

THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION AND LOCATION: WOMEN-CENTERED THEATER IN THE PHILIPPINES

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The Radical Tradition in 20th Century Philippine Theater

Philippine theatre—from the turn of the 20th century to the early years of this 21st century—can lay claim to a strong, radical, anti-Spanish colonial, anti-American colonial, anti-establishment (i.e., anti-imperialist, anti-comprador capitalist, anti-crony capitalist, anti-fascist) theater tradition.

These radical theater practices include:

- the “seditious” *zarzuelas* of the early American colonial period (1898 to 1930s)
e.g., Juan Abad’s “Tanikalang Guinto” (Golden Chain), a 1902 zarzuela that allegorized the traditional love story to expose the cruelty of Spanish and American colonial rule in the Philippines¹
- the social realist plays of the post world war II period until the early sixties
e.g., Alberto Florentino’s “The World Is An Apple”, “Cadaver”, and “Oli Impan”²
- the revolutionary theater (*dulang mapanghimagsik*), *dulansangan* (street theater) and people’s theater from the period of Marcosian/martial rule (late sixties to eighties) to the presidencies of Cory Aquino and Fidel Ramos (the mid-eighties to the nineties)³
e.g., Bonifacio Ilagan’s “Welga! Welga!” (1971), first performed by Panday Sining
Domingo Landicho “Dupluhang Bayan” (1975) by (Bangon 740)

Richie Valencia and Ed Vencio's "Ang Mga Unang Araw sa Buhay ng Bagong Iskolar ng Bayan" (1975), performed by UP Repertory (Bangon 740)

Alan Glinoga and Rody Vera's "Oratoryo ng Bayan: Makabayang Deklarasyon ng Makataong Karapatan" (1983), performed by PETA

Chris Millado's "Ilokula II" (1983), performed by UP Peryante

Teatro Pabrika's "Humanda Kayo mga Utak Pulbura" 1988

Teatro Pabrika's "Ang Pagpasya" 1990

(Atienza, Lumbera, & Zafra 740-749)

This paper, the main focus of which is discussing women-centered plays of the 21st century, is an update of my previous studies on radical theater in the Philippines, specifically, women-centered theater practices of the eighties and nineties.

Women's Radical Theater, Eighties and Nineties

Women's radical theater had its "formal" (i.e., with institutional support) beginnings in the plays of the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA) whose cultural workers then had deep links to the national democratic front organizations, as well as the productions of the Cultural Center of the Philippines' (CCP's) Women's Desk when CCP began to be peopled by cultural activists after the EDSA "revolution" (1986) that toppled the dictator, Ferdinand Marcos.

These plays recuperate the stories of forgotten women of the Spanish colonial period like ("Leona" by Elynia Ruth Mabanglo); the unsung women heroes of the revolution against Spain ("Oryang," "Teresa Magbanwa," and "Teodora Alonzo" produced by the CCP Women's Desk); the red guerilla fighters of the underground left-led struggle against the State ("Lorena" by Lualhati Bautista); our oppressed women's sector like those in the entertainment/ tourism industry; our overseas women workers ("Konnichi Wa Piripin" by Phil Noble, "Katas ng Saude" by Vicvic Ello, Vincent de Jesus and Liza Magtoto) and other professionals like social workers ("Juan Tamban" by Malou Jacob); as well as those of our "ordinary" housewives ("Usapang Babae" by Chris Millado and "June Bride" by Richie Valencia Buenaventura).⁴

Women's theater of the eighties and nineties, was thus concerned with a wide array of women's issues that were being addressed by various collectives and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with links to peasant and working class women. Unlike its equivalents in the U.S. and France (sixties onwards) which tended to concentrate on "identity politics" and concerns such as sexual equality, the tradition of women's writings, the "essential" qualities of women's/womyn's language and the establishment of a separate women's culture, Philippine feminism was firmly grounded in the long struggle for economic and political self-determination. This radical roots made Philippine feminists perceive the Filipinas' condition as an over-determination of sexual, racial and class factors. Thus, the dominance in Western feminist discourse of a politics based on the individual's experience of patriarchy was downplayed by Philippine feminists, asserts Delia Aguilar (18). Moreover, according to Asoka Bandarage, Third World feminists believed that women's subjugation was inextricably intertwined with class oppression at both the national and international levels. The liberation of Third World men and women, they argued, was not possible within the prevailing capitalist world system (Bandarage 495-515). This was also a distinctive perspective on the women's question by Philippine feminists—that sexual inequality/gender division of labor is inextricably linked to class/race/ethnic structural inequalities and the effects of uneven development of capitalism worldwide.

The specific character of Philippine feminist discourse until today can thus be explicable in terms of the development of the women's movement during the MAKIBAKA period in the 1970s and its revival in the early '80s with GABRIELA and other collectives within cause-oriented groups. Since the Malayang Kilusan ng Bagong Kababaihan (MAKIBAKA), the first all-female revolutionary organization founded by Ma. Lorena Barros and activists from Samahang Demokratikong Kabataan (SDK) and Kabataang Makabayan (KM), sought a better society for men and women alike, its members felt that their male comrades should not be left to bear the brunt of the struggle. According to Barros, who was interviewed before the declaration of martial law: "If an armed conflict does arise, we will fight alongside the men" (San Juan 156).

Since the seventies, the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA), has played an active part in encouraging a nationalist popular culture. Some of the groups within and outside the Metro Manila area with which PETA worked with were Kulturang Atin Foundation, Inc. (KAFI), Lanao

Educational Arts for Development (LEAD), Sangguniang Tagapag-ugnay sa Sining (SINING), and Educational Cultural Arts, Development and Services (EDCADS) (see Kalinangan, 1986-87). From their work as trainers, artists and organizers (TAO), PETA members developed a distinct repertory. It was through its interactions with other local and cultural institutions that PETA developed the aesthetics and pedagogy of The People's Theater, a synthesis of Brechtian techniques, Peking Opera, Boal's (Latin American) Theater of the Oppressed and types of Philippine religious theater.

The women cultural workers of PETA have tried to set up a Women's Desk through Remy Rikken (then head of the National Commission on the Role of Women) in the early '80s, attempted again in 1990 to create a structure that would address women's issues when fifteen women gathered at NURSIA, home of the Institute of Women's Studies, St. Scholastica's College in Manila for a women's gender consciousness-raising workshop. During the same period, efforts were made to produce a women's curriculum which would be part of the training program of plays for each of PETA's theater seasons (Interview with Maribel Legarde, Program Director of PETA's Kalinangan Ensemble, 21 May 1992).

These attempts to inscribe a feminist discourse into PETA's training programs and ensemble do not mean, however, that the organization only started to incorporate women's issues in its plays in the nineties. In 1983, "Mariang Aliw", a documentary-drama on prostitution as it is "universally experienced", was scripted and directed by Soxy Topacio. Three years later, it was followed by "Buwang at Baril sa Eb Major", a play written by Chris Millado and directed by Apo Chua which basically consists of monologues spoken by three women: a middle-class socialite, preparing her incongruous "battlegear" of gasmask, "Wet Ones", expensive rubber shoes, yellow confetti, cologne and suntan lotion for a People-Power rally; an Itawis woman, still shaken from the physical abuse she had suffered at the hands of the military, lamenting the murders of her family and neighbours; and a guerrilla's wife, traveling to a remote town in order to identify her husband's corpse, desperately hoping that the body is not his. There is the trilogy, entitled "Tatlo sa Taguan", dealing with the plight of Philippine migrant workers which was presented by PETA during its regional tour of the provinces of Rizal, Cavite, Batangas and Baguio in October-November 1987. The first work, "Amah: Maid in Hongkong", relates the lives of domestics in the British colony as they contend with the mental

and physical cruelty of abusive masters and in the indifference of Philippine Embassy officials; the second, “Katas ng Saudi”, focuses on contract workers in the Middle East and their bouts of homesickness; while the third, “Konnichiwa Piripin”, takes as its subject the nightclub entertainers and prostitutes in Japan and their problems with the Yakuza.

Notwithstanding the fact that the protagonists of all these plays are women, there are those, even within PETA, who do not regard them as feminist dramas. This is because less emphasis is placed in them on women’s issues than on the structural causes of such social problems as prostitution, poverty, militarization, human rights violations and the Philippine diaspora. Maribel Legarde and Liza Magtoto, Program Directors of the Kalinangan Ensemble (PETA’s performing arm) and the People’s Theater Resource Center, respectively are of this opinion. Earlier I had said that what distinguishes Philippine feminism from its European and American equivalents is its insertion in the Left’s agenda of national self-determination.

E. San Juan, Jr. adds that to properly understand this peculiar perspective of Philippine feminism and its articulation in the aforementioned plays, it is necessary to recall that, for the nationalist movement, the struggle for equality of the sexes has historically always been seen as secondary to the anti-imperialist effort. He further asserts that in spite of “the theoretical advances that western Marxist feminists have made in the last two decades in applying historical materialism to the analysis of patriarchy and its trans-historical persistence through various modes of production, the mainstream Filipino radical thinking on this classic question still labors from crude, dogmatic materialism which mechanically subordinates the women’s struggle to the peremptory needs and imperatives of the anti-imperialist struggle” (San Juan 160-163).

During a 1983 interview, Dolores Feria traced the failure of MAKIBAKA to male intransigence in the nationalist movement (Amante 26-30):

The masculine comrades could not accept it...aggressive women who pointed out that cornerstone of the women’s lib was the right of woman to use her own body, were unpopular...MAKIBAKA went down the drain because our culture was not yet ready for anything other than standard conception of woman in a supportive role: as feminine, attractive, and always keeping her voice down...**I hope that the Left will wake up one day to the fact that, with the Right, they think exactly the same frame of reasoning to**

downplay the women's lib...The Left could have successfully spear-headed such a movement for the "tactical consideration" (whatever that is), they decided not to do so right now.
[Emphasis added]

As late as 1990, Adul de Leon, performing artist and national Vice-Chairperson of the women's coalition GABRIELA, referred to the difficulty of convincing men and even women in the movement who were not yet "mulat" (awakened/gender-conscious) of the importance of including gender issues in the programs. She claims that the usual response was, "You women can take care of it"—which she and others took to mean as: "It's women's work. It's not important enough...not national in character":

We still have to wage our arguments with the chauvinist men and activist women of the movement...They should listen to new voices and not accuse the questioning person to being reformist, not critical enough, not nationalist...We've already stretched sectoral organizing to the limit. What other forms of organizing can we do? And in terms of educating the people...we should use new cultural and popular forms...Let's get away from the teach-ins, the symposia and the fora. And for cultural forms, let's get away from the revolutionary songs and the street theater...Ask the artist. (Patajo-Legasto, "Videotaped Interview with Adul de Leon, 1990; also "Sarilaya: Women Artists and the Nationalist Movement", 1990).

Philippine feminist scholars working on representations and discourses of gender ideology, including Delia Aguilar, Sr. Mary John Mananzan, Soledad Reyes, Joi Barrios, Lilia Quindoza, among others have developed a materialist feminism which views the women's and nationalist struggles as both conjoined and relatively autonomous.

Feminist cultural workers have similarly processed this new understanding of the dynamic and interdependent relationship between the nationalist agenda and the women's liberation agenda through their plays. What problems beset poor women and not poor men? What hurdles and experiences do Philippine women across classes face and share in common? These questions have been addressed by PETA plays such "June Bride" (1985) by Richie-Valencia-Buenaventura, "Leona" (1990) by Eynia Ruth Mabanglo and "Usapang Babae" (1990).⁵

In “June Bride” (1985), the juxtaposition of the stories of two women from different backgrounds is intended to foreground their points of convergence and divergence. Sandra, the bored housewife of Dindo, a yuppie production manager, and Ising, the urban poor housewife of Pilo, a union leader decide to seek employment in spite of their husband’s admonitions that a woman’s primary responsibility is to minister to her family’s needs. Their reasons for looking for work differ: Sandra feels that her daily routine and the supposed highlights of her role as “angel of the house” (visits to mother and mother-in-law, tête-à-têtes with other matrons, shopping, aerobics) have left her as stunted as the bonsai plants she tends, while Ising has to compensate for her husband’s frequent involvement in strikes. Despite this, however, the patriarchal practices and discourses ensuing from their husbands are similar. Both Dindo and Pilo suspect the motives of their wives’ employers for hiring them and even accuse Sandra and Ising of infidelity whenever they arrive home late from work. They also attempt to make their wives feel guilty for neglecting themselves and their children. When Sandra goes on her work shift, Dindo refuses to let the maid provide him with his supper and take care of their child because “Trabahong babae ‘yan” (“It’s woman’s work”). Ultimately, the women stand firmly by their decisions and Sandra tells Dindo that the problem is not her alleged relationship with her boss, who had been her suitor twelve years before, but their inability to share their experiences.

Sandra:

...Alam ko naman mahal ko pa rin si Dindo, pero marami siyang problema sa trabaho... [I know I still love Dindo, but he has so many problems at work...] How can other men talk to me about their problems. Hindi ako kasali sa mundo niya sa opisina. [I am not included in his world, his office]... We used to be best friends too, Dindo, before we were married... Pero somehow, pagkalipat natin ditto sa townhouse [when we transferred to the townhouse], I became a housewife... [translation mine]

More biting is Ising’s assessment of her and Pilo’s marital problems. His criticisms of her lack of sympathy for his cause and for the oppressed in general, as well as his assurances that his work for the union sustains her very existence, elicits this retort from his wife.

Mabuhay? Mabuhay para ano? Para sigaw-sigawan mo tuwing umaga? Para maggisa ng mungo, maglaba ng pantalon mong maong, mag-isis ng sahig, magtimpla ng kape? At pagkatapos ng trabaho dito sa bahay, pagkatulog ng bata, darating ka, amoy stainless, ngingisi, kikindatan at kikilitiin ako, at inaasahan mo namang ako’y buong lugod at buong pusong maglililis ng daster at bubukaka? Kung hindi iyan pang-aapi, anong tawag mo diyan?

So I can live? Live for what? So that I can be shouted at by you every morning? So that I can cook you food, wash your jeans, scrub the floor, and make your coffee? And after my work here at home, after the child is put to bed, you arrive, reeking of stainless, smiling, winking at me and teasing, you expect me to willingly and with a full heart, slip off my housedress and spread my legs? If that is not oppression, what do you call that? [translation mine]

What makes “June Bride” different from other plays which explore the various dissatisfactions of women in marriage? First, it concludes with an affirmation of the importance of the family, an institution which has traditionally been the object of attack from some strands of Western feminist discourse. Second, it emphasizes the need for partners in an emotional relationship to share their roles and responsibilities more greatly. Third, it deconstructs local myths about the privileged position in the home of Philippine middle-class women—their actual but concealed power as the “reynas of tahanan” (the queens of the house)—in relation to that of other Asian women. Fourth, it examines the difficulties which are specific to politically engaged but financially struggling couples whose commitments to national conflicts may adversely affect their relationships.

Ultimately Pilo and Dante realize the need to open up to their wives:

Pilo:

...Ang sabi ng unyon, dapat daw hindi kami magkulang sa pagpapaliwanag sa asawa. Hindi naman ako nagkulang sa pagpapaliwanag ko ke Ising, eh. Siguro lang, nagkulang ako sa pag-unawa. Sumama na rin si Ising sa welga...

The union said, do not be remiss in explaining the struggle to your partner. I don’t think I was remiss in explaining things to Ising. But maybe I was remiss in not trying to understand her [side of the problem... [translation mine]

Dindo:

...Maybe I've never really tried to understand her. Understand her as a person. She's always been my girlfriend, then my wife, then the mother of my kid. She's right... She's always been my June Bride...

While this denouement of the play may seem utopic, it does express the aspirations of Philippine feminists for a greater dialogue between men and women.

Other plays which address the pernicious effects of patriarchal discourses on Philippine women include "Leona" (1990) and "Usapang Babae" (1990). *Leona*, written by Ruth E. Mabanglo and directed by Brenda Fajardo, consists of a monologue spoken by Leona Florentino, an Ilocano *ilustrado* poet who was the only female Philippine artist to achieve international renown in the 19th century, in which she relates her tragic life. At fourteen Leona was married to the scion of another wealthy Ilocano family by a father who believed that it was the only means of saving herself from her own intelligence and independence. The marriage proved to be the equivalent of a prison sentence, with her profligate husband as her jailer. Although he neither loved Leona nor appreciated her talent, he nevertheless prevented her from writing and reciting poetry for her friends for fear that she would be considered insane and so reflects badly on him. When Leona was discovered to be dying of consumption, he forcibly separated her from her children and then abandoned her to establish another household in Manila. One of Leona's last poems which features in the monologue served poignantly as her eulogy:

Leona:

...Ang bangkay ko'y tataghoy ding buong giting
at ang sinumang makarinig ay sasabihin;
ay, kahabag-habag, kapalaran niya'y walang
kasimpait;
'pagkat nabigo at ni walang umibig.

My corpse's lament will resound piercingly
and anyone who hears it will say:
How pitiful, her fate has no equal in pain
she was rejected and no one loved her.
[translation mine]

The monologue ends with Leona saying: “Ako’y ako...nagkataong babae sa buhay na ito...nagkataong makata...nagkataong ina...nagkataong nangulila.” [I am myself...because of circumstances a woman in this lifetime...a poet...a mother...alone.]

Other women’s plays of the eighties and nineties responded to the cries of other Leonas who feel alone and abandoned. “Usapang Babae” [Women Speaking] is a trilogy of monologues that present the lives of three women: Elaine, Trixia, and Itang. Elaine is a domestic worker in London who periodically relates her experiences as an alleged secretary to her mother back in the Philippines via audiocassettes. Trixia is a “porno-queen” who narrates to the audience her failure at university, her abandonment by her boyfriend, her previous job as a masseuse and her greatest secret—being raped by her father and her mother’s failure to defend her. Her story unfolds as shadowy, masked figures perform bullfight sequences with her. Itang is a battered wife whose predicament would be dismissed by the police as a “purely domestic matter” even if she reported it to them. Finally, she is helped by her female neighbors who instruct her to make noise whenever her husband beats her by banging pots and pans; on hearing the racket, they will also bang their pots. “Sa ganitong paraan ang pambubugbog ay magiging isyung publiko, hindi isyung pantahanan...Ang suliraning pantahanan ay magiging suliranin ng lahat,” asserts feminist critic and poet, Joi Barrios. [In this way, wife-beating becomes a public issue and not just an issued between husband and wife or just a private matter. A problem at home becomes a problem for all to address.] Moreover, Barrios says:

Ang pagpapalabas ng dula ay maihahambing sa pagkakalampag ng kaldero ng mga kababaihan sa bandang wakas. Sinabi ng dula ang hindi sinasabi, ginagawang isyu ang hindi madalas ginagawang isyu, pinagtutuunan nang pansin ang isang bagay na hindi inaakalang mahalaga ng marami. (47)

Showing this play can be compared to the banging of the pots and pans by the women at the end. It articulates the un-said, makes an issue of what is not usually considered an issue, addresses a matter that people do not this is significant. [translation mine]

Women-Centered Theater, 2000-2007

At present, the first few years of this 21st century (2000-2007), women-centered plays seem to have a more discernible presence. The spectrum of women-centered Philippine theater range from commercially produced urbane/cosmopolitan plays to feminist plays continuing in the tradition of the radical women's plays of the eighties and nineties engendered by PETA and the Women's Desk of Cultural Center of the Philippines.

There is dinner theater catering to a predominantly elite female audience who can afford the pricey tickets, drinks and dinner that are served as they watch Philippine productions of Broadway and off Broadway plays/musicals. Since these are produced also by/ for/about middle class (specifically Metropolitan Manila based-women), these productions address topics/issues/problems that concern them, such as, women's empowerment in the corporate world, women's "double" burden, sexual liberation, menopause, sexuality after menopause, and sisterhood/cross-generational bonding.

"Vagina Monologues" (translated as "Usapang Puki" by Gleecy Atienza and Joi Barrios), "Menopause" and "We're Still Hot" constitute the "right of center" in the continuum of Philippine gender politics. These off Broadway musicals were shown at the University of the Philippines and dinner theater venues like Music Museum and the Promenade at Greenhills, San Juan, Metro Manila.

On the far left side of the gender politics continuum are plays like: "Hibik at Himagsik nina Victoria Laktaw" (2002) written by National Artist and UP Professor Emeritus Bienvenido Lumbera; "Basilisa ng Malolos" (2007) by scholar and playwright Professor of Film and Theater, Nicanor G. Tiongson; and "Gabriela" (2006) by actor, poet, and scholar, Professor Joi Barrios.

There are other women-centered plays whose gender politics is more ambiguous, thus making their classification a more complex matter. I refer to Carlo Vergara's "Zsa Zsa Zaturannah Ze Muzikal" (2006) and Rody Vera's "Ang Unang Aswang" (2006).

I would like to focus now on the first three plays as articulations of radical/ Left theater practice in the Philippines focused on the multiple struggles of other-ed women.

History is the dominant thematic of these three plays but historical memory (i.e., from official history) is not enough for gender, like race and ethnicity discourses, were occluded in earlier reconstructions of our colonial Spanish and American past, even by our own Filipino scholars. Hence, we see in these three plays a more active intervention by the playwrights in the “construction”/employment of history (rather than a mere retelling/mimetic representation of history) of the relatively unknown narratives of Victoria Laktaw, Basilia of Malolos and Gabriela.

“Hibik at Himagsik nina Victoria Laktaw” (February 13, 2002 by Dulaang UP)

The writer of the historical play with music (“dulang may musika”)—“Ang Hibik at Himagsik nina Victoria Laktaw”—is National Artist and eminent nationalist, Bienvenido Lumbera.⁶

In his “Pasakalye”/Foreword (*Sa Sariling Bayan: Apat na Dulang May Musika* 374-376), Lumbera states that (and I am translating his words “from Pilipino”), Victoria Laktaw was just one of the nine signatories of a manifesto-like poem titled “Hibik Namin” (our cry) which appeared in *Heraldo Filipino* on February 17, 1899. The poem was a call (“isinatulang manipesto na nananawagan”) for all Filipinos to address the conditions of women who had been victims of the rape by the American soldiers. Rather than consider the names of the women signatories as factual, Lumbera suggests that they should be read as names meant to symbolize the ideals of the Philippine Revolution of 1896. It was a practice then for revolutionaries to hide their identities behind symbolic names after being initiated as members of the secret society, the Katipunan (e.g., *Maypag-asa* for Andres Bonifacio, the head of the Katipunan; and *Tahimik* for Apolinario Mabini, “The Brains of the Katipunan). Thus, Lumbera asserts, that these signatories of “Hibik Namin” should be seen as representing all the women who had been victimized by the conquering US army during the Filipino-American War.

The play “Hibik at Himagsik”, became for Lumbera, the playwright’s way of giving life to these signatories through a narrative which he creates. “Ang naging gawain ko bilang mandudula ay bigyan-buhay ang mga lagda sa pamamagitan ng naratibong aking kinatha” (375).

The play, therefore, is a kind of historiographic meta-theater that affords the writer the opportunity to foreground, for the current and the future generations, the elision of the violent, bloody nature of the American conquest which claimed the lives of almost two million Filipinos. The war which the Americans downplayed as an “insurrection” was characterized by torture, rape, burning of villages to wipe out the revolutionary forces that fought a guerilla war even after William Howard Taft declared that the *insurrectos* had been pacified in 1902 when General Miguel Malvar surrendered. This guerilla war continued years after the last general, Macario Sakay, had been hanged in 1907.

Lumbera’s intervention in historiography through his play, he says, is deliberate since the histories depicting this period have either glossed over (given a few pages of 2 ½-9 pages)/concealed/lie about (“tahasang pagtatakip sa realidad o kundi man lantaranang panlilinlang”) the atrocities that deracinated millions of Filipinos or have hidden these violent acts under such sanitized titles as “Relations with the United States” or “The United States Take Over the Philippines” in early elementary and high school textbooks (375).

The other reason for Lumbera’s intervention in historiography is his commitment to the women’s movement today which is fighting the silencing of women’s voices in relating their own participation in the revolutionary nationalist movement.

Ang “Hibik at Himagsik nina Victoria Lactaw” ay sinadya ko ring iambag sa mga tinig na sa hanay ng kasalukuyang kilusang kababaihan ay tumutuligsa sa pagpipi sa boses ng kababaihan sa pagsasalaysay ng kanilang revolutionaryong pakikibakang sambayanan. (375)

In order to recuperate or even construct a history that will situate the women’s struggle within the larger nationalist revolutionary movement, Lumbera connects the “Hibik Namin” of these women poets to other “tulang hibik” by male revolutionary poets prior to the outbreak of the 1896 revolution against Spain---e.g., Marcelo H. del Pilar’s “Sagot ng Espana sa Hibik ng Filipinas”, and Andres Bonifacio’s “Katapusang Hibik ng Filipinas”.

The play itself, a musical set in 1899 to 1902, begins with the young men and women of Maestra Rustica’s (Maestra Ticang’s) school, just discovering love against the context of the euphoria over the establishment of the Philippine Republic in 1898 (“maaliwalas na bukas ng katatayong Republika”). It continues with Act II (1901) which enacts the hardships of, and the cruelties

experienced by a young generation forced to mature as they fought a war against the new American interlopers. In Act III (1902), the women who wrote the “Hibik Namin” remember their comrades/co-signatories of “Hibik” who have been felled (killed or violated) by the Americans, as well as those who have been “felled” (conquered or violated) by their patriarchal husbands, fathers and suitors. The play ends with a rekindling of their revolutionary fervor and the former revolutionaries like Victoria Laktaw returning to the mountains to join the others in fighting the war against the Americans.

In the tradition of the “seditious” zarzuela of the early American colonial period, the music of Lucien Letaba is alternately romantic and militant—“akmang akma sa diwang romantiko at makabayan ng panahon sumaksi sa Digmaang Filipino Amerikano” (Lumbera 376).

Here is a snippet from the play, a song by the women of ‘99/the women of Maestra Ticang’s school who poked fun at their education which was still feudal in spite of their already having been “freed” /their countrymen having been enlightened about the ills of Spanish colonialism, particularly the friarlocracy through Jose Rizal’s two satiric novels—*Noli Me Tangere* (Touch me Not) and *El Filibusterismo* (The Filibuster):

Babae ng Nubenta y Nuwebe
Women of ‘99 (1899)

Chayong, Conching, Andang, Perting, Ayang and Gare:

Kami ang babae	We are the women
Ng Nubenta y nuwebe	of ‘99
Pinalaya kami	We were freed
Ng <i>Noli</i> at <i>Fili</i>	By <i>Noli</i> and <i>Fili</i>
Pero gaya ng dati	But just like before
Kulong pa rin kami.	We are still imprisoned

Dito sa eskwela	Here in the school
Ni Maestra Rustika	of Teacher Rustica
<i>Urbana at Feliza</i>	<i>Urbana at Feliza</i>
Ang aming bibliya	Is our bible
Sinasambang santa	Being sanctified is
Babaeng tanga	the stupid woman.

(Lumbera 381; translation and emphasis mine)

The song is reprised after the women spoof their prayers which are used to teach “mga batang hangal” to render service to God and subservience to the fraile; the honing of their reading and writing skills again used to teach service to God and subservience to the fraile; and the mastering of counting or arithmetic to enable the the “madlang Indio” or the native population to pay the correct taxes.

The reprised version shows the women breaking their feudal bonds:

Kami ang babae	We are the women
Ng Nubenta y nuwebe	of '99
Pinalaya kami	We were freed
Ng <i>Noli</i> at <i>Fili</i>	By <i>Noli</i> and <i>Fili</i>
Papayag pa ba kami	Will we allow ourselves
Na maisantabi	To be pushed aside
Dito sa eskwela	Here in the school
Ni Maestra Rustika	of Teacher Rustica
<i>Urbana at Feliza</i>	<i>Urbana at Feliza</i>
Ang aming bibliya	Is our bible
Tama na ang pagtanga	Enough of this stupidity
Gusto naming umiba	We want to change.
(Lumbera 382; translation and emphasis mine)	

In Act III, these women remember their manifesto-like poem—“Hibik Namin”—the historical document that was the kernel of what would become this historiographic meta-theater of Lumbera—“Hibik at Himagsik ni Victoria Laktaw”. In the play, Chayong, Conching, Gare and Ayang sing this subversive hibik as they conceal their revolutionary activity through their act of embroidery.

Lahat:
 Mga kababayan tunay na kapatid
 tunghayan ang aming tapat na hibik
 tapunan ng awa't mahabag sa tinig
 ng mga babaeng dito'y nagsititik

Gare (Feliza Kahatol):
**Pagkatanto naming ng kuhilang-asal
 ng Amerikanong labis ng kasam'an**
 sa sakit ng loob ang kulang na lamang
 ay, maubos kaming sa apoy lumuwal.

Ayang (Patricia Himagsik):

**Di pa sukat yaong madlang kahayupan
Ginawa nila sa pakikilaban,
Ano't ang babaeng abutan sa bahay
Na mapasok nila'y nilalapastangan.**

Conching (Felipa Kapuloan):

Mangahabag kayo sa aming pagdaing
at ipaghiganti ang puring nailing
ng mga babae't inyong gunitaing
kayo'y sa babae mula at nanggaling.

Chayong (Victoria Laktaw):

**Halina tayo'y manandatang lahat
Itanggol ang dangal nitong Filipinas
Sa alinmang nasyon ay huwag ipayag
Na mapagharian tayong mga anak.**

(Lumbera 410-411, "Ikatlong Yugto", emphasis mine)

There are other lines from the historical document, "Hibik Namin", found in other sources which trace the connection of these women's "Hibik" not to the male Hibik form but to the revolutionary discourses inscribed with the trope of mother Philippines/Inang Bayan, metonymically invoking feelings of family loyalty, filial love, honor, reciprocity, as well as images of self abnegation and sacrifice, especially of the mother.⁷

Sukat na ang kayo'y **masisintang anak
ng inang nagbigay ng unang liwanag
ay dapat matutonggumanti ng linga
sa babae't dahil sa inang naghirap**

You who are the loving children
of the mother who gave you light (life)
must learn to reciprocate with protective love
for women because of the mother who suffered.

**Dahil din sa ating inang minamahal
kaya tayo'y dapat umibig sa bayan,
sapagka't ang kanyang mahalang aral
bayan ang pahigtin sa lahat ng bagay.**

It is also because of our beloved mother
that we should love our bayan
she has taught us her important lesson
to regard the bayan above everything else.

Kung tayo ay anak na nagsisigiliw
ay aral ng ina'y pilit na susundin
aral na ang bayan ay pagkaibigin
at dahil sa kanyang pag-ibig sa atin.

If we are children who truly love her
our mother's lesson we should staunchly obey
that holding our bayan dear
and because of her love for us.

Kaya mga giliw na aming kapatid
 pag-ibig sa baya'y itanim sa dibdib
 alang alang doon sa ating pag-ibig
 Sa aral n gating inang matangkilik
**Halina tayo'y manangatang lahat
 itanggol ang dangal nitong Filipinas
 Sa alinmang nasyon, at hwag ipayag
 na mapagharian tayong mga anak.**

And so our beloved siblings
 plant in your heart the love for bayan
 in consideration of our love
 for the lesson of our caring mother.
 Come let us all rise in arms
 defend the honor of Filipinas
 from any nation and don't allow
 That we children be subjugated.

**Ang ating pagsasarili'y ating ipaglaban
 hanggang may isa pang sa ati'y
 may buhay,
 At dito'y wala na silang pagharian,**

Let us fight for independence
 so long as there is someone among
 us who lives
 and here may there be no one left
 for them to lord over
 save for our blood and lifeless
 bodies.

**Kung hindi ang ating mga
 dugo't bangkay.**

("Dios Ina..." qtd. from Lumbera 1998, 85; translation by Pambid-Domingo, 97-99)

In these lines, the injunction to revolt against the evil Americans ("Amerikanong labis ng kasamaan"), to avenge the violence done to women (a synecdoche of the "rape" of Filipinas/the inang bayan) is couched in terms of filial piety and *utang na loob* (a debt of honor that needs to be repaid). The loving children (the Filipinos) of the mother who gave us life, who taught us to love the country/bayan above everything else, must protect the country's honor until there is nothing left to be lorded over by these foreigners, except our blood and corpses.

The 1902 scene (Ikatlong Yugto, 410-424) that follows the recollection by these four women of the Hibik, however, also illustrates the long struggle yet to be waged by women revolutionaries against patriarchal structures.

Of the nine women who originally signed the "Hibik", only four are left to meet at Conching's house. Salvadora Dimagiba had been killed by a Yankees bullet. Deodata Liwanag (Asun), the Katipunera, was still in the mountain camp of rebel General Sakay. The whereabouts of Dolores Katindig (Sabel) was unknown but her sister had fallen into a gorge ("kinain ng bangin"). Their father and brother had been killed and both women had been raped by American soldiers before arriving at the camp of General Malvar.

In this scene, we learn that Felipa Kapuloan (Conching), formerly a revolutionary fighting with Malvar had become a "dakilang maybahay"

[glorified housewife] of Tino (“kinulong ako ng asawa”). Victoria Laktaw (Chayong), another former revolutionary, had been shot during an attack at Malvar’s camp, incarcerated, then raped by the Americans. Upon being freed by the enemy, she was abandoned by her sweetheart, Bindoy, another former revolutionary, who rushed away to Manila to continue his studies as a doctor. Moreover, she was forced to receive English language lessons by General Bell to enable his soldiers to keep an eye on her, the instigator of “Hibik Namin”. Victoria Mausig (Andang) was married off by her family to Filemon, an old Federalista, to keep her from associating with these dangerous women (“babaeng peligrosa”, referring to the hibik writers, who were under the surveillance of the Yankees).

At this point in the play, what we have are representations (portraits) of former female revolutionaries being made to yield to patriarchal politics, especially sexual politics (through tropes of rape and marriage, violence and imprisonment) wielded both by male Americans and Filipinos.

The men, including the Filipino revolutionaries, are not wanting in patriotic fervor and do voice their resentment against the orientalist attitudes of the Americans who think that with “the war over (the capture of Malvar) your people can learn civilized ways”. Lieutenant Norris adds, “Lower class gentes, they are wild and dangerous. Force is necessary to teach them civilized ways”, he adds. To this Tino retorts: “Putang ina ‘ka mo siya! Senor Norris, si Bell pumapatay, nanununog. Siya ‘gay sibilisado? Mga bangkay, abo ng tahanan... Hindi kami hayop na paaamuin sa hampas at kulata”. To which Chayong adds since the newly-arrived American cannot understand Tino’s angry tirade: “Brother very angry because American soldiers kill, burn people, houses, steal chicken, girls no more honor”. In stereotypical Orientalist fashion, Norris blindly parrots: “Those are lies spread by filibusteros and bandidos. Americans are Christians. They are civilized people not animals” (417).

Orientalism⁸ is a term used by Edward Said to label a discursive formation emanating from the West about the “Oriental” (the Arab, the Chinese, the Indian, etc.) as inherently childlike, barbaric, animal-like, passive, emotional, scrupulous, deceitful, violent, etc. and the “Occidental” (the Americans, the British, the European) as his opposite. Orientalism and its doctrines (“white man’s burden”, “Europe’s civilizing mission”, “Benevolent Assimilation”) also provided the legitimization of colonial and imperialist projects in the Philippines. But Orientalism (most pronounced in cultural practices like

literature, the arts, popular media), like colonialist and imperialist discourses are not just about race. Orientalism is as much about gender power relations as they are about inequitable economic, political and social relations. The conventional trope of conquered/virgin territory is female with the “feminine” attributes of virginity, naivete, passivity, as well as fertility, fecundity, eroticism; whereas the conqueror’s image is male with masculine attributes of aggression, violence, authority, as well as contradictory qualities like reason and benevolence.

Thus, I reiterate that it is not sufficient for the revolutionaries of the past and present, to struggle/to have struggled/to struggle against the foreign invaders, and the local elites, in waging a war for nationalist/national liberation. Gender liberation must be part of the general struggle for human emancipation and this is what the play underscores as part of its denouement.

The play ends on a high note—messengers from General Sakay rekindle the protagonists’ revolutionary fervor and old comrades are reunited, determined to continue the fight against the Americans.

Husband Tino is reunited with Conching, who had left him, but only after she insists that she be treated as a “babaeng may angking mithiin...” and one who should have control over her body (this issue of “choice” or control over her own body and sexuality, a contemporary issue, might be construed as part of the playwright’s intervention in history):

Conching:

**Ako ay babaeng may angking mithiin
Landas ko ay aking sariling landasin
Ang pagiging inang pinataw sa akin,
Hindi ko pa handang angking tungkulin
Ngunit lalaki kang ang bawa’t nasain
Ay naigigiit, nairaraos din.**

...

Basta, Tino, alalahaning pantay ang lupaing kinatatayuan natin.”

(421; emphasis mine)

But husband and wife agree that the country’s problems should be addressed first, as they answer the call for a “digmaang bayan”, although their gender politics still remains to be resolved:

Conching/Tino:

Sa panahong ito may hapis ang bayan.

Mga sugat nati'y sugat na mababaw.

Ang tagisan natin ay ipagpaliban.

Payapain muna ang pagsusumbatan.

Ang laya ng bayan ay niyuyurakan,

Ang harapin muna'y dayong pampalasan,

Tinatawag tayo ng digmaan bayan,

Umasang ang bukas na maliliwayway,

May laying lulunas sa sugatang buhay.(421)

Tino, in fact, admits to having been insensitive, and aggressive towards his wife, violating her against her will just like the enemy who had raped many of our women. He further acknowledges that he was wrong to think that the exercise of his male rights was the only law that ruled their relationship. “Para ng mga kaaway na gumahasa sa maraming kababaihan natin. Akala ko noon, ang karapatan ko bilang lalaki ang tanging batas sa ating pagsasama. Mali iyon. Tanggap ko na” (421).

Chayong, on the other hand, does not accept the renewal of love and the proposal of marriage of Bindoy saying that three years of war had changed them.

But the final aria ends with a note of hope in a future—“paglaya’y sisilay”—the breaking of a free dawn. Victoria Laktaw with Bindoy leave for the mountains with the messengers of General Sakay (old friend and comrade Sabel and her brother, Julian.) amidst cries of “Mabuhay si Victoria Laktaw” (422-424).

From the play’s initial representation of the indoctrination of the women of nubenta’y nuwebe (’99)—schooled by Maestra Ticay in *Urbana and Feliza* (the Spanish book of right conduct and good morals purveyed by the priests, also an instrument of hispanization or the Spanish “civilizing mission” amongst the natives in the skills of reading, writing and counting to enable these women to serve God and the fraile and to become good tax-paying natives—to the narratives of pain/suffering/violation/imprisonment; then of nationalist and feminist awakening and initial liberation of the ninewomen of “Hibik”, especially Victoria Laktaw, is the long trajectory of women’s national and feminist struggle against colonialists, as well as their own chauvinist men. The plays stages this narrative struggle against colonialism/imperialism and the patriarchy. Thus, the intervention in historiography that “Hibik at Himagsik

nina Victoria Laktaw” represents is a laudable cultural contribution not only to the nationalist/national liberation struggle, but also to the nationalist women’s struggle.

“Basilia ng Malolos” (March 2, 2007 by Dulaang UP)

Nicanor G. Tiongson, the nationalist scholar and playwright of “Basilia ng Malolos” and author of *Women of Malolos* (Ateneo de Manila University Press) wrote very extensive “Playwright’s Notes” for the play program. He explained that the play had to do justice to historical events (1888 or the last years of the Spanish rule to the early decades of the American colonial period) in order to give us the context against which the contemporary audience could understand and appreciate the heroic contributions of these women of Malolos. Therefore, in a way, the play seems to have been historically faithful to the documents which were the sources of his book. Tiongson also said that since it was a play, it had to center on characters not events. Therefore, he had to recreate the dynamism of Basilia Tantoco, one of the leaders of the women of Malolos during the turn of the century, and one of the pioneers of the women’s movement in the Philippines.

There is no dearth of studies on the life, works and milieu of Philippine national hero, Jose Rizal. What the play does is to make us synthesize these previous information from different sources and to foreground the impact of the important works and ideas of Rizal (his two novels and his other writings, in particular, his letter to the women of Malolos-“Sa mga Kababayang Dalaga sa Malolos, Bulakan”-Basilia playbill) and the other ilustrado nationalists on people in a particular place. In a way, this gives flesh and bones to our understanding of the Philippine revolution vis-à-vis the lives of actual people who lived through it.

Basilia was a Chinese mestiza from a land-owning family (“Playwright’s Notes”) who together with Alberta Uitangcoy and Mercedes Tiongson (blood relatives of Basilia) did what was unthinkable at the time—they submitted a letter to a Spanish government official named Wyler petitioning the Spanish colonial government to allow the women to establish their own classes where they could learn the Castillian language and the other subjects (like philosophy, history, mathematics) which even their Filipino male counterparts had little access to, unless they went off to Spain to study. This was an unheard of move,

especially since women were only supposed to be “schooled in the domestic arts”. It was enough to have the women learn the “basics” —cooking, sewing, playing an instrument, knowing how to care for the home, children and husband.

In the play, the friars at the convento try their best to block the women’s access to Wylér. They are convinced that this letter is the work of the devil and that these women are devil worshippers, especially since they also refused to go to the convento to serve the friars. Serving the friars then meant kissing their hands; but it also meant allowing these lechers to fondle them and, in worst cases, rape them (as was the sad fate of Maria Clara in Rizal’s novel).

Basilia, because of an earlier bad experience with the same lecherous friar, had learned early in life not to trust the priest. She had luckily escaped from such an attempt at sexual harassment.

Yet the Spanish friars are not the only villains of the play. A women’s centered perspective, would also critique representations of the macho men among the Filipinos. The first suitor of Basilia (a young ambitious Filipino provincial bureaucrat) woos Basilia but wants her to stop her involvement in what the women of Malolos were doing. These included studying the works of Rizal and the other propagandists like *Dasalan at Tocsohan*. He becomes even angrier and more obnoxious as a suitor when he learns that these same women had written the petition letter to Wylér.

The second suitor, who was even a Katipunero, seems initially like Basilia’s “destiny.” Yet, his amorous words and actions towards Basilia at every meeting across what seemed like decades—through the Katipunan Revolution, through the establishment of the Malolos Republic, then the American period—is belied by his constantly procrastinating on his promise of marriage to Basilia symbolized by an engagement ring.

The wedding scene, when it does occur, is a theatrical spectacle with the entire assembly consisting of the most important people of the Malolos Government like Emilio Aguinaldo, the prominent town members and former Katipuneros of Katipunan del Norte, the women of Malolos and the bride’s family in attendance. This spectacle then becomes a debacle when the wife of Basilia’s future groom or betrothed appears. All this time, the man had been married to this woman who bore his children even. The scene ends in the public humiliation, never mind of the suitor, but of Basilia who deserves more from

life because of all her sacrifices on behalf of her family, her fellow women, her community of Malolos, the Katipunan (of which she was an inducted member) and the Bayan. It is to her credit though that instead of turning against the other unfortunate, similarly duped woman/wife, she accepts the treachery of her fiancé and moves on.

At this point, the conventional romantic plot of love and marriage, which seemed to have momentarily dominated, returns to the main narrative constituted by the subversive acts of these women of Malolos.

Moving on means, for Basilia, accepting the life of singlehood and devoting her energies to the creation and leadership of the *Asociacion Feminista Filipina* (1906), the *Club Mujeres* and the first *Centro de Puericultura* of Malolos (1917) and other women's groups and the establishment and management of the *Escuela Catolica de Malolos* (1917) ("Playwright's Notes").

The play is informative about the early attempts of our early feminists to fight for women's rights in the context of our nationalist as well as women's struggle.

What is praiseworthy about "Basilia ng Malolos" with its intertext, Tiongson's book—*The Women of Malolos* is that it constructed a narrative of women whose contribution to the women's movement and the revolutionary movement was hitherto confined to Rizal's letter to them. The two texts thus made visible what was hitherto occluded. "Basilia ng Malolos", the play is a paean to the women of Malolos made famous through national hero Jose Rizal's "Letter to the Women of Malolos".

One critique, though, that may be made about the play involves the twin rhetorical strategies of compensation and recuperation. "Basilia ng Malolos" is compensatory (praising women achievers, centering women's stories) history in that it centers on the narratives of the women behind Rizal's famous letter. Yet in making the wedding such a theatrical spectacle, the play also functions to recuperate the protagonist, Basilia. The conventional patriarchal plot of romance and marriage as women's destiny, although truncated, still has the subliminal message that spinsterhood (albeit full of meaningful public acts such as the establishment of women's organizations and educational institutions for women), might be the lot of women who dedicate themselves to noble projects.

“Gabriela” (January 27, 2006 by Dulaang UP)

“Gabriela”, written by a woman, displays an acutely sensitive reading of a female subject—Gabriela, a historical figure, who entered the archives after taking over the revolution against Spain with the death of her husband, Diego Silang. The little that is known of her is what makes this heroine the apropos subject for feminist re-imaginings.

According to the playwright/feminist scholar/actor Joi Barrios herself, the play “Gabriela” is not a traditional play with three acts or one narrative that reaches a closure at the end of the play (“Mga Tala ng Mandudula”).

“Gabriela” is also not a traditional historical play about the revolution in the Ilocos region. It is an *oratoryo*, with a chorus, music and action constituted by vignettes (“pira-pirasong kwento”), and offering different representations that speculate on who Gabriela was.

One representation/”portrait” is that of a woman forced by circumstance to play an active role in the anti-colonial struggle with her husband’s death; the other portrait is that of a Gabriela, who is in every respect Diego’s partner and co-decision maker; and the third is that of Gabriela who was the true brains of the Iloko revolution.

“Walang iisang Gabriela sa kasalukyan. Sa halip, mayroon lamang tayong mga babaeng nagnanais maging isang Gabrielang inialay ang buhay para sa bayan” (“Mga Tala...”). [There is not just one Gabriela today. Instead, there are women who desire to become Gabriela AND TO offer their lives to the country.]

The play then is an attempt to represent through songs the stories of women, then and now, who want to serve the country, to fight for justice and true self determination. “Ang dula’y pagtatangkang ilahad sa pamamagitan ng mga awitin ang kuwento ng mga kababaihang noon at ngayon ay naghahangad maglingkod sa bayan para sa katarungan at tunay na kasarinlan” (“Mga Tala...”).

Moreover, “Gabriela”, the play has two main protagonists and two plotlines that are intertextually connected—the narratives of the Gabriela of the past and the Gabby of today.

The “crucifixion” scene where Gabby’s body is borne by her comrades after she falls victim to the violence of a militaristic State is the play’s virulent commentary on this current government’s repressive and violent acts against militant activists and against its detractors.

...nais kong bigyang pansin ang lumalalang “human rights violations” na nagaganap sa ilalim ng pamahalaang Arroyo. Mahigit 150 nang katao, karamihan ay mula sa Bayan Muna, Anakpawis, at Gabriela Party Lists, mga lider manggagawa tulad ni Ka Diosdado Fortuno (tagapangulo ng Nestle Workers’ Union), at maging ng mga peryodista ng mga di-kilalang elemento at wala man lang imbestigasyong nagaganap hinggil dito. Lubha nang mapanganib ang maging aktibista sa ating bayan. (“Mga Tala...”)

The inclusion of scenes of violence in the play perpetuated by the state and its instrumentalities are Barrios’ mode of exposing human rights violations committed against people like Ka Diosdado Fortun, head of the Nestle Workers’ union and the more than 150 victims of state violence under the Arroyo government mostly coming from Bayan Muna, Anakpawis, Gabriela.

The anti-fascist rhetoric of the *oratoryo* is intertexted with its pro-feminist stance since the national democratic perspective that frames the oratoryo now views the women’s struggle against conservative patriarchal discourses and practices as similarly urgent.

And this women’s struggle is waged not only in the public domain (factories, rallies, revolutions, rebellions), but also in the “private” circles of women’s lives (their relationships with men—husbands, sons, suitors, lovers). The personal is also political, has social/public causes and social/public repercussions.

The Gabby of today is a *kerida* (the “mistress” of Diego). *Kerida* is a word that poses problems for feminists just like *puta*, *haliparot*, *kangkarot* and *masamang babae*. Barrios’ conscious choice of Gabby, the mistress, as a central character then can be seen as an attempt at re-wording and re-worlding. She says that activists are not perfect, and fellow activists, fellow women activists, especially, must accept their comrades’ flaws/weaknesses (*kahinaan*) and see beyond these, to focus on liberation (“patuloy na kumilos para sa bayan”).

Barrios purposely includes a problematic scene—the meeting between Gabby and D.G.’s wife—where the writer challenges us to see beyond the

contest of two women over one man to the very heart of the problem which for the playwright is the society that does not recognize divorce.

...sa pamamagitan ng eksena X (ang eksenang sa pagitan ni Gabby at ng asawa ni D.G; ang eksenang hindi malaman kung tatanggalin o hindi), nais kong itapon ang pansin hindi sa tunggalian ng dalawang babae para sa iisang lalaki kundi sa lipunang hindi pinapahintulutan ang diborsiyo, at dahil dito'y lumilikha ng mga sitwasyong maaari sanang naiwasan. ("Mga Tala...")

Who is Gabriela/Gabby? What do these multiple representations of Gabriela, past and present, signify? Barrios intends Gabriela to be the signifier for activist women who want to serve the bayan, to fight for justice and true self determination (*kasarinlan*), who are willing to offer their lives for the bayan.

~ ~ ~

There are two other plays that I would like to briefly discuss which also have women characters at the heart of the narratives but which can be analyzed as being more about the ambiguous, complicated/complex projects/agenda of differently located groups/individuals laying claim to being able to "represent" the Filipino women. I refer to the plays "Carlo Vergara's "Zsa Zsa Zaturannah ze musikal" and Rody Vera's "Unang Aswang".

Carlo Vergara's "Zsa Zsa Zaturannah ze muzikal"⁹ (February 10, 2006 by CCP's Tanghalang Pilipino)

"Zsa Zsa Zaturannah: Ze Muzikal" is based on Carlo Vergara's grafiction or graphic novel (comic book collected in one edition), *Ang Kagila-gilalas na Pakikipagsapalaran ni Zsa Zsa Zaturannah* (2003). Accompanying the award for *Ang Kagila-gilalas* by the Manila Critics Circle is a description of the work as "deconstructing Darna...featuring superhero action that skewers and celebrates Pinoy pop culture as well as unabashedly bears its gay origins and themes to uncharted territory."

"Zsa Zsa" is about a *bakla* (following J Neil Garcia's assertion that the *bakla* and the gay are not interchangeable terms),¹⁰ named Ada, who runs a beauty parlor (*parlorista*) with the help of his *bakla* friend, Didi. Then one uneventful

day, like the rest of their days in their quiet town, Ada accidentally swallows a magic stone that changes him into a female superhero, Zsa Zsa. As a female superhero (a cross between the American Wonder Woman and her Filipino counterpart, called Darna), Zsa Zsa defends earth against a giant frog, hordes of zombies, and finally, the invading female warriors/the Amazonistas from planet XXX whose mission is to rid the earth/the universe of men. Unable to win Zsa Zsa over to their vision of an amazon utopia where women dominate and males are kept only for reproduction, the Amazonistas engage in an all out battle against Zsa Zsa and the people she defends. A wounded Zsa Zsa is then aided by his “Prince Charming”, the heterosexual Dodong. Zsa Zsa regurgitates the stone and forces this into the mouth of Queen Femina, the leader of the Amazonistas, who is transformed into a hated male form. Her own Amazonistas then turn against “him” and this results in defeat for the invaders, and their retreat. The end of the play shows a subdued Ada whose departure for Manila is postponed by Dodong’s declaration of love for Ada as Ada. In the graphic novel, *Ang Kagila-gilalas*, the last pin up page shows Ada and Dodong in bed.

Reviewers have justifiably praised the play’s “campy” wit, its humorous “baklese” (bakla language) lines; its catchy tunes; its “confident staging of material that is at once current and accessible, but also meaningful and emotionally resonant...” (Rina David-Jimenez, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*); “the ingenious ways it transcends the limitations of the stage... The musical is extremely funny and entertaining” (Rome Jorge, *Manila Times*).

Whatever the play has contributed to gay movement and gay theater in the Philippines, is not the purview of this study. However, since almost all the main characters (protagonists as well as antagonists) are females (with the exception of Ada, Didi and Dodong), I feel the obligation to cite some problems arising from the play’s representations of women.

The English-speaking (“mga Inglisera”) alien invaders are women whose separatist rhetoric bear the imprint of radical feminism, a variety of American feminism of the late sixties. What is illustrated though in Queen Femina’s discourse is the more popular, albeit, reductionist version of the radical feminist call, “the personal is political”. In the sixties, this feminist slogan meant that “marriage, domestic labor, childrearing, heterosexuality, etc. were

not private activities but patriarchal institutions and additional targets of political activism” (Childers and Henzi 252). For Queen Femina and the “Amazonistas” (a reference is here made to the Amazon utopias that some western feminists thought illustrated the powerful all-female societies of a yet unknown matriarchal past which could serve as counterpoints to the past and present patriarchal societies), being radical means getting rid of the male forms, the enemies, and (having emerged victorious against the men in their own planet XXX) seeking other worlds to liberate/conquer.

Queen Femina:

Many many years ago, **we waged a war against our male forms.**

It was the most violent conflagration ever felt on Planet X...X...X.

The war wasn't without just cause.

There was a moment in our history

when male forms despised

the privileges of the women in our society...

Amazonistas: Damn those male forms!

QF:

Fueled by **greed and envy**

they resorted to **brutal violence**

And that violence led to the

near extinction of the female race...

Dina B: Uh huh!

QF:

Only a handful of women were spared and kept alive...

Nora A: How sad!

QF:

As male forms needed to breed.

These women suffered in silence,

bereft of the right to speak...

Vilma S.: No word!

QF:
 And it stayed that way
 for nearly a hundred years...
 My mother and my mother's mother
 were among those kept alive...

Sharon C: Oh yes!

QF:
 Poor unfortunate souls they were
 and SO WAS I.
 Seventeen years I lived
 not hearing my own voice.
 A difficult time it was.
 We simply had no choice.
 One day I decided to end
 their cruel joke.
Thus on my eighteenth nameday, I SPOKE!

Amazonistas:
 On and on and on she spoke,
 fueling the fire of revolution.
 On and on and on she spoke
 fanning the flames of rebellion.

QF:
With cunning, stealth, grace and beauty,
we waged a war against the enemy.
 And amidst the shattered enemies' corpses,
 at last we found victory.
We vowed never to be
conquered again,
 until now that remains to be true.
 And I became their leader
 Queen Femina Suarestellar Baroux...
 ("The Amazonistas from Planet XXX,
 Song 8 of Zsa Zsa CD; emphasis mine)

Queen Femina's narrative initially seems like an inspirational story of success for the women's movement. However, and this is my first critique of the play, the Amazonistas have imbibed "the art of violence", the war-like, cruel, aggressive ethos of their enemies, the male-forms.

Queen Femina (to Zsa Zsa):
...It's way past my bedtime
I need my beauty rest
so I'll end this fracas once and for all.

You may see me as you equal
that is your mistake.
For I have **no emotion**
I will never break
Your weakness is your love
which I don't comprehend
My anger is more practical
Prepare to meet your end.

Prepare to meet your doom
my poor and hopeless warrior.
Kiss your dear Prince Charming goodbye !!!
Prepare to meet your doom
my foolish little sister
there can only be **onevictor**—
that is I !!!

As I have said
It was the male forms
Who taught us the art of violence
If we have to act this way
to further our goals
then so be it.

("Prepare to Meet Your Doom", Song 19; emphasis mine)

In the furtherance of their goals (unfortunately, her name being Femina, might led some members of the audience to think that her goals and rhetoric are "feminist"), the Amazonistas unscrupulously use the power strategies of their male enemies that have made patriarchies dominant to this day. There

is no liberation then, in the ideal feminist sense, from all forms of structural inequities and their attendant patriarchal cultures of conquest/domination/control/ aggression/violence.

My second critique has to do with the names of the Amazonistas—Nora A, Dina B and Sharon C. Their names refer to the “reel” names of local film popular/super/mega stars—Nora Aunor, Sharon Cuneta, and Dinah Bonnavie. Queen Femina’s complete name is Queen Femina Suarestellar Baroux (a Baklese pun of sex star Stella Suarez’ name).

Why are these powerful/ influential, iconic heroines of Pinoy pop culture being “skewered” or represented as super villains/ as imperialists?

What’s in a name? Michel Foucault stated that the author’s name gives the discourse (e.g., novel, painting, musical piece, etc) that bears it, a certain status; a kind of determination that affects its mode of production, distribution and circulation (“What is an Author?” 1622-1636). The movie star’s name is like the author’s name in that it has more than an indicative function (referring to a proper name, and thus to a person who bears that name). The movie star’s name has a descriptive function, referring to everything that is known about a public figure and giving that movie star’s name a kind of status. For example, a movie which bears the name of megastar Sharon Cuneta or superstar Nora Aunor or star-for-all-seasons Vilma Santos will be a box office hit because of the hordes of fans who will watch their movies; compared to a movie that bears the name in its credits of some relatively unknown starlet. By affixing the names of local movie “superstars” to the alien Amazonistas and by parodying the formers’ idiolect (manner of speech) laced with “provincial” accents that “mar” their English pronunciation; their popular mannerisms in their “real” and/or reel lives, these local movie stars become the objects of satire.

Again the question, why are these powerful/influential, iconic heroines of Pinoy pop culture being “skewered” or represented as super villains/ as imperialists? One answer might come from a consideration of the artistic medium. The play is part of “legitimate” theater which, in spite of its being “camp”, was patronized by an elitist/intelligent audience/ the culturati who viewed this play at the Cultural Center of the Philippines or at the RCBC Tower in Makati, the financial district of Metro Manila. In contrast, the superstars are from the movies, a “popular”/ “mass” form with adherents/fans from the “general populace.” Hence, from an elitist/burgis point of view, the movie stars are “fair game” for negative stereotypes laced with class prejudice against the “hoi polloi.”

Yet the play's attitude towards women "superstars" (the ambiguity of the term stemming from its being employed to refer to both movie stars and to superheroes) and other performers/entertainers is ambiguous. When Zsa Zsa bemoans the hardships of a superhero, she says that the "bellas" (pretty entertainers/GROs) at the grill restaurants have it better:

...Napakahirap pala ang maging isang superhero
Bugbog-sarado na, walang pang pera ang aking bulsa...
...makakain ko ba ang kanilang mga palakpak
aanhin ko ba ang kanilang paghanga

**Mas swerte pa ang mga bellas sa ihaw ihaw
Silay magiging sikat na artista na umaani ang tagumpay**

Samantalang ako, tignan niyo nasa gitna ng labanan
(“Ang Pagmumunimuni ni Zsa Zsa”, Song 18; emphasis mine)

This contradiction in terms of attitudes towards popular entertainers, then is illustrative of the tensions that constitute the play. This Zsa Zsa play, like any text,¹¹ is open to multiple readings/interpretations because of the conflictual discourses that constitute it.

The same tension can be read/interpreted in the varied and conflictual representations of Ada/Zsa Zsa. First, there is Ada/Zsa Zsa, not one but two characters, representing just one protagonist for the plot action.

Following J. Neil Garcia's idea in "Performativity, the *Bakla* and the Orientalizing Gaze" that the *bakla* is a male whose *loob* is female, (a "feminine" soul/psyche/personality trapped in a man's body),¹² one can understand Ada's elation when he realizes that the mysterious stone he swallowed has transformed him into a beautiful, buxomy, big (red)-haired, small-waisted, sexy woman—Zsa Zsa. His feminine exterior/*labas* now matches his feminine *loob*.

Ada as Zsa Zsa:
Tingnan mo! Hoy bakla!
Hoy, Didi, tingnan mo at babae na ako!
**May biglang dalawang lumobo
dito sa dibdib ko!**
Kurutin mo 'ko, 'to ba'y totoo
Wala na pong kokontra
Ako'y isang dalaga
Tingnan mo...babae na ako.

Tignan mo... hoy atang
 Hoy, Didi, tignan mo
 At babae na ako.
Wala na akong putotoy
Na lalawit-lawit
Wala na 'kong bigote
na kailangan pa ng ahit.
 Wala ng ibedensiyang
 Ako'y isang tsismosa.
 Tignan mo babae na ako.

Babae na ako...
 babae na ako
Isang ganap na bebot na!
 Babae na ako.

Babae na ako...
 babae na ako
Mula kilay hanggang kuko
babae na ako...

Naiingit ang bakla
 dahil bakla pa rin siya.
Tignan mo aking daliri
Hindi na mapurol
Pagmasdan aking leeg
wala nang adam's apol
 wala ng ibidensiya
 ako'y isang tsismoso!

Ang taray na ng lola
Sa akin na'ng korona
 Tignan mo...babae na ako.
 ("Babae na Ako!!" Zsa Zsa to Didi, Song 5;emphasis mine)

Acquiring the physical attributes of a woman is what Ada is ecstatic about, understandably, because physicality is what is fetishized by a heterosexist patriarchal society (e.g., the cosmetic and perfume industries aimed at a female market; or sports gear and weapons sales for males—instances of commodity fetishization of beauty and machismo, respectively).

The mysterious stone that turns the male Ada into the female Zsa Zsa is “magic” in that it grants the person who swallows it the power to transform his “labas” according to his “loob”. Ada is in his loob is a gentle, shy, beautiful female and this inner/internal representation/signified of a female self takes on an outer/external signifier. Why? To open up a third space for genders—not male, not female, but a hybrid of the two. Perhaps, but the ecstasy that Ada feels as Zsa Zsa points more to the obvious desire of the *bakla* to be a woman, inside and out—a bakla dream but within a heterosexist paradigm.

Second, with Ada’s/Zsa Zsa’s new role as defender of his/her town, another contradiction becomes palpable. To triumph against the giant frog, the zombies and the Amazonistas, he/she has to be as confident of his/her power, as aggressive, as war-like (if not more), than than the invading women.

Zsa Zsa:
 Tabi kayo! Ang pangit niyo!
 Hitsura niyo di nababagay
 Itapat sa byuti ko.

Hindi nyo kakayanin and superpowers ko!

Wala pa ‘kong gana niyan
 Matamlay pa ako!

Akala niyo siguro ay kaya niyo ako.

Mga gunggong...nagkakamali kayo !!!!...

Walang ka-effort-effort, oh!

Panalo na ako.

Meron pa bang kokontra?

Sa akin ang korona

Ang barooooosh panalona ako!!!

(“Panalo na Ako!”, Song 10; emphasis mine)

Thus, a triumphant Ada/Zsa Zsa (“*sa akin ang korona*”) both celebrates his/her new female body and his/her newly acquired physical (masculine) strength/superpowers.

Thus the representations of feminized Ada and a masculinized Zsa Zsa partly engender the play’s ambiguity/contradictions.

When Ada gives up his Zsa Zsa identity (beauty and prowess combined) by forcing the stone into Queen Femina's mouth, we are prepared for this through Ada's realization earlier that his/her being a superhero has only endangered the lives of people he cares for, Dodong and Didi.

**ako,tignan niyo nasa gitna ng labanan
mga mahal ko sa buhay ay nadadamay
Nag-iisang kaibigan ko
nadawit, nasaktan.**

Pati puso ko nakikigulo parang
ako'y nahihirapan...

Kailangang pag-isipan ko
ang dapat kong gawin
Kapangyarihan bang ito'y
magtatagal
Baka ito'y maglaho na bukas-
makalawa.

**Mabuti pa nga, mas tahimik
Ang buhay ko kapag ako si Ada.**

("Ang Pagmumunimuni ni Zsa Zsa", Song 18;emphasis mine)

Zsa Zsa's *pagmuni-muni* (reflections) is an intimation of astute insights that masculinized power is ephemeral, that the "womanly" qualities of friendship and loyalty are important, that a quiet life as a *bakla*, albeit, confusing and incomplete, might be more desirable.

Zsa Zsa the play's contradictory representations of women and conflictual gender themes might still lead to a reading/interpretation that makes the play deployable for the feminist project of liberation from iniquitous structural forces and relations. Such a reading ensues from a juxtaposition of the ambiguous themes and representations (characterizations) being "processed" throughout the play with the play's plot denouement. In the end, the "magic" stone transforms Queen Femina into a hated male form (the "magic" translated as the power to morph/transmogrify a person's interior/ "essential" traits/true substance into an exterior form). In the end, as well, Ada returns to his quiet, unspectacular life as a *bakla* and it is this Ada that wins the love of Dodong.

**“Ang Unang Aswang”
(February 25, 2006 by Theater Company Rin Ko Gun and the CCP’s
Tanghalang Pilipino)**

“Ang Unang Aswang” written by Rody Vera was presented as one of the plays included in the “Philippine Bedtime Stories 2”—a joint production of Japanese Theater Company Rin Ko Gun and the Cultural Center of the Philippines. The play was bilingual with Filipino dialogue being provided Japanese subtitles and Japanese dialogue being provided English subtitles.

This play supposedly is about the origins of the Philippine *aswang*—referred to in the Japanese dialogue as *akuma*; or the generic ghoul. Our Philippine *aswang*, has an appetite for human flesh, especially children’s.

The play consists of two variants of one storyline, both shown in one day’s performance. The basic plotline runs thus: A pregnant woman dies in the forest and her unborn daughter eats her way out of the mother’s womb. This daughter is then nurtured by “familiar” (beast companions of witches in European folklore). As a young girl, she falls for a guerilla’s son who strays into the forest. He takes sexual advantage of her, but then leaves her to return to his “civilized life.” Finding herself to be pregnant, she goes in search of him. When they meet, she is rejected by him and is also told about her lover’s similarly pregnant wife. Returning to the jungle, she tries to stop her baby’s birth, and not succeeding, she sucks the baby’s blood instead. To exact revenge on her lover, she sucks the blood of his legitimate unborn child and in the process, also kills the lover’s wife. So ends the legend about the origin of the first/*unang aswang*.

The play raises several questions about the politics of representation. Why is the ghoul /the *aswang* imaged as a woman? In the *Second Sex* (1949 in French and 1972 in English), Simone de Beauvoir speaks of how “women as flesh” incarnate/as the “gateway of the devil”¹³ was feared/abhorred by men. She cites the church fathers as saying that “man was born between feces and urine” (Patajo-Legasto, “Pasyong Pilapil” 113-114; quoting De Beauvoir 188-189).

In the play, “Ang Unang Aswang”, the young wild uninhibited woman in the forest is constructed as the embodiment of her young lover’s forbidden

desires as well as his fears. It is her “otherness” that makes him eventually flee from her in fear of the wilderness (the forest conflated with the woman) that drove his father mad. This same fear makes him afraid to be seen with her in the streets (“civilization”) when she does find him. The play’s final transformation of the woman into an *aswang* is the symbolic reduction of her as man’s other, an otherness which he had caused, in the first place.

The negative representation of woman’s power to reproduce is also a theme found in our *Pasyon/sinakulo* (the prayer and play based on the story of the life and death of Jesus Christ) is reinscribed in this 2007 play. “The act of biological reproduction is so negatively constructed in Catholic discourse. This is borne out in the disgust for sexual relation, “carnal pleasure and reproduction in the texts of the early theologian. According to St. Augustine, ‘concupiscence is a vice...human flesh born from it is sinful flesh...we are born between feces and urine.’” (Legasto, “*Pasyon Pilapil...*” 113; citing de Beauvoir 188-189).

The ideologeme (collective fantasy) of monstrous birth and birth of monstrosities, according to Jean Franco’s critique of Latin American novels are articulations of male writers’ attempts to abrogate unto themselves the power of the original female chanteuses/keepers of historical memory to tell their people’s narratives (Franco 510).

A collective fantasy of monstrous birth and woman as not going beyond nature/natural sexual urges and natural aggression (*vis-à-vis* “civilization” and civilized human behaviour which is associated with males) is similarly deployed in “*Ang Unang Aswang*”. The woman, albeit wronged by her lover, is represented as wild as beast-like/cannibalistic, capable of feeding on the fetus of her rival, as well as on her own unborn child.

The patriarchal logocentric binaries of civilization/nature, reason/passion, light/dark, male/female are thus reinscribed in the play which by adapting the legend as frame consciously or unconsciously offers an explication of the origins of a monster, the *aswang*.

The Politics of Representation and Location in Women-Centered Theater in the Context of the Nationalist and Feminist Liberation

These 21st century plays that I discussed, illustrate how Philippine theater, even women’s theater, has become an ideological site for the contestation of conflictual discourses—Broadway/ West End/ western vs local/ ethnic/

nationalist; patriarchal vs feminist; “national”/ “nationalist” politics vs “identity politics”; even varieties of feminist/ women’s politics. This paper attempted to illustrate how these conflicting discourses are played out, particularly in the Philippine women plays of the 21st century.

At issue here is the politics of representation and location. Who can speak for whom? Who can speak for/or represent woman/women? Theirs/Hers is an embattled location. Woman is used in discourses on nation and nationalism—deified as Dios Ina and Inang Bayan by millenarian groups and Inang Bayan/Mother Country by ilustrado nationalists. But she is object rather than subject of her destiny, relying on her sons to free her from the shackles of the colonial masters. In contemporary versions of historical plays, what seems to be carefully paid attention to are the themes of cosmopolitanization/abjection of the native other by colonial and neocolonial discourse, decolonization, liberation struggle.

Women are symbolic capital for such nationalist plays, literature, art or plays that want to transgress race/ethnic/heterosexist discourses. Yet representations of women by male authors in these 21st century plays illustrate some residual masculinist/patriarchal memories.

Therefore, who can represent women? “Representation” is a term with manifold resonances” like speaking on behalf of other persons or groups (Ella Shohat, *The Struggle over Representation*, 1995) which means that something/ someone is standing for something else or some person or group.

Deepika Bahri (“Feminism in/and postcolonialism” 204+) cites Gayatri Spivak’s two ways of representing: first, *vertreten* (*to tread* in someone’s shoes) so *vertretung* can refer to political representation, e.g., a congressman representing us. The second way of understanding representation is *darstellung* (same cognate *stellen* or to place). *Darstellung* means “placing there.”

Representation in short has two modes/means two things: *Proxy* from the first term *vertretung*, and *Portrait* from *darstellung*.

Those othered by the dominant patriarchal discursive formation have no voice and are thus “spoken for” by those who have the authority and means to speak (representation as Proxy). And what follows is that those with the power to represent and describe others clearly control how those others will be seen /portrayed (representation as Portrait).

“Representations are always fictional or partial” but since subjectivity/ identity is constructed within discourse/through representations (what you are

and who you are is constituted by representations of you,) the matter of who is speaking and for whom is he/she speaking for is of the utmost importance.

Without wanting to reduce my next statement to “only women can speak for women”, care must still be exercised to look at historical and cultural locations/specificities for there are no universal women, only women with specific locations who should empower themselves to speak. And since gender discourse is also cathected with nationalist discourse and class discourse in Third World countries/countries of the South/Asia, Africa, Central and South America, the politics of representation and location of women is fraught with difficulties.

The politics of representation is therefore a continuing process of intervention, and re-invention.

The other problematic being addressed in this paper is whether or not women-centered plays are feminist plays. This is a corollary question that relates to the complex nature of “representation” in literature and theater and what it means to “represent” a class, a race, an ethnic group, a religious congregation, and in this particular paper, women, whose gender position transects/intersects all their other class, race, ethnic, religious etc subject-positions.

These conflicting discourses are played out through the underlying configurations of variegated women- related themes/topoi (oppression, repression, sexuality, nation/nationalism, empowerment); women archetypes and stereotypes (Madonna, whore, monster like the aswang, babaylan or priestess); literary and theater conventions associated with women’s plots (romance with marriage as denouement; self sacrifice with “single blessedness” or singlehood as final “reward”; sexual liberation or promiscuity with punishment, banishment from “decent” society or death as outcome); women’s power reduced to sexual power or possible only with the intervention of males; etc).

As feminist scholars and cultural activists, we cannot escape or elide questions of location and representation for theorizing about how feminist politics, including feminist cultural politics, could address all kinds of societal/structural inequities?

Sr. Mary John Mananzan expresses a “truism” (although as postcolonial activists we have been epistemologically traumatized by western/orientalist “truths”, we need some degree of “strategic essentialism” a la Gayatri Spivak

to be able to agree on some common forms of action) that Philippine radical feminists live by:

...The context of the women's movement is societal transformation which involves economic, political, socio-cultural, structural changes. The women's movement sees societal transformation as a necessary although not sufficient condition for women's liberation. On the other hand, no struggle for total human liberation can be considered a success if half the society remains unliberated from gender oppression.

The integrality of the women's movement in societal transformation is not only in the final goal but in the very process of the struggle. There are examples of countries where the women struggled with them (the men) for the liberation of their society but were later on put back to the kitchen. Gender equality must be initiated and consciously posed in the very process of struggling for justice and equality." (*The Woman's Question*, 52; qtd in Bodden, 10)

Two lessons can be learned from this pioneer of women's studies in the Philippines: that human liberation means liberation of all, and involves all societal practices. National liberation includes the liberation of women. Secondly, liberation should not only be a final goal, it should already be addressed in the process of struggle.

What the latter further tells me is that there is need for constant give, for dialectical negotiations with those comradesose liberation projects are oriented mainly towards class, ethnic, race *or* gender emancipation from their respective monsters/mga halimaw (a metaphor for imperialism/bureaucratic capitalism/fascism popularized through protest plays)—the bourgeoisie/*mga burgis*, the colonial masters or imperialists or international capital, machos or the patriarchy.

To address one type of project without the others is to elide the complexities of the wholistic liberation agenda. Where the nationalist agenda is addressed with acute sensitivity, the complicated nuances of patriarchal ideology might remain residual. As in the case of the "slip", the recuperation of Basilia ("Basilia ng Malolos") and the unintended reinscription of the heterosexist trope of marriage as woman's destiny or the stigma of spinsterhood for those who commit themselves to public service.

“Locations play a constitutive role in structuring the frames of reference within which we develop our project, a role that deserves to be more fully analyzed—institutional affiliations, the milieu of intellectual debate, the ‘background practices’ and grain of everyday life” (John 110). “Locations” may refer to geographic locations, but since all the plays analyzed in this paper were produced in the Philippines by Filipinos based here, then “location” can be widened to include class or class “habitus” (i.e., the life habits/modes of thinking/attitudes of a certain class or class fraction); ethnicity (referring to lowland Christian culture or Visayan/Iloko/National Capital region culture vis a vis, for instance, “lumad culture of Mindanaoans) etc, gender and sexual orientations (i.e., masculine, feminine, gay, lesbian); religious affiliation (Christian, Muslim); educational training; age/generation, etc.

These specificities of location can also be associated with the term *subject-positions*—positions that the author/reader or playwright/audience will bring into play as he/she writes/reads or produces/views cultural texts, and in this paper, Philippine plays or Philippine theater practice. Feminist scholars/critics/cultural activist and feminists, in general, must therefore be aware of the how these subject positions/subject locations are inscribed as themes, topoi, plots, characterizations (stereotypes and archetypes), tropes, figures of speech (symbols, metaphors, similes, etc.).

There are some commonalities across these five 21st century women-centered plays. Obviously, the main characters (either protagonists or antagonists; heroines or villains) are women. Secondly, Victoria Laktaw, Basilia of Malolos and Gabriela are not archetypes since there are historical figures on which these three characters are based. Having said this, however, we must add the caveat that these three cannot be considered realistic portrayals of actual historical figures. The reason for their not being realist representations of actual historical figures is related to the third point I wish to make.

Thirdly, the four plays (“Hibik at Himagsik”, “Gabriela”, “Basilia ng Malolos” and “Unang Aswang”) have history as setting or backdrop (on the simplest level; for the first three, the Spanish colonial period; for “Unang Aswang”, the Japanese occupation and after). The first three plays also relate to historiography (i.e., the writing of history, although more specifically, the re-writing of history) as frames and motivations of their plots. Hence, as I said earlier, the characters of Victoria, Basilia and Gabriela are not realistic portrayals of historical figures. The three texts in which their narratives are

played out have as agenda the construction of the historical past (not just the mimetic reconstruction of history) in order to either foreground women's active participation in the colonial struggle or to construct representations of these women revolutionaries which can be alternatives to their representations in official versions of Philippine history. In the case of "...Victoria Laktaw" and "Basilia...", the play texts' project is to make more visible the contributions of relatively unknown women; hitherto appearing like footnotes to Philippine history (e.g., the women whose Hibik was mentioned in a newspaper article of the period; and the women of Malolos who were the ones to whom Jose Rizal addressed a letter). In the case of the more post modern play, "Gabriela", the project is to speculate on the active role of Gabriela, which in official history is encapsulated in her portrayal as the wife of Diego Silang who, by force of circumstance (the death of her husband) becomes the leader of the Iloko revolt. What if Gabriela was Diego's equal partner in planning the revolt, and in the armed struggle that ensued before Diego's death. To underline this possibility, the play has a companion narrative centered on Gabby (the modern day activist) being as committed to political action as her companion/not husband, Diego. The play further speculates on Gabby's key role in the "crucifixion scene" where it is she rather than Diego who is victimized/killed by the forces of the State.

Fourthly, four of the plays ("...Victoria", "Gabriela", and "Basilia..." and "Zsa zsa...") can be read/analyzed/interpreted as engaging in radical politics (gender politics for all four and feminist/nationalist politics for three—"...Victoria", "Gabriela" and "Basilia..."). Feminist themes of women's oppression and repression are present in the latter three plays. Multiple forms of oppression are depicted, for instance, lack of access to educational institutions; and "education" for women as limited to acquiring skills/talents that they would need to fulfill their feminine/passive roles as daughters/wives/mothers ("domestic arts") or as nuns. The other feminist themes are women's invisibility in the public sphere (politics, history, economics); women's repression because of patriarchal norms which emanate not only from the "official" male holders of power (the colonial State, the frailes) but also from those within their families and circle of friends (fathers, brothers, uncles, suitors, supposed comrades) in the colonial/activist/revolutionary struggle.

"Zsa Zsa Zaturannah", which initially appears to be the most radically engaged in gender politics, on closer reading, reveals its more conservative theme, tropes, politics. As I indicated earlier, one might misconstrue the text as

feminist because its central character, Zsa Zsa, is a superwoman (like the trope of the empowered woman) whose strength is used to protect her community against the threat of alien invaders. But this superwoman is actually a male, a “bakla”, with many feminine attributes—a *parlorista* whose aim is to make the “pangit” (ugly) people in her community beautiful because of his skills in hair cutting and make up; “malambot ang loob”, and coy in her reticence to disclose her adoration of Dodong, a heterosexual male (physically portrayed as a “hunk”). What redeems Zsa Zsa, as I explained earlier, is its denouement. The play ends with the defeat of the Amazonistas and their leader whose transformation into the hated male form is a negation of patriarchal discourses of control/dominance, aggression/violence, conquest/war and an affirmation of women’s discourses of filial love, family, friendship, loyalty.

“Ang Unang Aswang” seems un-recuperable/un-redeemable because of its heterosexist prepresentation of the origins of the aswang.

This study ends with the finding that the discourses articulated through women’s centered theater or plays do not form a unified discursive formation. It remains a highly contested site, a dialectical arena needing constant negotiation/dialogue or intervention. Those laying claim to the right to represent women, have surely contributed to the “nationalist” and/or anti-fascist struggle, especially during the dark period of Marcosian despotic rule, but they are producing discourses that articulate their differing (subject) positions/locations. In the end, the bottomline questions for Filipino feminists (including Filipino feminist cultural activists who can wield “weapons” like representations through their work as scholars and artists) should be: Which kinds of cultural (scholarly/creative/ theater practices) can enable the liberation of Filipino women from the manipulations of the patriarchy, global and local capitalism, and a gender-insensitive State?

Notes

1. See Amelia Lapeña Bonifacio, *The “Seditious” Tagalog Playwrights: Early American Occupation* (1972). Lapeña-Bonifacio history of our Tagalog theater during the first decade of the American colonial period gives a wealth of details about playwrights, performances and the colonial government’s responses (e.g., incarceration of playwrights and sometimes whole troupes, closure of theaters) to what they soon realized were seditious/revolutionary contents hidden by the allegorical/romantic conventions of the musical (zarzuela/sarwela).

Lapeña-Bonifacio's book is "the first study of that period." (*Cultural Center of the Philippines Encyclopedia of Art*, VII: 163). See also my "Theater as History: The Spanish Conquest to the Philippine Revolution." *Philippine Humanities Review 1985-1995*, Vol. 2 (1995): 315-366.

2. See Chapter III, "Bigas at Tubig: Theater of Social Concern, 1965-1968", of my Ph.D. Philippine Studies dissertation, College of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of the Philippines-Diliman, 1988; as well as "Theater as Pedagogic Tool." *Masks & Voices* (Journal of the Department of Speech Communication & Theater Arts, CAL, UP Diliman), I, 2 (July-December 1993):62-78.

3. See *Bangon: Antolohiya ng Mga Dulang Mapanghimagsik* edited by Gleecy Atienza, Bienvenido Lumbera and Galileo Zafra. (1998).

See also my "Days of Disquiet, Nights of Rage: The Revolutionary Theater in the Philippines, 1969-1972." *Philippine Humanities Review*, Vol. 7 (2004): 172-187.

4. For a more thorough going analysis of Philippine feminism vis a vis western feminisms, the women's movement and feminist theater in the Philippines during the eighties, and "close"/ textual analyses of these plays, see my "...Women Speaking" in *Filipiniana Reader*, 76-84. Earlier versions of this study appeared in "Usapang Babae: Women and Contemporary Philippine Theater." *Cultures and Texts*. Edited by Raul Pertierra. Q.C.: UP Press, 1995; "Women and Contemporary Philippine Theater." *RIMA: Review of Malaysian and Indonesian Affairs*. XXVIII (Winter 1994): 99-109.

5. Please see "Usapang Babae: Women and Contemporary Philippine Theater." *Cultures and Texts*. Edited by Raul Pertierra. Q.C.: UP Press, 1995; and "Women and Contemporary Philippine Theater." *RIMA: Review of Malaysian and Indonesian Affairs*. XXVIII (Winter 1994): 99-109 for my earlier studies on radical women's theater of the eighties and nineties.

6. The play—the version found in *Tatlong Sarsuwela* (UP Press, 2003)—won the Centennial Literary Contest. Its first performance was by Dulaang UP on 13 February 2002 which was directed by Alex Cortez. Music composition was by Lucien Letaba, set and costume design by Salvador F. Bernal; choreography by Myra Beltran. The version of the play being cited is from Lumbera's *Sa Sariling Bayan: Apat na Dulang May Musika* (De La Salle University Press, Inc., 2003). Also available is an audio CD of the Dulaang UP performance of "Hibik at Himagsik nia Victoria Laktaw".

7. See a fuller discussion of "Hibik Namin" in the context of revolutionary discourse, as well as Inang Bayan discourse of millenarian groups, in Nenita Pambid-Domingo's "Dios Ina (God the Mother) and Philippine Nationalism", *Diliman Review* 53 (2006): 73-103.

8. See Edward Said. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon, 1978. See also Tony Shirato, "The Narrative of Orientalism" (1994) where he introduces the notion of

“contemporary Orientalism” (as differentiated from Said’s “classic” Orientalism). Contemporary orientalism consists of negative discourses of the Oriental which attributes his inferior status, not to inherent racial traits, but rather to his lack of exposure to western civilization or for someone who has been Christianized or educated abroad, to his not having “properly” imbibed the “blessings” of western civilization. The Oriental merely “performs” his westernization to acquire some kind of financial or political capital from westerners, as in the case of the “new Japanese” after World War II.

9. “Zsa Zsa Zaturannah Ze Muzikal” is based on the grafiction or graphic novel, *Ang Kagila-gilalas na Pakikisapagsapalaran ni Zsa Zsa Zaturannah* (Collected Edition) by Carlo Vergara (2003).

Ze Muzikal was first performed at the CCP’s Tanghalang Huseng Batute on February 10, 2006 with Vincent A. DeJesus as composer/lyricist/ musical director; Herbert Go and Dennis Marasigan as Tanghalang Pilipino Artistic Directors; Chris Millado as Stage Director; Chris Martinez as Stage Adaptor . There is a CD of Zsa Zsa Zaturannah ze musical (2007).

10. In J Neil C. Garcia’s “Performativity, the bakla and the orientalizing gaze.” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* I. 2 (2000): 265-281.

11. Roland Barthes referred to the irreducible plurality of the “text” as against the singularity/centredness of the “work.” See “From Work to Text”; 1470-75.

12. Western discourses about gays, especially those which adhere to Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, is blind to the specificities of the Filipino bakla. Butlerian theory asserts that heterosexist gender identities (masculine/feminine) are tenuous and therefore need constantly to be performed/to be affirmed. The gay performs the acts associated with a feminine identity, without completely letting go of some masculine traits or mode of dress or mannerisms, to subvert heterosexist norms. Garcia in “Performativity, the bakla and the orientalizing gaze” takes issue with this notion of performing one’s gender because the bakla is feminine inside/his loob and his feminine acts are not parodic but stems from a real aspiration to be feminine/ a woman. Filipino cross dressers at gay beauty pageants want to affirm their femininity not parody it.

13. In my Pasyon Pilapil article (“The Pasyon Pilapil: An-“Other” Reading, 113), I state that: “In the dualism that structures Christian discourse, man is divided against himself—i.e., his body against his soul. Because of original sin, man’s body is the enemy of his soul. The flesh is evil. And critiques Simone de Beauvoir, ‘the flesh that is for the Christian, the hostile OTHER is precisely woman. In her the Christian finds incarnated, the temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil’. (pp. 188-189). ‘Woman! You are the GATEWAY OF THE DEVIL... a temple built over a SEWER’, Tertullian, one of the First Fathers of the Church, disgustedly says of her. (De Beauvoir citing Tertullian, p. 189)”

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