

**Title:** FILIPINA-AMERICAN ODU INSTRUCTOR SPEAKS FOR HER DIFFERENTNESS.(COMMENTARY)(Review)

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HER WILD AMERICAN SELF

M. EVELINA GALANG

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M. Evelina Galang's voice is emerging. It is a young and forceful voice, one defined by "differentness."

A Filipina-American, born in Philadelphia and raised in the Midwest, Galang speaks urgently of her differentness in the autobiographical "Her Wild American Self," a fine debut short-story collection. Through female characters she knows intimately, Galang tears down personal and cultural walls, demanding to be recognized, given separate identity.

Asian women are not all alike! She rebukes. How dare you!

And, of course, she's right, people do stereotype such women. Even people of the same culture. Or the same family.

Galang's characters are mostly first-generation Filipina-Americans, who not only must fight bias in America, but reconcile Filipino heritage and custom with assimilation.

Neither black nor white, they are shades of brown.

Writes Galang in "The Look-Alike Women," her saucy two-page opening story: Asian women are regarded as beautiful, exotic and intelligent women who have "been raised to wait for the man." They are "Subservient. Obedient. Quiet."

If an Asian woman speaks out, she is "an anomaly. One of a kind. Wave maker."

Or a writer, determined to be who she is.

Galang, in her mid-30s, teaches creative writing at Old Dominion University. Her language is exquisite. Wise. Emotionally textured. And often defiant.

She challenges the old and the new ways that trap young Filipina-American women in self-doubt, and advocates for self-knowledge. Always, she examines choices.

Rose hates being noticed by men for her different beauty and avoids her own mirror image in "Rose Colored," a powerful story of identity. She sees herself as a "Chink. A Jap. A foreigner." But after a few days in Chicago with her beautiful cousin Mina, a dancer at ease with her life and body, Rose begins to glimpse another self, one who dreams.

Augustina, the "hardheaded" teenage heroine of the title story, also suffers the ugliness of American xenophobia, this time in the "Let It Be" 1960s.

She rejects Sunday Mass to displease her parents, but clings to a male cousin who becomes the father of her child. A generation later, her niece is warned by disapproving elders: "You're next. Watch out."

"It's like my family's stuck somewhere on the Philippine Islands," the girl complains.

The lessons of Filipino tradition, history and family speak volumes in the best of these 12 stories. When Galang ventures into male-female sexualrelationships, she is less successful.

As she writes in the pointed "Lectures on How You Never Lived Back Home," a "council of ancestors" haunts these women who are "the hyphen in American-born."

"Your people," her fictional alter ego explains, expect women to "grow up to be young housewives, good mothers, and in their old age, . . . behave like obedient daughters." But now here you are "well over twenty-five and still single. The old aunts raise one eyebrow and say, See?"

And yet, "back home" matters to you, and so you can't please anyone - the foreigners or your father. "It's up to you. Your choice. Your responsibility."

Many of Galang's characters choose to defy their families and struggle for their own voices. But others lack the courage to control their lives and remain silent.

In "Contravida," Lisa, pregnant and unmarried, returns home to care for her dying mother and confronts scandal in the form of her overbearing, traditional aunt.

Conversely, in "Miss Teenage Sampaguita," "Baby," the youngest of 12 children born in the Philippines, tries to help her American-born niece stand up to her domineering father, as Baby could not do for herself.

There is a sameness of perspective in "Her Wild American Self." The same woman - Galang - appears in each story, with a new name. Fortunately, she is "stir-fried," an energetic woman of complications, and so she sustains interest. But the emotional world of the stories can seem limited. The voice is singular.

"Finally, after all the voices, hear your own and know, you are one of a kind," Galang concludes in triumph. "An anomaly. Making waves is what you do best."

That, and telling stories. This is a very bright beginning.

CAPTION(S):

M. Evelina Galang

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