

Book Review



***Women in the Philippine Revolution* ed. Rafaelita Hilario Soriano (Quezon City: Printon Press, 1995)**

This book has been well praised as an important contribution to the Philippine Centennial celebration. No other book or publication so far has succeeded in putting together the narratives of so many women—30 of them altogether—who played a part in the Philippine revolutionary movement.

A noteworthy precursor to this anthology, it must be pointed out, is the substantial chapter on “The Filipino Women During the Revolution” in the undergraduate thesis of Paz Policarpio (later Paz Policarpio-Mendez)¹ at the University of the Philippines. This essay was written as early as 1924, at around the beginning of the first wave of feminism in the Philippines which culminated in the granting of

¹ Published in *Review of Women's Studies* Centennial Issue (1996): 19-38.

women's suffrage. As such, the essay is marked by a high degree of historical consciousness of the role women played in the revolution, and indeed of Philippine history. Unlike this book which is a collection of essays on various women, arranged alphabetically according to their maiden names, by six different writers and researchers, Ms. Mendez places her study within a historical framework. She starts with the founding of the Katipunan and the early Masonic lodges, follows through with the Revolution of 1896, the establishment of the Republic, the war with the Americans, the organization of the Filipino Red Cross and ends with the forging of peace with the Americans. She uses mainly documentary sources, including publications of the period such as *La Independencia* and *La Republica* but manages to make the women she presents come alive.

Similarly, the best of the profiles in the book under review give life to the women whose narratives they tell. Notable examples are the biographies of Adriana Sangalang and Trinidad Tecson, told by their descendants, Rafaelita Hilario Soriano (granddaughter) and Lovely Tecson Romulo (grandniece) respectively. These writers provide us with interesting details that give an insight into the character and personality of their foremothers. On the whole, overall quality of the profiles is uneven, as far as providing adequate information goes. Some of the other writers have had to rely on sketchy or incomplete sources. The editor gives us some idea of the difficulties they encountered:

Many descendants did not remember the exact dates of birth and death of their heroine ancestors—where they were born, where they went to school, what endeavors they pursued after the revolution—all these were a thing of the past to some of them, deeply buried after many decades. To make their oblivion the more obvious, some have no pictures at all. One family has

a big life-sized picture of their general grandfather but none of their heroine grandmother.

To give the editor and authors credit, they managed to dig up a fair number of photographs; where these were not available, they provided pen and ink or charcoal drawings and portraits which enable the reader to visualize both character and incident. But even as the authors come face to face with the lack of information on women in the revolution, the work itself fails to recognize the larger issue of why women are hardly visible in Philippine history, particularly of this period. Beyond lamenting the fact, they do not ask why there is a scarcity of documentation on women in the period while the participation of men who are seen as the primary actors is fully documented. Nor do they think to question the view of history that underlies this situation.

The singular absence of women in historical accounts has in fact been problematized by a number of historian and historical writers in recent years.² They point out that the tendency to neglect or ignore the participation of women stems from the concept of history which sees it as a grand narrative of political achievements and military exploits of men acting in the public realm. Because the activities of women arise from (but are not limited to) their traditional roles and are largely of a supportive or nurturing nature, e.g., providing supplies; caring for the sick and wounded, cooking, sewing, they are largely taken for granted. When attention is given to women who also perform men's roles, they are judged as "extraordinary" and not quite women.

² See, for instance, Gertie Ampil Tirona, "Why Are Some Filipinas Historic But Not Heroic?"; Albina Peczon Fernandez, "If Women Are the Best Men in the Philippines, Why Are They Invisible in History?" and Digna Balangue Apilado, "The Women of Ilocos in the Revolutionary Era, all in *Review of Women's Studies Centennial Issue* (1996).

The authors of these profiles, while trying to redress the situation, seem nevertheless to accept this view of history. The biographer of Trinidad Tecson, for instance somewhat disparagingly notes that "her fearlessness [as a soldier] *beclouds* [my italics] her femininity." Moreover, for all that they try hard to highlight the various achievements of these "heroines", they nevertheless see them not as women in their own right but as men's appendages, as it were, to be seen and defined in relationship to men. Hence, where a subtitle is provided (and most of the biographies do have a subtitle), it is invariably "Wife of. . ."; "Mother of. . .". It is thus that Trinidad Tecson is characterized as "Wife of Julian Alcantara, later of Doroteo Santiago and lastly of Francisco Empainado" when these men hardly figure in her story. Similarly, Rosario Villaruel is characterized as "Wife of Luciano Bautista" when she is in fact better known by the epithet "The Pallid Virgin of the Revolution."

While the consciousness that there is a need to rethink traditional, male-centered notions of historical writing and research if one is to write about women in history does not inform the work, it does make use of some methods and concepts that move it in the new directions history is taking. Oral history sources, in the form of family narratives and recollections of relatives are much used here and help give voice to women whose histories would otherwise not be told. One wonders however why, engaged in the effort to articulate the stories of women, the book has not sufficiently recognized the contribution of articulate women to the revolutionary effort. There were women writers during the revolution, including Florentina Arellano and Rosa Sevilla who contributed to periodicals during the period and whose contributions are a rich source of what women were thinking at the time.

A similarly noteworthy feature is the attempt to broaden the scope of history beyond the political. Many of the writers place the women they write about in the context of family and community and give us a vivid sense of their contribution to the social history of the towns or cities in which they lived. There is also the recognition in the preface that the history of the regions should be more deeply studied. This would be a step in the right direction. The combination of oral history techniques with a focus on regional history should help bring about "history from below," allowing the ordinary and the marginalized, including women, to tell us more, in their own voices, about their participation in the making of the nation.

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