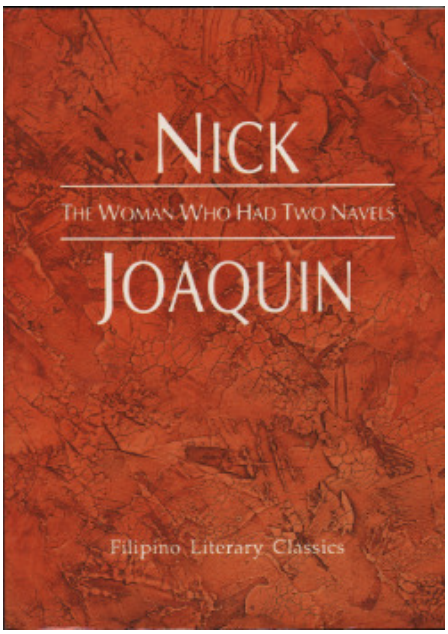

The Woman Who Had Two Navels

Nick Joaquín

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This book is a fictional story of a Filipina woman who believes she has two navels. It is widely considered as a classic in Philippine literature. It is divided into 5 chapters: Paco, Macho, La Vidal, The Chinese Moon, and Doctor Monson.

This is a novel, not be confused with the short story collection of the same name.

The Woman Who Had Two Navels Details

Date	:	Published 1991 by Bookmark, Inc.
ISBN	:	9789715690157
Author	:	Nick Joaquín
Format	:	Mass Market Paperback 336 pages
Genre	:	Fiction, Classics, Historical, Historical Fiction, Mystery, Novels, Cultural, Asia, Short Stories, Literature, Asian Literature, Academic, School

From Reader Review The Woman Who Had Two Navels for online ebook

K.D. Absolutely says

"The identity of a Filipino today is of a person asking what is his identity." *- Nick Joaquin*

When I bought this book a couple of months ago, I immediately skimmed the first two pages. I did think that this was a book about a female character with anatomical deformity and the book was about what caused the deformity and what should be done to correct it. I thought that this book would make me endlessly laugh.

Having formed that ridiculous image in my mind, I set this book aside. There were and there still are so many books by foreign authors that beckon on me. Also, just like most Filipinos, I always thought that foreign books were far better than local ones even those by our local literary greats.

On many counts, I was awfully wrong. First, this novel has nothing to do with the study of medicine, anthropology or anatomy. It is a novel that every Filipino should be proud of. It is a novel written by a Filipino about Filipinos and for the Filipinos. However, it does not preach. It does not self-deprecate. It does not promote self-interest nor does it encourage us Filipinos to hate ourselves and wish that we were of different nationalities. This novel is part of who we are as it shows a pivotal part in our nation's history and how our race was formed or came into being by getting sustenance from two colonizers, akin to two navels: those of Mother Spain's and Mother USA's. The two countries that greatly influenced our nation's psyche and will forever be part of who we are as an Asian race.

But I was right too. It made me endless laugh. But not for the thought of a person having two navels. I laughed endlessly albeit silently as I grieved about having to realize how much I've been missing while I prioritize foreign authors in my book choices. I also shamelessly laughed realizing how distorted *asking myself who we are as a race*our culture is and we just couldn't do anything about it.

Nicomedes "Onching", today just "Nick" Joaquin (1917-2004) was awarded the National Artist for Literature trophy in 1976. This award is the highest national recognition given to Filipino artists who have made significant contributions to the development of Philippine arts and to the cultural heritages of the country. He was said to be the Greatest Filipino writer of the 20th century and third to Rizal and Recto as the greatest Filipino writer ever. He was #1 in Filipino writers list in English. Dr. Alejandro Roces compared him to William Faulkner. His *Portrait of the Artist as Filipino* is said to be the most important Filipino play in English. Before his death due to cardiac arrest in 2004, he was a friend and the biographer of the former president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. After his death, this bookworm with a gift of total recall, expressed his wish of donating the 3,000 books from his personal library to University of Santo Thomas. He did not marry.

Without providing too many spoilers, the story is about a **Connie Escobar** who claims to have two navels. She discloses this to a Filipino doctor, **Pepe Monson** who is one (the other being the priest **Father Tony**) of the two sons of a former rich Filipino businessman who is hiding in Hong Kong to avoid postwar trials of post war independence. Connie is in Hong Kong apparently to chase a band player **Paco Texiera** even if she is already married to **Macho Escobar.** However, Connie says that she left the Philippines to run away from her husband because he is having an affair with her mother **Senora de Vidal**.

The novel's theme of ***pressure of the past upon the present*** is similar to G. G. Marquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude* although Joaquin did not cover as many generations as Marquez did. In fact, Connie has

only the relationship between her husband and mother as the immediate past that greatly affect her present. However, the symbolisms are clear. Connie suffers due to the strong influence of her mother when she was growing up (with the incident about the dolls as the image that got etched in my mind) and the indiscretions the mother did in having extra-marital affairs. All these while the supposedly the strong patriarch **Don Manolo Vidal** was busy protecting his business and his political turfs. Don Vidal can be likened to the Filipino businessmen who sided to whoever was in power during the Spanish and American occupations just to protect their interest while overlooking the interest of the many poor peasants (symbolized by Connie Escobar).

This is not an easy read though. Joaquin's narrative is confusing especially in the first 50 pages of the book due to mixed points of view and multiple flows of thoughts in just one paragraph. I worked for two years in Hong Kong and I thought it would have been more interesting if Joaquin took time to describe his milieu for imagery impact. He also did not resort to using local languages or phrases, e.g., Chinese nor in Filipino, to give authenticity to the spoken dialogues. Lastly, I did not notice any effort to give distinct and recognizable voices at least to the main characters. All the voices seem to be coming from the same person.

However, the plot is brilliant. My first time to read a local book with Hong Kong *and* Philippines as settings. Prior to this, I thought that the post-war (WWII) era has been that part of Philippine history that seems to be "untouched" by fictional writers. This was due to the fact that many literary works mainly focused on the time when the WWII was on-going. Joaquin's use of his characters to symbolize the bigger scope – the Philippines as it is trying to rise from the ashes – is astounding and the impact is comparable to the intent that Dr. Jose Rizal probably had when he was writing his *Noli* and *Fili.*

I will be reading Joaquin's *Cave and Shadows* and *Tropical Gothic* next to know more about the man.

Fableknot says

After glossing through hundreds of glowing four-to-five star ratings and insightful theme analyses of *The Woman With Two Navels*, you may be led to believe that I too will conduct this review in an appropriate, almost distant manner, praising Joaquin for such a glorious masterpiece.

You have been sorely mistaken.

There will be no detached observations. There will be no compulsory censoring. I will rant. I will spoil. It will be messy. If you take exception to this, then find another reviewer, because I cannot politely contain the fury of my emotions or thoughts this book has provoked. Classic or not, nothing can change my opinion that *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*, while not a waste of my time, was one of the worst novellas I ever had to sit through.

The two-naveled woman in question is Connie Escobar, a spoiled, selfish, and delusional Filipina who travels to Hong Kong in search of a treatment for her condition from a horse doctor. Yes, a horse doctor. For a condition which may not actually exist since she refuses to show her deformity to anyone who asks. Note that there is a moment when Connie relents, much later in the book, but the author thought it would be more meaningful or some shit to fade-to-black at the last possible moment, since it shouldn't fucking matter

whether she actually has two navels or not, and the title is supposed to double as a fucking metaphor.

Now I digress. Her visit sparks a chain reaction, one that effects everyone from her family to a group of childhood friends that she's never met. Each of their lives will never be the same, and they'll be forced to face the actions of the past, present, and future, regardless of whether these actions were, are, or will be theirs to make.

> If you beget a monster of a child it could prove you were rather monstrous yourself.

But the story truly begins with Concha Vidal, Connie's flighty mother who's experienced much heartbreak and disillusion throughout each era she experiences. In one of them, she encounters Macho, a younger man who shares her thrill-seeking ways and eventually becomes someone she grows to love. Unfortunately, she's married and he's, well, young. Although her latest husband is one of necessity and they've come to an understanding, Macho and Concha's relationship is frowned upon by society and is the subject of much ridicule among their peers. Concha, not wanting to destroy the boy's life, leaves the country, thus ending their dalliances and breaking his heart. When she returns, she asks him to marry her daughter Connie, in order to obtain the happiness of the two people she cares about most in this world.

> "If your hands were not clean, your good actions had grimmer and more relentless consequences than your sins."

Unbeknownst to anyone, Connie has been corrupted by her mother's past and this very decision, which leads the little girl on the path to insanity, for lack of a better word. In one method of coping with this, she makes friends with the hideous, inanimate idol Biliken. Biliken becomes her anchor, a way of shielding her from the harsh realities lurking beyond her safe little bubble.

After Connie grows up and experiences a few blissful months of marriage with Macho, she finds a stack of letters in the back of his closet. Although they're old, written before she was even born, they contain every excruciating detail of her husband and her mother's past relationship, something they'd kept secret for a very good reason. Upset by this shocking revelation, she runs away to Hong Kong while struggling to gain the courage to face her problems head-on.

The unfortunate victims of the Vidal family's shenanigans are a tight-knit circle of friends who grew up away from their heritage and the country it came from. There's Rita, the likeable, sympathetic leader of their group that pulls all the stops to keep them together; Paco, a poor musician who blames Connie for his unhealthy obsession with her when really, he's just a cheating, victim-blaming scumbag and unforgivable almost-rapist; Mary, the unfortunate wife to said scumbag who doesn't grab her kids and leave Paco's ass the moment he tells her of his escapades in the Philippines; and Pepe, a... blank sheet that really only serves to ask Connie questions and inadvertently draw her closer to mess up their lives even further. Following behind is his father Doctor Monson, a demented old man who seeks to go back to the good ol' days by becoming a druggie, and his brother Father Tony, a priest who begins to question if he's cut out for his line of work.

Together, they will unrealistically think and speak in strange riddles and analogies, rife with hidden meanings, as they will, without reason, help this one suicidal stranger, who will effectively ruin the lives of each and every one of them to obtain her happy ending without so much as a proper apology. Forget if it might be temporary, necessary, or done unintentionally. That's fucked up.

> "But don't you understand, Father? I want to be good. I'm trying to stay good. Does one go mad for trying to do that? Is it that hard?"

> "It's very hard indeed. But you, Connie, have taken the easiest way out. You are not trying, you have given up... When you convinced yourself you had two navels, you retreated, not from evil, but only from the struggle against evil. People can't be good unless they know they're free to be bad if they wanted to."

If this whole thing wasn't a mess already, Connie's narratives get confusing as hell towards the end. The hallucinations she experiences are supposed to show her unstable mental state and how she slowly overcomes her issues, but most of the time I had no clue what was going on or what was really happening. Only until after I had gone through these scenes over and over again for weeks did I finally get that her dreams were in fact dreams.

On a matter of personal taste, I have a few more complaints. The last fifty pages were utter crap. Everyone had a chance to be redeemed in my eyes, but any sliver of hope—and I mean for *every single character*—was kicked to the curb after I crossed that final lap. I was ecstatic Concha was killed—tbh there was a chapter or two where I thought she was great but damn, girl—yet did Macho have to die too? They were apart of the past and so needed to be left behind, but I wanted Macho and Connie to ride off into the sunset, especially after Macho confesses that he had grown to love his little wife and forgotten all about her mother, which he'd only realized until that moment. And what the fuck was up with Connie and Doctor Monson having some dipshit, meaningful conversation in his final moments? It's past meets future, I know that too! Yet I felt like the honor of his last words shouldn't have been randomly bestowed on our pathetic excuse for a protagonist.

But despite its glaring faults, I couldn't put it down. Like a bystander drawn to the sight of a trainwreck, I couldn't tear my eyes until I reached the last page. I felt a burning hatred for every single character and every one of their stupid actions but still, I couldn't, which leaves me to my next point.

I could label this as a godawful book and leave it at that. But oh no. My feelings, much like this book, are much more complex. (See! I can do this too, Father Tony. You self-righteous piece of shit.) As a work of commentary regarding the Philippine identity and society, it does a brilliant job. I admit, I will give credit where credit is due. As an enjoyable work of fiction... no. Just no. Joaquin focuses too much on getting a point across than writing a story. Which would be fine, since he probably meant for it to be that way, but I wish he could have managed to have balanced both of these elements, so that the reader could be satisfied in the message and the ultimate fate of the cast.

Perhaps their lives needed to be changed. Perhaps Connie needed to go to a veterinarian instead of the psychiatrist she so obviously needs. Perhaps Connie needed to take that idiotic confrontation with Doctor Monson on his deathbed. Perhaps Connie needed to take that *coughs* *unconventional* step of courage. Perhaps Mary needed for her husband to be stolen away and left with a gaggle of kids to "find herself". Perhaps Paco shouldn't have gotten his comeuppance. Perhaps Macho needed to shoot Concha and himself in the fucking head instead of Connie starting over with him and living happily ever after. But this does not make me hate these choices any less, and this doesn't make any of these characters less of a dumbass for doing what needed to be done. I end this review with one big fat middle finger to all of them.

one-and-a-half stars

Arbie says

As a Filipino, this book appeals to me on different levels. Joaquin wrote this on a different time and yet its

significance remains to be relevant.

I see the character of Connie as the embodiment of the Filipinos. Having two navels, therefore, implying having two mothers, personifies the two nations that colonized the Philippines. The culture, politics and other influences of these two nations have led the Filipinos in a state of being addle on their identity, similar to the state of Connie. At some point, as I try to digest the condition of Connie, I was caught on a quandary on whether her character, or Concha, really existed, since it seems feasible, for me at least, that one of the ladies may be the alter-ego of the other (a case of dual personality).

I'm neutral on the style of writing. There are times that the pacing and transition of the story are not established well. But Joaquin piqued my interest in accounts where he described the old Manila. I got curious about how verisimilar is his description of the place in those days that I Googled old photos.

Overall, Joaquin's work is worth the pride of the Filipinos. This book, along with other works of Filipino authors, should saturate the literature provided to young Filipinos.

Victoria says

Considered as one of the best Philippine works of fiction in English, I found that I did not enjoy reading this work as much as I hoped to. At some point, I kept reading in the hopes that the story would become more interesting or that there would be some structure that would make more sense out of the story.

Aj the Ravenous Reader says

Nick Joaquin is known for his highly symbolic prose. This novel is no exception.

Maria Julieta says

Just the best book I've read this year! Sobrang galing. Breathtaking as it is profound. I'm officially a fan, Sir. :)

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cel de Jesus says

it's like watching a play..

Apokripos says

Past Engagements

(A Book Review of Nick Joaquin's *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*)

In 1955, Nick Joaquin left the Philippines on a Rockefeller creative writing grant taking him to countries such as Spain, the United States, and Mexico. This two-year sojourn gave birth to his first novel inspired by an earlier, shorter work, *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*, published in 1961 having won the very first Harry Stonehill award.

A historic novel now considered a seminal work in Philippine Literature, it revolves on the lives of Filipino emigrants living in Hong Kong centering on the story of Connie Escobar, a woman who indulges and deludes herself as having two belly buttons/navels so as to set herself apart and seen as somehow special by others. She confers this secret to Doctor Pepe Monson, a horse veterinarian, son of a former Filipino businessman and revolutionary in self-imposed exile terrified to deal with the trials of post war independence. As the book progresses we meet these characters at muted wars with themselves and, as if serving like a mirror reflecting Joaquin's experiences prior his travels and composition of the novel, it portrays their struggle to keep their identity amidst different cultural point of views.

I'm sure this novel's odd title, the point of inquiry and fascination of anyone who had either merely read it on the front cover or read the book through, is what excites anyone's curiosity: how can someone have two navels and what are the reasons concerning it? Is it because of an anatomical or genetic anomaly here unto now unheard of? Or it is an outright lie from someone's disjointed view of reality? In a stroke I will call nothing short of brilliant, Joaquin paints an efficient literary device, a catalyst from which to springboard questions pertaining to nationalism amidst the heavy influence and heritage of past colonial masters, society's collapse wrought by past wars, and the Filipino identity as it basks in its new-found freedom.

Aside from the occasional critical essays I've encountered (I still particularly recall his colorful essay about Nora Aunor which I read ages ago in our college's Introduction to Film subject), it's like encountering an all too different Nick Joaquin in the pages of this novel. Getting into the novel requires a huge amount of comprehension and perception in the part of the reader, and in no pretension whatsoever, it is truly a difficult read, I lumbered through the first part myself. Yet carried on I did and I'm quite delighted by the pay off. If I'm ever qualified to make suggestions as how to read the book, I say take it in stride, like a leisurely walk on the battlements of Intramuros paying the utmost attention to the cobbled stones you walk upon, the brick work of the structure, the sun that illuminates the place with an unfathomable wonder and the location's sense of history. Joaquin's prose is intricate, at times profoundly confusing and has this surreal quality as if entering upon a dream at once overwhelms and likewise gratifies in ways that words can't quite express; with eloquently beautiful scenes, imagery and flashbacks similar to viewing sepia-tinted pictures, it makes reader wax poetic about the past, of a Philippines in its youthful glow in its erstwhile glory during a time when the epithet *The Pearl of the Orient* rings true.

The Woman Who Had Two Navels is a many-layered, chaotic and less-than-prefect novel that taunts out universal paradoxes of truth and falsehood, illusion and reality, past and present by paralleling it to the characters and reader's inner turmoil and puts it in the context of the Filipino's search for identity. In Nick Joaquin's view, we must look at the past with the consciousness need of engaging the present world in its own terms.

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Finished: August, 2011
My Rating: ★★★★

[See this review on my book blog **Dark Chest of Wonders** and for many others.]

Maria Ella says

another high-school-compliance-read-this-or-else-zero-grade-in-report-card!

Good read. Concept of incepting an idea to a Filipino mind is not so great since the two-navel idea is not a good comparison with a typical Pinoy with two (or more) identities.

Little did I know is that the navels served as metaphor. :)

John Rey says

I think that this book is more than about the Philippines and its history as other reviews suggest. Many allusions to events in the Philippine history was used but I guess they are there to contextualize "some things" in relation to one's personhood during those times. There are other topics about personhood discussed - like freedom, morality, etc. - and I think they are still relevant today as it was in the times when the plot is contextualized.

I think that the plot presents in an intricate yet subtle way how human nature cope with life experiences - from one's childhood to one's adult life. This novel is more of psychological in its theme that reflects on one's life experiences. But more than that, it is also about one's struggle to go out from the grip of the past to acknowledge that one is free to do what one should do in the face of the struggle for the moral thing to do. This is just my reflection on the book. But maybe I could re-read this in the perspective of Philippine identity, but as of now, I believe that this novel is more about one's struggle to find one's self in thick of one's present reality and not bound up by the past.

As for how the book was written, it was delicately and brilliantly written. There are a lot of "verses" that Nick Joaquin uses and turns around to give new meaning. These lines are like recreating their meaning, at times, and on other times, they are reinforcing the image they portray and creating allusions within the text. Great style! I have never encountered anything like this yet.

Admittedly, this is not an easy read. I wrote this review only after my second reading of the book. There are many flashback scenes in the plot but was flawlessly incorporated to lead the reader back to the present (i.e., present time in the novel). Again, excellent style!

Jireh Lee says

I read this when I was 8 years old or so, so I didn't really understand what it actually meant. Although, I thought it was rather excellent when I read it. I should probably re-read it sometime. I hope I can get a copy when I go back to the Philippines, since the two copies I had left was destroyed by Ondoy.

Celine says

One of the best collection of short stories (and play) I've read. And Summer Solstice is actually my favorite thing I've read of all time.

Rise says

> Over damp Hong Kong the day dawned drizzling, astonishing with sunshine the first passengers huddled inside the ferries, luring them out on deck to spread cold fingers in the blond air and to smile excitedly (that night was full moon of the Chinese New Year) at the great rock city coming up across the black water, rising so fat and spongy in the splashing light the waterfront's belt of buildings looked like a cake, with alleys cutting deep into the icing and hordes of rickshaws vanishing like ants between the slices.

The postwar Hong Kong setting of Nick Joaquín's first novel was significant in at least one respect. It highlighted the exiled condition of its Filipino characters, exile of the physical and spiritual kind. The Monson family—the elder Doctor Monson and his sons Doctor Pepe Monson and Father Tony Monson—had been living in Hong Kong for the better part or the whole of their lives. The elder Monson was veteran of the turn of the century wars against Spanish and American colonial armies. It was also to Hong Kong where General Emilio Aguinaldo (first president of the Philippine Republic), whose image adorned the younger doctor's clinic, went into a short-lived voluntary exile after a political settlement with the Spanish government. It had been Monson's dream to come back to the country only when "it was a free country again", which he finally did after the second world war. What he had seen when he came back to Manila, however, had so disappointed him it dashed the idyllic images of the country he harbored in his mind.

Also fleeing to Hong Kong was Connie Escobar, the woman who thought she has two navels. Whereas the elder Monson was haunted by the specter of the past and the shame of discovering its impermanence, a different kind of shame, anatomical in nature, was haunting Connie Escobar. She ran away from Manila, presumably to flee her husband and to seek out Doctor Pepe Monson. She wanted to undergo an operation, "something surgical", that would remove one of the two orifices that supposedly peered from her belly like eyes. Her complaint may be psychological yet it clearly had something metaphorical about it. It seemed like a product of her sensitivity and a trauma from childhood, a projection of her repressed anxieties. The same physical deformity marked a "defaced" statue of the Biliken, a "toy" grudgingly given to her by her parents when she was a child. Although meant as a good luck charm, owing to its perpetually smiling face, there was something sinister associated with the Biliken in the novel—"an old fat god, with sagging udders, bald and huge-eared and squatting like a buddha; and the sly look in its eyes was repeated by the two navels that

winked from its gross belly".

Billiken statue

Connie's "imagined" condition could also be caused by emotional rebellion. She felt betrayed by her husband (Macho Escobar) and mother (Concha Vidal) when she learned that they were former lovers. She was so affected by this that it may have triggered a kind of internal division in her, a branching of consciousness that manifested itself on her body. Those around her, those she told of it, denied the possible existence of an extra navel, almost taking her for a madwoman. The symbol of the two navels, the aberration it signifies, was so rich with implications that unraveling it almost made for a mystery story, although to call the novel a horror story was not farfetched either.

Another character seemingly in search of direction was Paco Texeira, a married band vocalist living in Hong Kong. Paco, a Filipino-Portuguese, went to work for a while in Manila's entertainment clubs and became entangled with Concha Vidal (La Vidal), Connie's mother. He became her constant escort, accompanying her in various parties and functions. Paco also got involved with Connie but he had to flee the two women as he detected a kind of evil force around them.

> "They're both agents of the devil—she and her mother. They work as a team: the mother catches you and plays with you until you're a bloody rag; then she feeds you over to her daughter.... They work *for* each other. Whenever I was with one of them I could feel the other watching greedily. They share each other's pleasure, watching you twitch. And when they've screwed you up to the breaking point the daughter springs her abominable revelation [of having two navels]—and you go mad and run amuck. And there's one more soul that's damned."

Connie's mother was also in Hong Kong, presumably on business. The two women were actually pursuing Paco. To add to the complication, Macho Escobar arrived looking for his wife. These characters were all exiles of a spiritual kind, imprisoned by their desires and baffled by their pride.

Connie's characterization, with her unstable mental condition, was already a far cry from that of Maria Clara in José Rizal's nationalist novel *Noli Me Tangere* (1887). The latter had always been seen as the representation of the ideal Filipina and symbol of the 'motherland'. Maria Clara turned out to be an illegitimate child of a villainous Spanish priest (Padre Damaso), a secret which when she discovered brought her unimaginable shame. The source of Connie's shame, for her part, was seeing her own self as a freak of nature.

An obvious meaning of the two navels was Connie's inheritance of a dual identity, her being a child of two worlds, of Spanish and American cultures. Her cultural environment, wracked by a recent war, created in her soul a kind of hybrid self. It may be too transparent a metaphor: the Filipino identity being frayed twice by conquistadors during bloody conflicts and colonial administrations, native culture hostage to two cultural axes. Punctuating these cultural crises were the major wars (the Philippine Revolution against Spain, the Philippine-American War, and World War II against the Japanese) which left destruction in their wakes: the savaging of lives, landscapes, and, again, identities.

This transparent reading of the Joaquín's inquiry into Filipino identity was complicated by the clash of the

male and female. The dramatic battle of the sexes that figured in the novelist's other works of fiction was here played out in its full barbaric sensuality. And Joaquín being Joaquín, the writing was a celebration of existence. His sentences were acute expressions of beauty, horror, and vitality.

> From the ramparts where the Spaniards had watched for Chinese pirate and English buccaneer, the younger taller city beyond the walls seemed rimmed with flame, belted with fire, cupped in a conflagration, for a wind was sweeping the avenue of flametrees below, and the massed treetops, crimson in the hot light, moved in the wind like a track of fire, the red flowers falling so thickly like coals the street itself seemed to be burning.

The prose was rich with color and details; reading it sometimes felt like watching a fashion show. The Vidal mother and daughter strutted their clothes, hats, pearls, and furs like ramp models. Even the description of postwar destruction had a surreal energy about it.

> Macho had suddenly packed up one day and flown off to Manila; not really caring to see the city again or anyone there; not really moved when he saw it, flat and spiky, its bared ribs and twisted limbs a graph of pain in the air; not really astonished even by its vivacity—traffic brimming between the banks of rubble; daylong blocklong queues at the movie houses; the ruins noisy with night clubs; and, on his third night there, like a nightmare's climax, a glittering fashion show in the bullet-pocked ballroom of a gutted hotel, where Macho, turning away from the sequins and diamonds, the shattered ceiling and the bloodstained floor, had so abruptly come face to face with Concha Vidal ...[H]e had suddenly and sharply and exultantly known, with the old ache in the marrow and a blaze of flametrees in the mind, that he had never stopped wanting, he had never stopped desiring this woman.

The imagery that lighted the novel's hallways was determined by poetry. But it was a fixed form poetry, as the repetitions of details were deliberate, creating the patterning effect of an elaborate tapestry. The symmetric structure of repetition was like that of a villanelle's, with the images repeated like a refrain after several lines.

Consider a flashback scene near the novel's end, in the final chapter titled "DOCTOR MONSON". (The penultimate chapter was called "THE CHINESE MOON"; the double letter "O" in these titles almost concretized the presence of the two navels).

> Behind him now, like smoky flames in the noon sun, the whole beautiful beloved city, the city that he guarded even now, here on this mountain pass, and for which he had come so far away to die—to the edge of the land, into the wilderness, up the cold soggy mountains of the north—and he told himself that, finally, one discovered that one had been fighting, not for a flag or a people, but for just one town, one street, one house; for the sound of a canal in the morning, the look of some roofs in the noon sun, and the fragrance of a certain evening flower.
>
> He told himself that, finally, one found oneself willing to die, not for a great public future, but a small private past; and he picked up his pistol, having finished eating, and crawled back to the cliff's edge.

The elder Monson was here on his deathbed dreaming retrospectively of his participation as a young fighter in the decisive battle in the mountain of Tirad Pass, the last stand of Filipino fighters against Americans. It

was an inspired juxtaposition of his imagined death years ago in the battlefield with that of his actual dying in old age. The same images were repeated later in the novel, a kind of closure for the old man as he finally defined his once conflicted nationalism.

> Opening his eyes he saw, not the stars or pine branches, but the canopy of a bed and the faces of his two sons hovering over him; seeing suddenly in their faces all the years of foreign wandering, the years of exile, but knowing suddenly now that the exile had, after all, been more than a vain gesture, that his task had not ended with that other death in the pinewoods, that he had stood on guard, all these years, as on the mountain pass, while something precious was carried to safety. For there it was now in the faces of his sons—the mountain pass, and the pinewoods, and the shapes of the men who had died there. There it was now in their faces—the Revolution and the Republic, and that small private past for which he had come so far away to die. It had not been lost ... [T]here was no need to cross the sea to find it. Here it was before him (and he strove to rise to salute it) in the faces of his sons. He had saved it and it was now in the present, and the hovering faces brightened and blurred about him, became the sound of a canal in the morning, the look of some roofs in the noon sun, and the fragrance of a certain evening flower. Here he was, home at last ... and before him, like smoky flames in the sunset, the whole beautiful beloved city.

Nationalism was here depicted as a homage to one's "small private past" and testified by Monson's two sons who will carry on after his death, even if they remains as exiles in Hong Kong. (Contrast the same battle of Tirad Pass in the closing scene of F. Sionil José's nationalist novel *Dusk* wherein nationalism was proffered as an inborn "duty".) This scene was a form of making peace with the past, the kind of closure that eluded Connie Escobar. In one of her imagined death scenes, she was arguing with her father, Manolo Vidal, about acceptance and letting go of the past. Her father's advice hinted at looking back at their lives with a critical eye, repairing the generational break, the severed connections:

> "If you must go down, go down raging. Do not lose that ability, like I did. Take things hard, make a fuss, and refuse to accept what we are—no not even now. Rage, rage against us—even now!"

The reference here was to the poem by Dylan Thomas, with "Do not lose that ability" paralleling "Do not go gentle into that good night". The poem was in fact a villanelle constantly echoing the famous passage about raging against darkness and stagnant death.

> Do not go gentle into that good night,
> Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
> Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
>
> Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
> Because their words had forked no lightning they
> Do not go gentle into that good night.
>
> ...
>
> And you, my father, there on the sad height,
> Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
> Do not go gentle into that good night.

> Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

The poem's subject was the poet's dying father. Joaquín's paraphrase was relevant as the poem's theme contextualized his discourse on memory and nationalism. In addition to the borrowing of novelistic structure of repetition, it anticipated the death scene of old doctor Monson and illuminated the meaning of Connie's (four) death scenes. Four times, the poet urged his father about why he must rage against the dying light, must not go gently with the good night. In the particular hallucinatory scene in the novel, the roles were reversed. Connie was with her father on an airplane ("there on the sad height", as in the poem; atop Mount Tirad as in the case of old Monson). Manolo was appealing to her to finally face the specter haunting her and embrace her destiny, her identity, whatever she may have thought of it. Present reality check as key to affirming life, to attaining rebirth and regeneration.

In *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*, as with his only other novel (*Cave and Shadows*) which appeared more than 20 years later, Joaquín abstracted his ideas on memory and identity and played the devil's advocate on the subject of nationalism. He was ever the sly novelist and consummate prose writer.

Patrick says

This book deals with the absurd. The book is a complex story on individual choice as a step in living a more fulfilling life and through the characters an allegory on how a developing country chooses democracy in its steps for self-determination. I understand how some people find this book a hard read because the character's engage in a sort of stream of consciousness montage that occasionally shifts from past to the present as well alternate scenerious that one can interpret as hallucinations. Parts 3-5 is excellent piece of experimental writing as well as having complex moral dilemmas so I will give this book a 5 stars.

A southern landlord, Mr Escobar gave his boy on his 15 birthday a servant girl whose father was a tenant father who had debts owed to Mr. Escobar. When she got pregnant, Escobar tried to hide the girl but Macho got pisses off and rebelled against his father since she was his first experience. After going to boarding school in Manila, Macho came home and became fast friends with his father who he hunted, drank, and whored with.

Macho tells on how he met Senora Vidal. Mr Vidal told his wife that they should court the Escobars because they had significant voting blocs that they could secure. While Mr Vidal led Mr Escobar to the gambling tables, Senora de Vidal entertained Macho. Escobar said that Concha was a good wife and devoted mother who had a reputation for being lecherous though no one could place anything definite on her. Mr Escobar said that she probably had an itch to cheat but just need an opportunity to and joked that Macho should go after her before she goes after him.

After a few months of being a bad boy galavanting around town, Macho meets Concha again by chance and was taken with her passion and excitement for him so much so that she did not try to hide their affair. What started out as a fling became something more where they both fell in love. Love was something that was serious and needed to be hidden because it destabilizes stable societal ties. Macho suggested that they run away together so they could live happily ever after without having to look over their shoulders but Concha could not bring her 9 yrs old daughter with her.

Concha said she would go away on her own because she did not want to destroy Connie nor Macho's life and urge him to tell his father that the affair was over. His father wanted progeny so he urged his son to leave Concha. After Escobar died and Concha left him, Macho became the evil landlord like his father and their forefathers before them so that the tenant farmers nothing ever seems to change in which one master is just replaced with someone who is as equally as cruel. During WWII, he became a cruel guerilla overlord who got his tenants together into a small guerilla army to kill Japs and their collaborators with a sadistic pleasure since he considered his life destroyed.

After the war, he bumped into Concha again and knew he still desired and wanted her. Due to war, Concha changed into a hardened woman. Later, she wanted Macho to marry Connie which Concha thought would be the best solution for the both of them. Macho hated Concha for suggesting such a match but married Connie anyway since it was Concha who asked. Only when Macho discovered that Connie knew about the love letters did he realized the magnitude of the betrayal that he shared with Concha against Connie.

For Senora Vidal, whatever she does seems wrong. She tried to break off with Macho because her conscience demanded it only to see him destroy his own life. She also tried to match Macho and Connie because she knew that they would be happy together only to find people thought what she did was depraved. In trying to save the two most important people in her life, she destroyed them and damned her life to misery. Joaquin says it best, "Anguish was manufactured by her benevolence; her private hell was indeed paved with good intentions."

Paco Texeira's band was the only band playing American jazz during the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong. Filipinos are the only Asians who understood and mimic American jazz rhythm. Unlike the Monson boys who were constantly reminded that they were sons of a patriot in exile, Paco had no sense of country as long as he had his music he could live anywhere. The only thing he remembers of his father talking about the Philippines is a description of its mountain ranges as a woman lying down. Paco lived with his mother because his father had an unstable income because he was also a musician. He makes an interesting observation in juxtaposing between Filipino traditions and Americanized Filipinos occurring in the same individual Filipino.

In one of his gigs, Paco befriended Senora de Vidal so they could swap tips on where to go in Hong Kong vs Manila. Paco thought their relationship strictly platonic as his marriage to Mary was great in that they seemed to be extensions of one another. But despite the platonic nature of Paco and de Vidal's relationship, the gossip of them being lovers made their friendship lose its luster. For a couple of weeks, he stopped seeing her and found a Manila that was poverty stricken unlike de Vidal's rich Manila. Two Manila's living side by side but never seeing each other.

One day while waiting for de Vidal, Paco found Connie and from that moment on wanted her. It was during this time that Connie found the love letters between Concha and Macho and went to her mother's house to confront her. Connie became a groupie of his band showing up in clubs that he would play in perhaps to distract herself from problems at home or possibly even get revenge from her husbands affair with her mother. In am moment of terror in which one man shot another, Paco comforted Connie and was driven to him by his protection. Knowing that the attraction was mutual, Paco allowed her desire for him to overtake her mental reservation on cheating on her husband. Not knowing her background story and thinking that she was a tease, Paco was about to rape her but was scared off by the all seeing eye. Paco states that both Connie and Senora de Vidal have an evil hold on him and he knows that he will go running to them when they call him. Pepe realized both his father and Paco have a similar traumatized look after they came back from the Philippines.

The book starts of with Connie visiting a horse doctor in Hong Kong believing she is abnormal because she has two navels and wants something to be done about it because she does not want to seem like a freak when she has to undress for her husband. Later, Connie asked Pepe to act as a go between her and Macho. For Pepe, Connie seemed to be a troubled girl with a compulsive lying past.

Senora Vidal remembers how Dr Monson courageously chose exile rather than pledging allegiance to the US after they took over the Philippines. Senora forced her daughter, Connie, to marry because she became upset by the common rumor that her father was pilfering from state coffers in order to send his daughters to a good private school. Connie believed the rumors and did not want to go to school with blood money.

According to Senora Vidal, Connie is now chasing a band leader Paco Texeira because she was forced to marry a man she did not love or even choose. Connie runs away to Hong Kong and is followed by her mother and husband. De Vidal matched Connie up with Macho though neither one was in love with the other she gradually grew to like him a lot due to his good humor and good looks. For his part though he liked her too, he did not seem present when they were together. Macho came to Hong Kong to take Connie home so she would not embarrass her politician father during election time by creating a scandal that can hand the opposition gossip as ammunition. When Macho realized he could lose Connie forever due to the love letters, he changed his tune and wanted her back in her own terms no matter how long that took.

Meanwhile, Rita and Helen owns a successful interior decorator venture that Is expanding due to the rapid expansion of Hong Kong. Rita was her batches leader and matched Paco and Mary together since they seemed each others extension of the other. While Mary used to be independent in traveling to other parts of the world while her batch mates stayed in Hong Kong, now that she is a mother, she is servile to Paco as she feels they are two halves to the same soul. But ever since Paco and Pepe's father returned from the Philippines it seemed the group is falling apart.

CHAPTER III: VIDAL

During Concha's childhood, it was known that the house lizards were "servants of the Virgin". In April at age 15, Concha met her first husband during a play in which the ambivalent new empire the Americans established tried to censor the theatre as a means for expressing nationalistic sentiments after the Filipino-American war. It was here that Concha met her first love, an Esteban Borromeo who was a former editor of her fathers nationalistic newspaper who was sued by libel because he called the American merchant propping up in the Philippines carpetbaggers. Because nationalistic sentiment remained high after the Filipino-American war, Senior Gil mortgaged his home so that Esteban could be freed from prison. Since Senor Gil's paper closed, Esteban started working as a playwrite of a subversive play critical of American occupation.

Esteban Borromeo had a Byron cool on the outside hiding an interior lightening. As expected when it came to the subversive part of the play, the Americans closed down the play and arrested all the actors including Esteban himself. For Concha, Esteban represented the heroism that she was looking for in a real man who stood for nationalistic impulse against a foreign power. When she met him, she felt that for the first time she was a real woman because she knew what it was like to be in love. Reading his poetry, she was intrigued how naughty the words were which she juxtaposed by his sweet demeanor towards her.

Despite her interest in Esteban, she tried to be coquettish about her interest to throw her parents off from her precocious interest towards Esteban. She was able to force Esteban into a conventional courtship from the rebellious man since "he had romantic habits but classic custom." Unlike her contemporaries, Concha was able to have her love match. Just like a gentleman, he asked her parents for her hands in marriage. Esteban and Concha saw a bright future for each other with Esteban bursting with ideas not aware that America's

presence would drastically change the social and cultural landscape so that Esteban intelligence and faith in the old language of Spanish and its customs would be discarded in favor of English and American culture so much so that their ideas became inaccessible to future Filipino generations. While initially Americans were considered an occupier at the fringe of society, no one knew the extent of how American culture would usurp European or indigenous Filipino cultures. Not until after WWII, did Filipina's even consider being with an American. It was said that Southern girls were the best looking mix of Malay, Chinese, and Spanish blood. It was a land of chieftains. The woman of the south were either heiress, servants, or prostitutes. Esteban was a casualty of this cultural shift from Spanish to English in which a promising man of letters becomes an outdated fossil. Because he was not able to make the shift from Spanish to American rule, he died a broke and broken hearted man. Concha became a widow as Esteban succumbed to his illness and had to live with her father.

During her widowhood, she got pregnant by an effete writer and she turned to Dr Manolo Vidal for help. Vidal was widely known as a man who would perform abortions for sexual favors since to be "with child" outside of marriage was seen as a disgrace to the family. Perhaps because he himself was an old literary revolutionary, he respected Concha Borromeo. Unlike the other old revolutionary intellectuals, he saw the future laid in American politics so he quickly associated himself with Quezon who was backed by Americans as a reward for meeting American's half-way. Because he was able to adapt to changing times, Manolo Vidal political fortunes rose. After her abortion, Concha turned to religion with equal passion which she displayed in earlier love affairs. But before she could dedicate her life to God, Vidal came back into her life to court her. Even though she was in her mid-30's, Manolo surprised her by finding her beautiful enough to marry her.

As a monk, Tony Monson feels that he does not belong in Hong Kong instead seeing it as a place for exile. He does not feel holy either as his monastery is in the middle of the city. As per Pepe suggestion, Connie goes to Tony to find an explanation for her two navels. She felt both troubled and blessed to be different from other people. To Tony, she seems dangerously delusional who does not want to find out that she is delusional though she realizes that this maybe a real possibility.

Concha did not join the group at the club because she just wants to watch the young be young and full of energy. Later she argues with Father Monson that God made women beautiful so she feels it is her duty to God to be beautiful in front of everyone. While Father says it is inner beauty that God looks at, Concha feels it is her vanity that defines her. She says perhaps the real reason she married Macho off to Connie was because of the hate she felt for her daughter for preventing her from running off with Macho unlike her superficial reasoning that she did it because she thought they would make a good match. Concha thinks her inability to face her daughter maybe due to her fear that she actually hates her.

The Monson brothers found Connie in their apartment and relayed the information that Macho wants to start from scratch with Connie wherever she might want to go as long as they are together. She insists that the knowledge of her two navels will scare him away. The Monson brothers think that she is using the delusion of having two navels in order to feel unique and disengage from her problematic life including an excuse for not confronting Macho about being her mother's former lover. She wants to be safe so she retreats from a fully lived life. The Monson brothers want her to reengage in her life in order to live a full, free, responsible life of her own choosing. She wants the Monson brothers to confirm or refute her two navel delusion once and for all by stripping and letting them see for themselves whether or not she has two navel. Father Tony left Pepe to refute her two navel delusion which Pepe hesitantly acquiesced to.

Chapter IV

When Pepe confirmed that she only had on navel her delusional world broke apart. She proceeded to do what she always has done to run away first toward the monastery. During her drive towards the monastery she had both flashbacks and hallucinations of the destruction of her family.

FLASHBACKS:
When she was 5, Connie went to a carnival and wanted her doll Minnie to see Bililken, a carnival god who was going to be her idol in her belief in having two navels. Connie being a spoiled brat wanted the Biliken idol even going as far as throwing Minnie away and lying about it in order to convince he mother to get Bilikern for her. Here we see Connie as a compulsive liar because she equates her lies with safety and the outside world as having the 3 hags of terror in it.

When she was 11, she was able to possesses Biliken because Mr. Vidal thought it would represent happy memories during the beginning of WWII. For Connie, Biliken represented the joyous past before WWII destroyed it. It was during this time that mother broke up with Macho and the happy illusion of a family broke up. Up to that point, Connie idealized her mother as good and beautiful. But when she came back from Hong Kong, she became cold and mean. For Connie, Biliken represented a friendly face during American occupation before the horrors of WWII set in. At age 14, she was evacuated since the war was coming to Manila.

At age 15 after the war, the Vidals returned to the ruins of their home which Connie did not want to be rebuilt because things can never be what it was. She looked for her lucky charm Biliken which was the only thing keeping her sane after her mother emotionally abandoned her and during the horrors of WWII only to find two bullet holes in its belly shocking her. With the mutilated and ugly Biliken, she begins to internalize what she saw as her own disfigurement as having two navels and begins to doubt her happy past as a possible figment of her imagination. Perhaps she sees her past as horrible which was confirmed with Macho and Concha's affair, she takes on the delusion of having two navels as a way of internalizing her traumatic past transforming her into this horrible monster. After her honeymoon with Macho, Connie discovered the love letters. The shock sent her to Biliken not remembering the events that led her search for Biliken.

PRESENT DAY HALLUCINATION OR ALTERNATE PARALLEL UNIVERSE:

Connie is devolving in her delusions based on her own lies now has grown to seeing spies everywhere she looks. When she entered the train compartment, she found Macho waiting for her inside. She realizes that she lacks free-will and her life has been predetermined from the very beginning despite Macho wanting to break from the past and start anew. When Connie told him that she no longer wanted to be with him, Macho dropped the pretense of free will and said that he, Concha, and Connie will forever be linked. He suggests that as a little girl she knew about the affair as was an implicit accomplice to it. She eventually agreed that the love triangle will forever be linked and that when Macho makes love to Connie it will be both with Connie and Concha he is making love to. Even though Macho wants to escape so that it is just he and Connie, he knows that Concha presence will always be present. Connie felt comfortable with Macho's presence growing up as he was the stand in for the brothers she never saw while finding the love letters dispelled the myth that Macho and Connie were merely friends. Her childhood was built on a foundation of lies about friendship and false comfort. The hallucination ends with the train crashing and both of them dying.

Connie gets on a ship and sees her mother there. Her mother says that she is there because Connie is there further underscoring their being tied. Connie feels that Concha never loved her but just be kind and not hate her just as if she was a step-daughter not her real daughter. Instead of Connie, Concha got her affection from Macho. Connie thinks she is the fruit of all evil that Concha carried inside her. Concha confesses that she did

a terrible thing marrying Manolo. Connie wanted to go on pretending that Conch was the perfect mother but she could no longer pretend to love Connie because of the happiness that being with her cost Concha. Concha agreed that she never wanted Connie and she represents all the evil in Concha's life. The hallucination ends with Connie and Concha drowning in a sinking ship.

Zeny says

I was a kid when I read this book. Probably, I was twelve or so. I also saw the short-story version (the short-story came first, then, upon a Rockefeller Grant, Joaquin expanded it into a novel).
