each other’s next move and size each other up. For a moment, the woman experiences a battle of decision, hesitating on her greater fear: “to kill or not to.” Here, she is caught between two horrors: first, whether to kill or not. But if she would kill the rat, she would have to contend with the horror of

Death’s fixity, a glassy stare...  
The blob of a carcass...  
    The clinging  
    Stench of it..  
Dumped right into the beaten  
Bypaths of one’s morning sanities;

The other horror that beleaguers the woman is whether to let the rat go-not to kill. But the “scary hassle with the live/And vilely moving, a moving, scuttling /scurrying shape along one’s way... upon the margins of one’s daily eyepath,” is for the woman, enough “to trip one’s morning serenity.” At any

rate, that morning, after the combatants' calculation of each other, they both dash away in opposite directions.

Dimalanta's poems always undergo a shift to a higher plane, transcending the concrete and the literal in the previous stanzas, into a metaphysical and the symbolic leap. This metaphorical shift is often found in the last stanza of the poem. In "Rat Story", the rat now stands for something bigger, something abstract, a foe perhaps: "whichever, everyday is for contending/beleaguered as she is by packs of all/Sizes and shapes and nuances of black." Here, the battle looms bigger between the woman and the rat, and the fight is no longer just confined or contained within the arena of "open or hiding," or dawn or within the day. The rat transcends to become a metaphor for something else- a greater danger perhaps, or some difficult challenge, or a foe that "gnaw[s] at every piece/of cloud... of her dreaming, swan-filled eyes." It must be noted that this "piece of cloud" and "flight with swans" serve as metaphors for beauty, serenity, security, or that which salves. Like the swan from a fairy tale which is transformed into a ravishing beauty, the woman's transformation—from a "ragbag" or rat-harassed into a whirling wanton or "flight with swans" is characteristic of her private world. There are two opposing images at work here: a rat the size of a house and flight with swans—images that stand for repulsiveness and beauty, of fact and fancy, respectively. Initially, the woman that is delineated here is forced to abandon her "flight with swans," her dreamworld, if she were to confront the reality of rat which can stand for anything opposite the image of a swan, like oppressive patriarchal injunctions on women, for example. The woman's hesitation at the sight of the rat is but momentary because she then braces herself for the day's tasks, "rolls her sleeves" and the "battle royal of the day begins." There may be initial hesitations as illustrated in her sagging down amidst a flash of "dreamy swan filled eyes," but bracing herself to function, she psyches herself up for the challenge, even "vow[ing] to hold the fort." Although the woman has an aversion for the foe that she has to contend with, as illustrated in the ugly rat that "gnaws at her piece of cloud," the reality that reminds her that as a woman or a housewife, in this case, tells her to be on her toes and abide by her role of a dutiful wife

at all times. But the poem shows a competent woman, vowing to carry out with competency the challenge for the day. She knows her way around the house. She attacks work with a certain resolve—"she rolls her sleeves... ready for the day's minor battles." She is in control of the house and holds fort in this feminine sphere. On the other hand, her construction of a "piece of cloud," her fantasy world which she oscillates to from time to time, must be a way of relieving the drudgery of the routine of the feminine sphere and the demands generally expected of her as a woman. The "piece of cloud" serves as the woman's well- spring of strength and source of sustenance against "shrewd rats" that come in different "sizes and shapes and nuances of black." Precisely this show of resolve and resoluteness as she gets down to attack a houseload of work or challenge, actually springs from this feminist side, her piece of cloud—her source of strength and staying power. In order for the woman to come out unscathed from the vagaries of patriarchy, she has to construct a "piece of cloud" or a "flight with swans" to cope and stay sane.

The slippery nature of language, meaning, textuality, and consequently, of identity allows the reader to negotiate meaning and to render a space and agency for women, contrary to the notion of the stability of meaning and identity. Moreover, it unsettles the deeply-entrenched ideology of women's essential traits, such as that of being maternal and nurturing. This ideology is also substantiated by the conflation of physical characteristics one is born with, thus, equating women with physical "weakness" in contrast to men who are physically stronger, and thus, justifying the notion of home and motherhood as a fitting place and domain for women. The slippery nature or eliding character of language is recuperated to coax and foreground the ambivalence of identity and meaning to dismantle such patriarchal ideology and discourse. This concept is strongly illustrated in the next poem.

In the poem "Heart of Waiting," deploying "dead cold center" as the central image and metaphor, illustrates two simultaneous ideas: the opaqueness of language and the person's response towards this characteristic of language. Like the unpinable quality of words, one detects the person's rather vague frustration at the randomness of meaning: "I wish for shoulder

of rock/ for firmer grip on what sputters forth vaguely.” Thus, in the persona’s attempt to seek for a “shoulder of rock,” or for a “firmer grip” of meaning, she embarks on an endless search, going from one station to the other, from Omaha to Sioux City, “down at the first station.../ then off to...a landing on the other side.” The more involved she goes into this search to pin down meaning, to throttle this “dark force hurtling onward,” the more she is flung

Into deeper continents...  
Through vast chartless routes,  
Past customary grasslands...  
On to some free-floating sea  
Of the night’s womb, thrashed  
About in one deep uterine babble.

In the process, she flounders, is swept and keeled over, furrowed “both sides/under, over...sliding and floating.” Thus, continually subverted in her quest, she goes “off center.” She fails to fill the gap, gets past a firm grounding or a solid foundation. However, in the midst of this “polysemic speech,” of unpresence, and the absence or lack of proper communication to enable a “cross[ing] over “ from this floating condition, she sees a sliver of light. Thus, after all this vain search, the woman discovers this condition of being alone as “good, this bliss, this being lone, this anarchy of anonymity/ this being momentarily lost to all.../’tis good to be alone, unmissed.../unaccounted for.”

The advantages of being “unaccounted for,” of uncenteredness, symptomatic of the sliding character of words is finally brought home to her. However, this autonomy/solitude is momentary. Given the elusive quality of language, and by extension, meaning, it gives the persona a slip again. Once more, this bliss of solitude which takes on a positive inflection, turns to loneliness, and thus, perceived as a gap that needs to be filled. The poem ends with the line, the “heart of waiting/ is one dead cold center,” reasserting, in turn, the impossibility of pegging a presence.

The woman expresses a frustrating lack—“the heart of waiting/ is a dead cold center.” While this feminine upbringing primes her, among other traits,



to be refined, modest, passive, and be unassertive (thus, to wait rather than to actively search), she expresses a feminine ideology that this loneliness that assails her—"a dead cold center," can be assuaged and filled by a man, as evinced in the lines "I wish for some shoulder of rock/for a firmer grip... for sure hands." But this inertness of waiting for life's meaning eludes her: "I wait for some old signs/and blinking signals ...". Thus, inducing her to shrug off this supposedly feminine expectation of passivity (which includes waiting), and goes in search of happiness, represented by a man: "I wish for some shoulder of rock/for a firmer grip... for sure hands."

At this point, we see a blurring of the feminist and the feminine impulses in the woman. The feminine trait of passivity is supplanted by assertiveness (deemed a feminist trait) to get closer to her desire. Thus, she embarks on an endless search. But "happiness" eludes her. In the midst of the search for this firm grip and shoulder of rock, she comes into an epiphany: "suddenly... who cares!" She does not find her happiness which rest on a man, but in the process of the search, she comes instead, into a new knowledge about herself. She revels in this new-found freedom, this emancipation from a need, in this case, for a man to complete her life. She discovers that 'tis good, this bliss, this being/ lone, this anarchy of anonymity.../ unaccounted for... /free, and undefined, off center, plural." The persona, a new woman, finally realizes a new meaning of happiness and independence—one that is not dependent on a firm grip and a shoulder of rock but a being for herself. At this point, with the woman's new and exhilarating discovery about herself, which includes autonomy, anonymity, freedom, and the new idea of happiness, the patriarchal ideology on feminine conventions and tradition is deconstructed. However, this new discovery is momentary as this deeply-rooted feminine tradition, much-inscribed in the woman, reasserts itself in the hankering of the woman for "some fixed post." This old feminine self, "one's past palling over," momentarily abandoned, reasserts itself in this peception that the woman's happiness, life's significance, is still dependent on pinning down meaning. Thus, if such happens, thence can she only be "centered," otherwise, "the heart of the waiting /is one dead cold center." Here, the hierarchical play of meanings assumes that man is the "center," the "fixed" principle

upon which meaning lies—a notion that still holds strong and true for many. However, the unpinable character of language, this continual flickering which threatens meaning's presence, ironically throws the woman into an endless search.

## Conclusion

What looms clearly before the readers is the picture of women as a site of contestation between and among many impulses and forces, largely the feminine and the feminist polarities. The formulation of Toril Moi on the absence of an automatic connection between the “female” and the “feminine” explains the ambivalence of women as they shuttle back and forth the opposed polarities and other alternative paths. Moi's theory is applied in the selected poems of Dimalanta, analyzing the images of women on three counts: first, the assertion of the feminine polarity as a socio-cultural construct, and that such construct bears on their representations as women; secondly, the articulation of the feminist impulse in women, teasing out a nuanced reading of how this polarity works (whether consciously or unconsciously) to transcend or escape from the oppressive feminine stereotypes; and thirdly, the foregrounding of the tuggings or the push and the pull between the feminine and the feminist polarities, dichotomizing, in turn, the patriarchal concept and definition of “women” as necessarily “feminine,” and that there is a “given female nature” making them inherently feminine. This deconstructs the notion of stability and unproblematic character of identity, which, in turn, is recuperated to dismantle the patriarchal ideology of the female and the feminine,

Since Dimalanta is a consummate artist-poet whose poetic vision is enfolded through her art, the analysis of craft was imperative. Thus, the process of foregrounding the feminist project was two-fold: first, rendering the complexity of the poet's poetic process, and second, appropriating the specificities of technique, such as the centrality of Dimalanta's creation of metaphors not only to illustrate and understand the female sensibility, experience, plight, and condition, but in the recuperation of craft and technique to deploy the deconstruction of oppressive patriarchal assumptions and

structures. The constant tugging or tension between the polarities (feminine and feminist) which is rendered in a form of metaphors and images: Monday world (ragbag, rat as big as a house, etc.), vis- a vis Sunday world (piece of cloud, swan- filled eyes, trauntlike, lush forest of a wildly pulsing vagabond heart}, are reread and appropriated as illustrative and symptomatic of the fact and fancy that the female persona and the female subject in the poems of Ophelia Dimalanta constantly oscillate to, and by effect, gain some reprieve and agency from the demands of patriarchy.

The study has attempted to show that while Dimalanta's excellent New Critical training and education have rendered her a quintessential poet conscious of form, technique, and craftsmanship, which in turn, has been foregrounded by her equally New Critical-trained colleagues, this New Critical education has limited the study of her oeuvre to form, suppressing, in turn, myriad concerns that the poems may have. The present study, in turn, has recuperated form and technique to illustrate another angle of Dimalanta's poems. Foregrounding Dimalanta's vision en fleshed in art, the study recuperates the sexual/textual politics in Dimalanta's *Lady Polyester: Poems Past and Present*.

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