

ROOTS OF FEMINIST THOUGHT IN THE PHILIPPINES*

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Many consider feminism in the Philippines to be a foreign “ideology”, imported from the west and espoused by strident, middle-class women whose behavior and ways of thinking are those of aggressive western feminists. From this point of view, feminism has no place in national life and culture.

The problem is this view is usually held by those who have no sympathy for women. Quite possibly, they have not studied the women’s movement nor the history and development of women in the country. It is well therefore to start here — in the study of women and the construction of women in Philippine society — before altogether condemning feminism as an imported ideology.

Women in History

The reconstruction of women in Philippine history challenges us at present. If one bases this study on the books written by our historians, it would be difficult to see clearly the flow and the stages of development in the experience of women in the context of the formation of Philippine society and culture.

The reasons for women’s invisibility in books on Philippine history have been put forward by Dr. Maria Luisa Camagay. In her paper on “Women in Philippine History” (1988), she noted that most of our historians are male and look at history from a male perspective. In addition, she noted, the historians probably believe that men’s experience in history is no different from that of women. For this reason, not much attention is given to writing the history of women. The assumption that men’s and women’s experience are the same is problematic because men

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and women themselves affirm that men and women have distinct experiences in history.

To map out in detail the development of women in history needs further research and investigation. For now, it is possible only to speculate on major experiences of women in Philippine social history. It is possible to put together several valuable notes regarding women in order to come up with a history that will clarify the roles that women have played in Philippine culture and society. Obviously, a new formulation of the history of women will throw more light on the factors that led to the dominant concepts of woman and womanhood.

Historians and sociologists are agreed that women in a number of selected ethno-linguistic groups before the coming of the Spaniards held a respected position in the community, one that they could be proud of. In those places which had not yet come under the sway of Islam, women, if not equal to men, had an even higher status. Apart from the fact that they were eligible to become chief of the community, their children bore their names; they had a right to the family property and lineage and they were free to choose their spouses or to divorce them, if this should be necessary.

In the notes of the anthropologist Robert Fox, for instance, he observed that according to the chronicles of Spaniards who traveled to the Philippines, the ancient native family was not "patricentric." [sic] Women, when they were married, stayed close to their families of origin as did the men. Their two families remained close and lineage was reckoned not always patrilineally but matrilineally as well. Similarly, in determining kinship, not only the descendants of the male line but that of the female line were equally important.

One can understand the relatively higher status of women before Islam and Christianity took over, if one examines the social order of native communities during that time. Many of these were based on self-sufficient, agricultural economies. The land, the river or the sea from which they derived their livelihood could be said to have been owned by all; the family was the basic unit of production. And because the entire community was involved in producing the basic necessities of life, it seemed likely that there was no marked division of labor among male and female. Women could fish and hunt, as could the men. They also plowed the land as did the men. In truth, domestic work was the work of both men and women.

Thus, there was no clear division of labor based on gender. Women participated in all fields of productive work. There was as yet no private property; the limits of the private and public were not clear so the division of labor was not a problem. This explains the possibility of a woman becoming the political leader of the tribe. Thus, whether history or legend, Princess Urduja of Pangasinan and Sima of Cotabato were women or concepts of women who were products of such a social order. The existence of the story of these two women and the continued prevalence of their history among the ranks of women show clearly the insistence on the free status of women in early times.

Under the old order, therefore, it was possible that women were not necessarily under the power of men. They had sufficient opportunity to become equal with men in community affairs. It could also be said that they had the opportunity to make decisions on social and political matters.

That being the course of affairs, it would not have been difficult for women to shoulder the responsibility of being the spiritual and cultural leader of the community. Giving women the task of taking charge of religion and culture similarly resulted from the agricultural environment. Because woman was perceived as bearing young in the same way that plants came to fruition, she was looked upon as the repository of knowledge about life and the environment; her ability to sound nature's mysterious and oracular depths was recognized; she it was who could decipher the myths and legends that originated from nature.

For in communities such as these, the season of new growth coming to life was considered a matter for celebration. And this celebration gave birth to ritual — thanksgiving for blessings received in close association with nature for, according to historians, the indigenous religion at the time of the coming of the Spaniards was animistic. It is not surprising that such rituals and celebrations were centered on woman. She was considered the guardian of the secrets of life and nature. In caring for and nurturing life, she was privy to special knowledge which was not within the reach of man.

This is why in almost all Philippine ethnic communities, one finds the equivalent of the babaylan and the catalonan. They are called **babaylan** in the Visayas, **catalonan** among the Tagalogs, **mangaalisig** among the Kalingas, **mangaanito** in Pangasinan, **anitera** among the

Gaddang, **baliana** in Bicol, **mabalian** among the Bagobo, **almono** in B'laan and **doronakit** among the Isneg. Undoubtedly, different terms with the same meaning as babaylan may be found among the other ethnolinguistic groups.

One cannot take exception to the valuable role of the babaylan in indigenous society. Nevertheless, it is necessary to look deeper into the implications of such a role.

If one examines Salazar's division of the socio-economic structure during ancient times, into the following domains — the political which was the domain of the datu, the technological which was the domain of the panday and the cultural, which was the domain of the babaylan, one finds two important implications. First, the power of the babaylan is irreversible in the realm of culture or folk wisdom, particularly in the fields of healing, religion and literature. But this may well be because of the existing conditions of harmony or oneness in the running of society. That is to say, there was unity among the datu, panday and babaylan on how the over-all life of the community should be conducted. But what if they had fundamental differences or diverse perspectives on how the community should function.

Secondly, in this division of labor, could we be sure that the men made no intervention in the realm of culture? There is a resounding silence on this matter in our historical texts, save for the observation that there was some form of "intervention" in the form of male babaylan or catalonan who nevertheless had female characteristics.

Moreover, if woman was powerful only in the realm of culture and not in the other domains as implied in Salazar's research, it is likely that her high status could easily be brought down if both the political and the technological, key factors in maintaining the life of the community, were to fall into the hands of opposing forces, men or women, particularly if these forces were those of conquerors, as actually happened. In other words, any change in the political dispensation, any change in matters of technology could affect the domain of culture. If the new political order were to decree policies which were against the grain of community life and tradition, and similarly, if technology were to change direction, there would surely be a different outcome in the forms of expression and styles of life on which culture and learning are based.

Hence, when the ancient indigenous order and culture were infiltrated by Christianity and/or Islam, the power of the babaylan was swiftly eroded.

When the Spanish conquerors arrived, they found no clear-cut division of gender roles. A clear indication of this is the lack of sexual bifurcation in language, particularly in the case of nouns and pronouns. If the indigenous language is seen as a bearer of indigenous culture, it appears that it does not particularly matter whether a particular object or a particular labor is specific to men or women.

The Spanish conquerors wrested political power from the *datus* and replaced it with the power of the King of Spain. His representatives, in the person of the governor general, the military and the Spanish friars, humbled the *datus* who formerly ruled the barangays, making them in effect mere followers, implementors of decrees issued from Spain. Similarly, the conquerors brought in new technology to replace the old style of agriculture in the community. Most important, the Spanish priests and missionaries insisted on the hegemony of Western doctrine centered on the Roman Catholic religion. They forcibly imposed foreign ways of worship among the indigenous people, burnt all symbols of the old worship and outlawed indigenous rites and rituals.

This downgrading of the indigenous political- scientific-cultural order wrought a deep form of subjugation on women's experiences and the expression of these experiences.

For, along with the spread of Spanish colonization came the complex ramifications of patriarchy over the whole archipelago. Gone was the power of the babaylan to become the mediator between God and humans and to be guardians of folk knowledge. The only thing left to them was their power to heal but even this suffered a loss of prestige because they were considered herb doctors (*herbolario*) or midwives (*hilot*) or worse, witches (*Bruha* or *mangkukulam*).

The lands that were previously owned communally were made private property, first through the *encomienda* system and later, through the *hacienda* system. In the middle of the 17th century, the feudal system of production was reinforced due to the transformation of huge tracts of lands into *haciendas* where the landless indigenous peoples became tenant farmers (*kasama*). The land of small farmers were similarly confiscated by means of the *pacto de retroventa*. Under this system, lands

mortgaged by small farmers who could not redeem them because of their difficulties in eking out a living, were forcibly seized by the big haciendas. Towards the last part of the 18th century, the religious orders became hacenderos and held large tracts of lands throughout the archipelago.

Under this order, women were subjected to layers of oppression. Because the feudal system of family relations had become prevalent as a result of the missionaries' teachings on the need for humility and virginity among women, women turned out to be the lowest in the hierarchy of creatures on earth. They served a hierarchy of masters: first, God; second, the priest who was God's representative; third, the *alferez* or *governadorcillo*; fourth, the landlord and the landlord's wife or mistress; fifth, her own father or husband. In this hierarchy of power, it thus came about that the woman bore the brunt of livelihood burdens. Historical research has shown that women have often been used to pay (*bayad-tang*) debts incurred by her father or husband.

It was the women who suffered the effects of the small wars launched by the colonial government against its enemies. When the men were conscripted into the army or made to do forced labor on the construction of boats, railways and roads, it was the women who worked in the fields to make these productive.

When the planting of products for export such as sugar, coffee and copra made the country a vast plantation economy, women too had to work. When cigar and dress factories were established in the last half of the 18th century, many women went to work as "cigareras" and "custoreras."

Although they still played a role in livelihood activities, women no longer had a central role in the field of culture. It was no longer they who led in the rituals of worship but the Spanish priests. Women who conformed to the wishes of the priests became blind followers (*alipures*) of the Spaniards in carrying out church tasks - decorating the altar, leading prayers and litanies as taught by the priests, sponsors (*hermana*) of fiestas.

This state of affairs did not change radically until women involved themselves in the national movement for independence that began in the last half of the 18th century. At this time, the women who were affiliated with the masonic movement played a key role in organizing a woman's

branch of the Katipunan. Similarly, the twenty women of Malolos who launched a movement for the meaningful education of women played a key role in this chapter of Philippine history.

In the first decade of the 20th century, two women's organizations were formed by women who called themselves "feminist." This was the *Asociacion Feminista Filipina* (1905) headed by Concepcion Felix and the *Asociacion Feminista Ilongga* (1906) headed by Pura Villanueva Kalaw. In these organizations sprang the desire for equal political rights among men and women which led to the suffragist or women's right to vote movement.

In the 1930s, the woman question became even more prominent because of the widespread campaign for women's suffrage. In the midst of the debate on women's right to vote, a lawyer, Perfecto E. Laguio, wrote a book, *Our Modern Woman: A National Problem* (1932) which set forth a list of arguments against women's suffrage. His stand was that the rightful place of women was in the home and in the family. Laguio appealed to the innate qualities of the Filipina as a wife and mother and considered the entry of women into politics by means of the vote as a new form of bribery whereby the modern woman might use her body in exchange for political favors.

In his letter to women before the Philippine Legislative Assembly voted on the proposed referendum on women's suffrage, he summed up the feudal view of women in the context of Philippine society in the first half of the 20th century. He wrote:

Now that the Legislature has closed without having decided on the proposed bill on women's right to vote, I am addressing this open letter to Tagalog women in my country, specially the poor and the ordinary to let them know the great danger attendant to the implementation of the right to vote by women in the archipelago.

The Filipina woman has ever been considered by Filipino man as having a high position and eminently worthy of respect. He places her upon a high pedestal. His love for her is the purest that can be given by any created being. Looking around him, he sees the difference between Filipina women and women of other lands. Her splendor immediately comes to mind: her dewy eyes, her raven hair, her demure smile, her soft hands, her attractive figure — he looks up to these in admiration and worships her from afar.

But with the widespread occurrence of women's right to vote, all these will change. The leader of the women in this movement aims to be on an equal footing with men, to have the same rights and responsibilities. If these are obtained, the Filipino woman will no longer experience the same high regard that Filipino men have for her. She will be lowering herself from the shrine where she is "lord of all she surveys" only to be placed on the level of men among whom the spirit of honor and valor are no longer to be found. She will undergo suffering to lose the potency of all that men have conferred on her over many centuries and the splendor that goes hand in hand with her history will completely fade from her womb. And this only to gain the vote that was never her heart's desire.

Analyzing the text of Laguio's letter, we find inscribed the view of women which seemingly places them on a pedestal when in real life they are no better than slaves. The argument of Laguio is that the right to vote is only for males who are human, not for women who are "goddesses."

The view of woman as a goddess to be worshipped is usually put forward as an argument that in reality woman is not oppressed but is placed on a pedestal, particularly in the case of the Filipina. Laguio believes that a man's love for a woman would be reduced if she were equal to him. In other words, what gives woman a high status is man's love and admiration for her. One may ask in turn: what if a woman is not worshipped and adored. What then is her status?

What is more, Laguio adds, the demand for equality among men and women will pave the way for a man to no longer entrust his salary to his wife:

As a consequence of this, man will no longer entrust his pay envelope to his wife. At present, everything that the man earns is entrusted to the woman who disburses it according to her judgment. No questions are asked of her. She is greatly trusted. But this practice will appear outdated, once women get the right to vote . . . The power of a woman over her husband and children will likewise be reduced, and she will be placed in a situation where she will be at pains to earn her living or obtain funds.

Holding the purse strings is considered to be the basis of women's power in the home which is seen as a measure of her strength vis à vis

men. This is the observation of many historians and sociologists, male or female, who have studied the unusual strength and creativity of the Filipina. According to Gelia Castillo, Philippine society has a tendency towards matriarchy because of the "entrepreneurial" cast of its women. Apart from Castillo, many other researchers, both local and foreign, praise the Filipina for this quality.

But if one really looks at it, this holding of the purse strings is not a real basis for the power of a woman. What if the salary is not enough? Is it not precisely because the salary handed over to them by their husband is insufficient that women are forced to be entrepreneurial? There is no doubt that more often than not among Filipino households, this economic power of woman is meaningless in the context of a society where a majority of the population do not earn enough to enable their families to live comfortably.

However, there is an incontrovertible aspect regarding the entrepreneurial quality and unusual strength of the Filipina, as even Encarnacion Alzona emphasizes. Camagay also suggests that during Spanish times, even though many rights and powers were lost to women, they never lost their firmness and endurance and continued to do work in and outside of the home. Only those women who were contaminated with the "Intramuros ideology," according to her, were tamed by the Spaniards to accept the concept of woman as weak, modest, obedient, a wife who belonged only to the home.

In the history and texts of the campaign of the suffragist movement, one can see in what direction several well-known suffragists steered the woman question or the qualities specific to women. The idea of equality between men and women stood out in the writings of Dr. Paz Mendoza Guazon collected in a book of essays entitled *My Ideal Filipino Girl* (1931). But if this book were to be analyzed at the present time, many would surely say that this is one more contribution to the idealization of woman. Guazon places emphasis on what is the ideal Filipina, abstracting from the views of famous personalities regarding what constitutes the ideal Filipina and outlining mores and manners for women as if these standards were valid for all time.

What Guazon clearly holds on to is the idea of equality between men and women; this is the same idea fought for by suffragists such as Pilar Hidalgo Lim, Sofia de Veyra and others. In an article responding to

criticisms of the suffragist movement, they pointed out that all beings, male or female, were created equal in the eyes of God.

The suffragist movement won in the referendum of May 1937 and, of course, this reinforced the adherence of women to the ideas behind the campaign, particularly the principal idea of equality between men and women. If one were to analyze these ideas now, several idealistic formulations regarding the gender issue may be observed. First, the absence of a close look at the situation of women under a colonial dispensation and second the strong, foreign influence of similar movements, particularly of the west, which were used as models by the leaders of the movement. Nevertheless, this was a movement that Filipino women can well be proud of, for they were the first women in Asia to win the right to vote.

Looking at Philippine society from 1937 onwards, it may be seen that the equality of men and women remains an illusion. For it is not just in the domination of politics by men that we see the lack of equality between men and women. It may be said that this inequality is firmly linked to many systems of domination.

According to the latest statistics on labor, for instance, women receive forty centavos compared to one peso received by men for equal work. Similarly, it may be seen that many fields have continued to be dominated by men since 1937. The power to formulate policy, the structures of power in many fields, remain in the hands of a majority of men. This is true, in spite of the fact that a woman has actually held the highest political post in the country.

Did Corazon Cojuangco Aquino achieve freedom, rights and justice for the ordinary women in the nation? Did the lives of women improve when she became president? These questions can be answered variously but in the end we arrive at one conclusion: the lives of women in this country have not improved in quality. They remain poor, poorer than men. They remain oppressed, more oppressed than men. In measuring the strength and power that obtains between men and women, men are still more powerful, in spite of what may be said to have been gained by women in terms of rights, education and other positions and privileges.

For in truth, there has been no qualitative change and Philippine society remains patriarchal. This is the beginning and the end, the rea-

son, the ultimate cause why there are feminists and why there is feminism in the Philippines. Women may or may not have read Virginia Woolf, Simone de Bouvoir, Mary Wollenstonecraft, Michelle Barrett and many other feminists in various parts of the world. But whether or not the thought of these women help in the shaping of Philippine feminism, the important thing is to accept that reason may be found in our history, in our culture and our life for the existence of feminism and feminists in the Philippines.

An Ideological Issue: The Construction of Women

It may be asked: if the patriarchal society were to be dismantled, if equality were to obtain in all fields of life, would the oppression of women be solved? Yes and no. Yes, if at the same time, we can bring down the structures that maintain the superiority and privileged position of men, including that in the valuable realm of the imagination.

Up to now, the construction of the image of women, both in literature and other media, remains a disturbing phenomenon. In the study of Penny Azarcon of the images of women projected by commercials, the traditional roles of women remain imbedded: keeping an orderly household, being faithful and sweet, being pretty, with a smooth, porcelain-like skin, having a sweet breath, being loving and caring, being charming and alluring, in effect, a sex symbol, thus the use of images of women in ads for liquor because they, too, go to your head. These images are all over radio, television and magazines and are further reinforced by stories, particularly in films.

In truth, these negative and stereotyped roles of women have been around for a century. Rizal, by virtue of his women characters in his two novels, started us off with the stereotypes of Maria Clara and Sisa, the martyred maiden and the martyred mother. It may be said that these stereotypes are gradually being broken down but it is still difficult to go beyond the Maria Clara and Sisa syndrome.

Among the attempts to overcome or change the image of women in the culture, we find attempts in other fields where women are involved. For instance, a song which was widespread before the Japanese Occupation was entitled "Silent Woman," alluding to woman's meekness and silence, and urging her to turn against her poverty and her sufferings. Nevertheless, the lyrics of the song are still in accord with the traditional role of woman as mother:

O silent woman
Think and reflect
Long have you been oppressed
Long have you been subjugated
Your children are hungry
Your infant is crying
Can you suffer these hardships?
Why don't you rise up
If you are a mother
Who feels and cares.

Inscribed in the text is still the idealization of the role of mother who cares because of her crying infant, although it does urge her to rebel.

It is quite true that woman needs to take on the roles of wife and mother, but women today emphasize the fact that, first, domestic work is not for the woman alone and second, the life of woman does not center only on her being a mother or a faithful wife. One can discern the resistance to traditional images of women in several songs that are gaining popularity at the present time, as for example, in the song "You are a Woman" by Ananias Montano which has the following lyrics:

You are woman
Desired, adored
Defended, yet you are not free
The door to progress is open
Face it, open it, uplift yourself

Alternatively, we have another song that is widespread in the feminist movement, entitled "Woman:"

Are you a Maria Clara,
A Huli and a Sisa
Who do not know how to fight
Why do you cry at your oppression
Women, are you innately weak
Are you a Cinderella
Whose only hope is a man
Are you a Nena
Who earns a living as a whore?
Women, are you only good in bed?

Let us open our minds
And study our society
How your thought has been shaped
And accept that you are just playthings
Women, is this your fate?
Why then are there Gabriela
Teresa and Tandang Sora
Who did not depend
On pity and tears.
They strove, weapon in hand
Women who aimed to be free
Why is there a Liza,
A Liliesa and Lorena
Who were not afraid to fight
You now have many comrades
Women, with weapons in hand.

But it might be noted that these songs use the second person: "You are a woman," "are you ..." and on further analysis, it is as if the writer of the lyrics were ordering or making a command for women to take on this role and that. This is understandable if we realize that the writers of these two songs are men.

However it may be in these songs, it may well be that the new history of women's lives and struggles has been started and that it will not be very long before the dismantling of the symbolic order in which Maria Clara has been ensconced as the principal model for the Filipina takes place. It is very possible that she will be replaced by some other symbol of womanhood in Philippine society.

By way of summary, the following points may be discerned in the construction of women in Philippine society:

1. It is possible that the concept of womanhood changed with the change in the history of women after the coming of the Spanish colonizers. Because of the imposition of a foreign culture, the formerly high status of woman as cultural leader of ancient society was overlain. Nevertheless, something remained of the original strength, firmness and creativity [initiative] of women that became the basis of their resistance to the concept of woman imposed by the conquerors.

2. Although women were able to win equal political rights by means of the right to vote, the subordinate position of women in many aspects of national life continued to prevail. This was further reinforced by the idealization of motherhood and virginity and the stereotyped images of women remained until the first half of this century.

3. In popular culture, the old concepts of woman and womanhood remain entrenched and the common images of women as fit only for the bedroom, the kitchen and the home prevail, although the women's movement and other movements for change are starting to dismantle these.

From this study, therefore, it is clear that feminist thought has the right to prevail and to flourish in Philippine society.