

# RIZAL ON WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN THE STRUGGLE FOR NATIONHOOD\*

*Albina Pecson Fernandez*

## Introduction

I have chosen for my topic Rizal's ideas on women and children in the struggle for nationhood for the following reasons:

1. I was once a child; I have produced children who will produce children; and, like all of you, I face the certain prospect of becoming a child again;
2. I am a woman deeply involved in women's studies, a new area study in academe that proposes to cultivate and develop the "sisterhood of man" or the "brotherhood of women;" and
3. As president of the Kapisanan ng mga Gurong Nagma-mahal kay Rizal (KAGUNARI), an association of teachers dedicated to the task of professionalizing the teaching of the Rizal course, I deem it my duty to contribute to the dismantling of a tradition of teaching the course not contemplated by those who enacted Republic Act No. 1425 in 1956. It is an open secret that the teaching of the course has taken these directions: firstly, the trivialization of Rizal by concentrating on those aspects of Rizal's life which are relatively unimportant, and secondly, the use of the course to question the status of Rizal as national hero. In the first, precious time is spent on the study of Rizal's love life, travels and nothing more; in the second, Rizal and Bonifacio, who did not quarrel while alive, are made to fight each other beyond the grave for the status of national hero.

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Republic Act No. 1425 mandates that teachers like us must teach the life and works of Rizal, particularly the **Noli** and the **Fili** to our students in such a way that we will imbue their minds with the values of patriotism and liberty for which our heroes have lived and died. It is in this light that I prepared my paper for today.

## Methodology

The paper will discuss the following:

1. The status of women and children during Rizal's time;
2. Rizal and "the Woman Question;"
3. Rizal's ideas on the emancipation of women and children; and
4. The relevance of no. 3 to the present situation.

## The Status of Women and Children during Rizal's Time

We can get a good picture of the status of women and children from the following:

1. The letters of Rizal to the members of his family;
2. His family members' letters to him;
3. His annotation of Morga's **Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas**;
4. His "On the Indolence of the Filipinos;"
5. The **Noli Me Tangere** and **El Filibusterismo**, his major works
6. His Letter to the Young Women of Malolos.

The picture drawn from these sources jibes with that presented by other sources like the Census of 1903 and the writings of various observers of the Philippine scene in the 19th century like John Foreman<sup>1</sup> and James LeRoy<sup>2</sup>, to mention but a few.

## Bringing Up Pepe and Bringing Down Pilar

The women of the 19th century were no longer the women that Dr. Antonio de Morga encountered in the 16th century (**Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas**, 1609, annotated and republished by Rizal in 1889, and this version is translated into English and published as **Events in the Philippine Islands**, 1961). The pre-con-

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<sup>1</sup> Foreman, John, *The Philippine Islands* (London: Kelly and Walsh, 1890)

<sup>2</sup> LeRoy, James, *Philippine Life in Town and Country* (Manila: Philippine Book Guild, 1968)

quest native women who enjoyed sexual freedom, who could become heads of the barangay, who could become priestesses, the babaylanes; who could divorce their husbands, who could own property on their own, and who had more or less the same rights as men, faded into the sunset with the coming of the Spanish Cross and Sword. Using the different social institutions, the colonial government systematically disempowered women to the point that they "were lowered before their own eyes" to use Rizal's very own words, and thus have become subject to men - men as conquistadores, men as friars, and men as fathers or husbands.

The Catholic Church, a dominant institution then and even now, is a bastion of patriarchy, the ideology that promotes men's superiority over women and children. The Catholic religion has promoted the idea that women are occasions of sin. St. Augustine dwelt on this theme in his **Confessions** which is echoed by Padre Casimiro Diaz<sup>3</sup> thus:

*Woman is the most monstrous animal in the whole of nature, bad tempered and worse spoken. To have this animal in the house is asking for trouble in the way of tattling, talebearing, malicious gossip and controversies, for whenever a man is, it would seem to be impossible to have peace and quiet. However, even this might be tolerated if it were not for the danger of unchastity. Not only should the parish priest of Indians abstain from employing any woman in his house, but he should not allow them to enter it, even if they are only paying a call.*

St. Paul, on his part, gave a basis for treating women as inferior to men with this admonition:

*Let your women keep silence in the churches; it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also with the law... And if they will learn to say anything, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the Church.*<sup>4</sup>

The patriarchal notion that women are occasions of sin led to the persecution of women. In 1484 Pope Innocent VIII issued a

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<sup>3</sup> Mananzan, Sr. Mary John, *Woman and Religion* (Manila: The Institute of Women's Studies, St. Scholastica's College, 1988) p.8

<sup>4</sup> 54 First Epistle to the Corinthians XIV 34-5 quoted in Figes, *Patriarchal Attitudes*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1970)

Papal Bull that gave a special impetus to the persecution of witches. Many women were killed after being tried by the Holy Court of Inquisition. Sprenger, a German zealot of the witchhunt, echoes the sentiments of St. Augustine and Padre Casimiro Diaz thus:

*...Woman is a wheedling and secret enemy. And that she is more perilous than a snare does not speak of the snare of the hunters, but of devils. For men are caught not only through their carnal desires, when they see and hear women: For S. Bernard says: Their face is as a burning wind, and their voice the hissing of serpents: but they also cast wicked spells on countless men and animals. And when it is said that her heart is a net, it speaks of the inscrutable malice which reigns in their hearts. And her hands are as bands for binding, for when they place their hands on a creature to bewitch it, then with the help of the devil they perform their design. To conclude, all witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable.*<sup>5</sup>

Rizal, himself, took note of the way the religion introduced by the friars falsified women. In his annotation of Morga's **Sucesos**, he made references to the suppression of women's sexuality.<sup>6</sup> He emphasized this observation even more in his unfinished **Novela Tagala**. Katipunla, the babaylan, says of Catholicism:

*Woman is a flower that should bear fruit and not remain sterile... On the other hand, the new religion prefers the virtue of purity. That is why they always extol the young women who shut themselves in that convent in Manila called Sta. Clara....*<sup>7</sup>

With the coming of the Spaniards came the Code Napoleon. Law contributed its share in the downgrading of women. Upon entering marriage they became civilly dead for as Blackstone pointed out in his Commentaries, "husband and wife are one and that one is, the husband." Women became so degraded in law that

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.64

<sup>6</sup> Rizal, Jose, Annotation of Morga's Events in the Philippine Islands (Manila: Jose Rizal National Centennial Commission, 1962) p. 247

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Demetillio, "Rizal's Cogency for Our Time," Comment, Third Quarter, 1958) p. 102-103

they were even lumped together with a class that needed the special protection of men. This is the class of "the feeble-minded, the insane, the disabled and minors".<sup>8</sup>

The patriarchal bias that the Church and law had promoted, the school reinforced. Encarnacion Alzona noted that "as the chief aim of these institutions was to prepare women either for motherhood or for the religious life, there was little academic instruction".<sup>9</sup> They were taught how to read and write a little, catechism, music, urbanidad<sup>10</sup> sewing and embroidery. The school taught women that their destination is either nunhood or wifehood/motherhood and their lives must thus be focused on the three K's: Kirche (Church), Kuchen (kitchen) and Kinder (children).<sup>11</sup>

The family, on its part, succeeded in making women internalize their very own oppressors—colonizers and men. The irony of it all is that women themselves are in charge of the very process that has done them in. Mothers, in the process of socialization, has brought down their own daughters by teaching and training them to be the "other" to men and brought up their own sons by teaching and training them to be the "one"; Thus sons have been taught and trained to be active, intelligent, and strong while daughters have been trained and taught to be the opposite: passive, dull and weak.<sup>12</sup>

The indoctrination of women by patriarchal ideology is vividly shown in Rizal's characters. Sisa accepts her husband's oppressiveness as part and parcel of married life; Maria Clara sacrifices her own happiness for the happiness of the men in her life - Padre Damaso, who fathered her, and Kapitan Tiago, who took her as his own; Paulita Gomez plays the role of sex object to the hilt; Juli chooses to die rather than fight the friar who stands as symbol of male supremacy; Dona Victorina understands the power of men and struggles to break into their magic circle; Tiya Isabel is quite content and happy being an unpaid domestic servant of Kapitan Tiago; and the manangs are all victims of the male God created by the friars, a God who extracts the love, sacrifices, money, re-

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<sup>8</sup> Feliciano, Myrna S., *The Filipina: A Historical-Legal Perspective*, "Women's Role in Philippine History (Quezon City: University Center for Women's Studies, 1990) pp. 9 et seq.; Cortes, "Women's Rights Under the New Constitution," *Woman and the Law*, 1975)

<sup>9</sup> *History of Education in the Philippines*, 1932, p. 33

<sup>10</sup> as discussed by P. Modesto's *Urbana at Felisa*

<sup>11</sup> Soriano, "Women and Education," *Women and the Law*

<sup>12</sup> Fernandez, Albina P., "Nature and Culture: Woman and Man," *Kababaihan, Kalinangan, Kaunlaran, Essays on Women and Culture (Quezon City: Forward Looking Women, 1990) pp. 8-9*

sources, services and endless prayers of women, who must also suppress their sexuality.

Children were, like women, not only subordinate to men but also their parent's property. They enjoyed no rights whatsoever. Their parents told them what to do and what not to do. In the novels of Rizal we find Padre Florentino and Pilosopong Tasyo who are forced by their respective mothers to become priests regardless of their own personal choice; Placido Penitente is told by his mother to put up with the oppressive Padre Millon because patience is the saving grace of the Indio; Elias is made to pay for the sins of his forebears; Crispin and Basilio are forced by their mother to become bell ringers; Tandang Selo tells Kabesang Tales not to collide with "the iron kettle," the friars, for he is only an "earthen pot," a native; Simon is under the control of his dead father, whose memory pushes the son to stage a revolution just to avenge the father's death; and Maria Clara is treated like a prized possession by Padre Damaso and Kapitan Tiyago.

### **From Life to Fiction: The Women in Rizal's Life**

The women characters of Rizal were not created from thin air. Rizal had a lot of experience with women. He grew up in a household that was predominantly female. Aside from his mother, Doña Teodora, were his nine sisters, namely, Saturnina, Narcisa, Olimpia, Lucia, Maria, Concepcion, Josefa, Trinidad and Soledad. There were also the servants. Outside the home were aunts, not to mention women of various ages, sizes and nationalities that entered his life at one point or the other.<sup>13</sup>

From his mother, a devout Catholic, Rizal learned only too well how the institution indoctrinates so effectively. The ever solicitous mother tells her son in a letter dated December 11, 1884:

*You don't know the sadness that I feel everytime I hear about you from people with whom I talk, so that I request you again and again not to meddle in things that will distress me. Well, I leave it to you to take pity on me. Now, what I earnestly ask you, my son, first of all, is not to fail your duties as a true Christian, which is sweeter to me than for you to become exceedingly learned - because learning sometimes leads us to greater dangers. Perhaps this will be my last letter to*

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<sup>13</sup> Palma, Rafael, *Pride of the Malay Race* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1949)

*you, so that remember this very well, which is my greatest desire.*<sup>14</sup>

In another letter Rizal got this message from his mother:

*It is very necessary that I tell you that, when you are not doing anything, you recall the time when you were yet very young, before you learned to read, you were devoted to the Holy Virgin, the Merciful Lady. She watched over you until you learned almost miraculously. I acknowledge that the learning that you attained is due to the many rosaries you recited to her. May we not forget this.*<sup>15</sup>

Mother's words must have crossed Rizal's mind as he expounded on the frailocracy's policy of obscurantism, the policy which promoted the idea that the individual should not seek knowledge outside the Church, for knowledge sought elsewhere will pose a danger to the Christian.

From his sisters, Rizal got a good briefing regarding the problems of women that are peculiar to their sex as well as the helplessness of children who come into the world unprotected from the hazards of childbirth, diseases and a hostile colonial society. From Saturnina Rizal received a letter dated July 16, 1885:

*I have two children now, the first-born is Alfredo and the second is Adela. I'm eight months now on the family way. Study obstetrics very well. Because we are many, there will always be some who will have difficulty in childbirth.*<sup>16</sup>

From Lucia, then suffering from a depression because of her son, Jose's, death, he received a letter dated February 2, 1886:

*The reason we have not written you is already told in Mariano's letter (her husband). What I can tell you is that here there is much disturbance and there is said to be many bandits, as well as many persons inspecting patents.*

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<sup>14</sup> Letters Between Rizal and Family Members (Manila: National Heroes Commission, 1964) p. 159

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 179

*I request you to study painless childbirth and the method of increasing the mother's supply of milk. This is what we need here.*<sup>17</sup>

On March 10, 1891 Narcisa tells his brother:

*I'm writing this to inform you clearly of the happenings during the last two months, January and February, inasmuch as you have not received any news concerning our fellow townsmen who have been despoiled of all their lands, homes, animals, and crops of sugar, rice, and other fruits of their labor. Those who are suffering this outrage number more than 300 families without counting the small families that live in faraway fields, farm workers of the evicted tenants. Some live under the shade of trees and those who are on the seashore, on the beach, and those inside the towns, some are on the street, through the fault of those who have authorized the lay-friar administrators to prohibit the giving of lodgings to evicted fellow townsmen. We suffer this very sad and painful situation and we keep quiet because the authorities do this to us by force. What are we going to do? We are now in a town very much persecuted by all the authorities, among them the civil guards who are everywhere, bothering everyone. Boys and girls of 12 are compelled to buy cedula in the townhall that cost four reales... In view of these ferocious abuses, the unfortunate ones are almost without means to earn their daily bread. Believe me, if this outrage continues, Calamba is going to die... The only thing that people expect from you there, as they have power of attorney there, is for you to file in the Supreme Court a complaint against this ubiquitous outrage.*<sup>18</sup>

From his sisters, Rizal learned that because women have wombs, they are subjected to many vicissitudes. Not only did they have to contend with a harsh colonial regime, they also had to face the equally harsh reality of their biology. Pregnancy was a great risk to their lives. The frequency of pregnancies and too many children gave them no time for themselves so they could engage in intellectual pursuits or get involved in community work. Lucia, after

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 208

<sup>18</sup> Letters Between Rizal and Family Members, pp. 423-424



burying her son, had to stay home and take care of two other surviving children. She would have wanted to join her husband, Mariano, in the farm where all hands were needed for milling the bumper crop of sugar, she told her brother in her letter mentioned earlier. On August 29, 1886 Lucia again wrote her brother:

*Perhaps when you return you will find conditions here quite different from there, on account of the poverty and gloom of the times. The wind that blows here hurts the eyes. Because we are accustomed to this kind of life, we don't feel it very much. For our misery our remedy is the Spanish word *paciencia*. If you have a better remedy, don't forget to bring it along.*

In this same letter one can discern the frustration of a woman so aware of social conditions yet too tied up with children and domestic work that she could not do anything to alter the situation. Her poignant letter ends with these words: "Sra. Sisa had an abortion this month."

On March 27, 1887 Lucia again informs her brother:

*I'm writing you to let you know that I survived happily my seventh childbirth and at present I have no ailment, so is your nephew. Write us how to take good care of him so that he will grow up and you can teach him when you return.<sup>19</sup>*

Lucia's letter shows that she was beginning to rely more on science and that she was aware of the importance of childcare. Her brother, who was in pursuit of a medical degree, would perform the miracle that her favorite saint had failed to do for Jose, the son who died from a childhood disease. Her brother, in addition, was exposed to advanced ideas and she wanted to share them for the sake of her children. If Lucia who, like the rest of womanhood was a creature of the friar policy of suppressing true consciousness, could open up to a new way of thinking, all was not lost. Women could still be saved and become saviors of the future generation.

On May 30, 1890 Lucia wrote Rizal about her husband's death. Mariano Herbosa died of cholera and was refused burial in consecrated grounds by the parish priest. She tells her brother that

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 263

"misfortunes have pursued me incessantly," but she does not mention any of these in her letter. Instead she tells him about community concerns:

*Concerning our town, perhaps your heart would ache at the blindness of our compatriots. Today, abuse, madness, and despotism are rampant. You can then imagine what would happen. When the lay brothers go out riding, the lieutenant of the civil guards sits on the little bench of the carriage and the acting lieutenant goes over the curate. When the lay brothers have some orders for the Hacienda, they send out the capitan, justice of the peace, and Mr. V. Laureola Roque. In a word, our town is rotten. The capitan has two faces and for that reason his term of office will be prolonged.<sup>20</sup>*

Lucia's awareness of the larger concerns and willingness to get involved was shared by Saturnina. Like Lucia, she proved that women could do men's jobs even while fully engaged in reproduction work. In a letter dated June 2, 1890, she says:

*Last year, when for the first time they exiled Maneng, I wrote you twice, as I did when my daughter Amelia died, but you haven't answered me even once. Since then I have not been able to write you due to the preoccupations that fill my head... Through Maneng's letters you must have learned by now that the General has exiled him again. I'm again in charge of our property and the milling in Mainit and Tanawan, for when they exiled him, it was already December on the very day of Christmas, while we were eating... I'm in Manila because Zamora (a doctor friend of the Rizal family) is going to treat me. He says that my womb is swollen, is out of place and is dirty; but I don't feel the symptoms he mentions...<sup>21</sup>*

From Soledad, another sister, Rizal saw the problems women faced as a result of their lack of personal autonomy. Soledad, a teacher, fell in love with a Mr. Quintero. Her man did not meet the approval of the family because he did not court her in the proper

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 301

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 306

way, which at that time meant visiting her in the Rizal house at Calamba in the presence of family members. Because Soledad showed that she had the courage of her desires, she was isolated by the members of the family. Aunt Concepcion Leyba informed Rizal about Soledad's "trouble-making" <sup>22</sup> and Rizal in a letter dated June 6, 1890 and posted in Brussels tells his errant sister:

*...Always keep your eyes on the honor and good name of all. Don't do anything which you cannot say and repeat before every one with head up and a satisfied heart. If you have a sweetheart, behave towards him nobly and with dignity, instead of resorting to secret meetings and conversations which do nothing but lower a woman's worth in the eyes of a man. Men should be noble and worthy and behave like men and not like thieves or adventurers who hide themselves. You should despise a man who is afraid to come out in the open. You should value more, esteem more your honor and you will be esteemed and valued.*

*I enjoin you to consider the gray hair of our parents; they are very old and we should sow with glory their old days. There is a certain egoism in the love of parents, it is true, but it is an egoism which is the offspring of their excessive love. Parents would not want to see their children unhappy.* <sup>23</sup>

Leonor Rivera and Rizal were deprived of their life together because their respective parents wanted to protect them from harm. In the same letter to Soledad, Rizal, while stressing obedience to parents, unwittingly exposes the unintended injury inflicted by parents on their children:

*...You know well, as all of you do, that I should and could go to Pangasinan, that I had a formal engagement there, and that for many years one of my greatest desires has been to go there. Well then, despite the fact that I have been cherishing this desire for a long time, and I still cherish it, our father's opposition was enough to give up all my plans. I should like to go to Bacolor, our parents opposed it, and I gave in and obeyed them.*

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 294

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 309-310

*And notwithstanding that my disobedience would not have brought the slightest dishonor to us. (Rizal is referring to his 1887 visit to the Philippines. His father fearing for his son's life, for by then the Noli has been circulated and it was an open secret that its author incurred the hatred of the friars, forbade the latter to go). Leonor has done the same thing as I did. Although she wished and could go to Manila with her father to fetch her nephews, her father's mere opposition was enough to stop her from insisting on it, and frankly, if she had insisted and I had known it, I would certainly not have gone to see her.*<sup>24</sup>

Rizal was a keen observer of women. His diary is full of accounts of women. In Madrid he took note of prostitutes; in Germany he extolled the virtues of the German woman and felt so sad and apprehensive when he read advertisements of males in America calling for domestic helpers for overseas employment and for mail-order brides posted in the newspapers; in the Basque region he noted women's industry; in France he observed the child-rearing practices of mothers; etc.<sup>25</sup>

Considering Rizal's intelligence and his exposure to the predicament of women as a sex separate from men, his interest in them was not the usual male interest in the female species. He saw them not as sex objects but as creatures in need of liberation.

### **Rizal and the "Woman Question"**

While Rizal was in Europe, others like him were seeing the need of women to be liberated. On January 3, 1884 Rizal made this entry in his diary:

*...This morning we gathered at the Cafe de Madrid, announced on a card that Graciano passed on to me. They spoke about the Circulo, the pretensions of some, etc. As to the book (which Rizal proposed should be published by the Circulo) Graciano would write on the Filipino women.*<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, Reminiscences and Travels (Manila: Jose Rizal National Centennial Commission, 1961); One Hundred Letters of Rizal (Manila: Philippine Historical Society, 1959) and Letters Between Rizal and Family Members

<sup>26</sup> Reminiscences and Travels, p. 83

The plan to write about the Filipino women was, no doubt, influenced by the so-called First Wave of the women's movement then sweeping the western world.<sup>27</sup> By that time, to ask the "woman question" was to be on the side of progress. In many parts of the world, the position of women in society became the subject of inquiry. Her traditional role as wife, mother and domestic worker had long been shaken by the revolutions that changed the world. The French Revolution of 1779 saw women leaving hearth and home to guard the barricades, lead food riots, and join the mob that led to the Fall of the Bastille. The French artist Delacroix memorialized the new role women assumed, that of revolutionary, in the now famous "Liberty at the Barricades."<sup>28</sup> In Russia, the feat of the French women was replicated. From 1773-1775, 15% of the 2,564 individuals arrested for political crimes were women. In 1881 Sofia L'vovna Perovskaia led the successful plot to assassinate the Czar of Russia, Alexander II. She was the first woman of that country to be hanged for a political crime. Her hanging gave an impetus to women to push for their emancipation.<sup>29</sup> After her death more and more women began to see discrimination based on sex. While the serfs were emancipated, women were not. Thus, the "woman question" was raised.

The Industrial Revolution unsettled family life by taking women out of home and hearth to work in factories and creating urban centers that uprooted men, women and children from their rural setting.<sup>30</sup> Because the wages in the factory system were insufficient to support life, earnings through prostitution became a major income source. On the demand side were the men of functioning glands who could not afford to bring their wives with them. On the supply side were women workers whose wages were so small that they had to sell the only resource they had: their bodies.

Rizal himself noted the presence of prostitutes in Spain. He was shocked by their presence, considering the Spaniards' pretension to morality in the Philippines where prostitutes were few and mostly non-Filipino.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Freeman, Jo, *The Politics of Women's Liberation* (New York: Longman, Inc., 1975)

<sup>28</sup> Bridenthal, Renate and Koonz, Claudia, *Becoming Visible, Women in European History* (Boston, London, etc.: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1977) pp. 236-254

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 346

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 255-279

<sup>31</sup> *Letters Between Rizal and Family Members*, Vol. II, Book I, p. 89; for statistical data on prostitution in the Philippines, see Census of 1903.

Temma Kaplan describes prostitution in Spain thus:

*Until the middle of the 19th century, it was quite common for poor widows or seasonably employed single women to engage in occasional prostitution.... One sociologist estimated that in 1872 there were as many as 17,000 clandestine prostitutes in Madrid. By the turn of the century, critics of the city claimed that there was one prostitute for every 13 or 14 men and that about 6% of the female population of the city were prostitutes. But many of the women worked as seamstresses, milliners, and garment workers when such work was not available.<sup>32</sup>*

Rizal's letter to his brother, Paciano, written in Madrid on February 13, 1883 attests to the presence of prostitution on a wide scale:

*Women abound even more and it is indeed shocking that in many places they intercept men and they are not the ugly ones either... With respect to morality there are also some who are models of virtue and innocence and others who have really nothing womanly about them except their dress and at most their sex. Rightly it has been said that the women of the South of Europe have fire in their veins. However, here prostitution is a little more concealed than at Barcelona, though no less unrestrained.<sup>33</sup>*

In America, women also asked the "woman question" because of the fact that men were interpreting Thomas Paine's "The Rights of Men" too literally. While women paid taxes, they were not represented in government because they were denied the right to vote. The realization of their inequality with men became more acute when the Negro was emancipated from slavery and later given the right to vote.<sup>34</sup> In 1848, women from different western countries met at Seneca Falls, New York, to discuss the feminist

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<sup>32</sup> Bridenthal and Koonz, *Ibid.*, p. 409

<sup>33</sup> *Letters Between Rizal and His Family Members*, Vol. II, Book I, pp. 89-90

<sup>34</sup> Donovan, Josephine, *Feminist Theory* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Co., 1977) pp. 246-384

agenda. Read at the convention by Elizabeth Cady Stanton is the now famous "Declaration of Sentiments" which reads in part:

*We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.... The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward women, having its direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her. To prove this let facts be submitted to a candid world.*<sup>35</sup>

The Declaration then enumerated the facts which included women's exclusion from the franchise, the compulsion to submit to laws she had no part in making, the construction of her civil death upon marriage, the theft of her property, the status of women as an irresponsible being required to promise obedience to her husband and being bound to his chastisement, the formulation of divorce laws in the interest of men, taxation without representation, the exclusion of women from all "avenues of wealth and distinction which he considers most honorable to himself," scanty remuneration for women, denial of education, the double standard which operated to the advantage of men, to the monopolization of the Church, and usurpation of the prerogative of Jehovah himself, claiming it as his right to assign to her a sphere of action, when it belongs to her conscience and her God."<sup>36</sup>

## Rizal and Feminists

Rizal had direct contact with feminists of his day. His **Noli Me Tangere** was published in Berlin, Germany, on March 21, 1887. It was printed by a firm run by feminists.

The Zetzerinnen-Schule des Lette-Verein established the Typographische Institut in January 1874. This was a school that trained women in printing. In 1887, it had 37 pupils. The school was attached to a printing shop, the Berliner Buchdruckerein Aktiengesellschaft Setzerinnen-Schule des Lette-Verein. The shop offered the cheapest rate for printing throughout Berlin. For 2,000 copies

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<sup>35</sup> Hole, Judith and Levine, Ellen, *Rebirth of Feminism* (New York: Quadrangle Books, Inc., 1975) p. 429

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 430-431

Rizal was charged only P300. Also, by Rizal's own account, the women printers were very efficient. They never failed to deliver the galleys on time as specified in the contract.<sup>37</sup> Outside Europe, Rizal also had the good fortune of meeting feminists that fascinated him no end. While touring the United States, he met a certain Miss Smith from Boston. Rizal was so impressed with her high level of consciousness. In his diary, he noted that she gave him a comprehensive history of Chicago and annotated for him various places of interest.<sup>38</sup> On his way home to the Philippines after publishing the *Noli*, Rizal met a feminist aboard the ship. He observed:

*A handsome woman, well painted, with the look of an actress, Madam de Block (?) is attracting attention for her beauty. They say that she is traveling for a scientific mission. We shall see.*<sup>39</sup>

The lady in question turned out to be a feminist sent to India to write on the condition of Indian women. Rizal finally had his wish to talk to her. He wrote:

*I had a long conversation with the lady in question bearing on medicine, peoples, women writers, artists, sentiments on literature. She is going to India to study Indian women.*<sup>40</sup>

In 1889 Rizal, then in London annotating Dr. Antonio de Morga's *Sucesos*, managed to get connected with First Wave feminists in the Philippines through the intercession of Marcelo H. del Pilar who requested him to write to the women of Malolos. These were the twenty daughters of middle class families who articulated what can be considered feminist sentiments: lack of priority in education, role overload in the homefront, etc. Writing to Governor-General Valeriano Weyler on December 12, 1888, the women said:

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<sup>37</sup> Ingles, "The Place Where the *Noli* Was Printed," *This Week* 15:30-31, June 19, 1960; Fernandez, "On The Centenary of the Letter to the Young Women of Malolos: A Feminist Reading," unpublished lecture delivered at the UP College of Social Work and Community Development, Bulwagang Tandang Sora on February 22, 1989

<sup>38</sup> *Reminiscences and Travels*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173



*We...(are) desirous of learning the rich Spanish language...and unable to study it in the colleges at Manila, some on account of their limited funds, others on account of pressing circumstances in their homes, nor can they do so in the daytime because they are busy with most peremptory household chores; with such purpose, we humbly pray Your Excellency to grant us a night school at the house of an elderly woman relative of ours to which we shall go accompanied by our mothers....<sup>41</sup>*

In his letter, written in Tagalog, Rizal told the women:

*...[N]ow that you have set an example to those, who, like you, long to have their eyes opened and be delivered from servitude, new hopes are awakened in us and we now even dare to face adversity because we have you for our allies and are confident of victory. No longer does the Filipina stand with her head bowed nor does she spend her time on her knees, because she is quickened by hope in the future....<sup>42</sup>*

## **Rizal and the Feminist Spectrum**

During Rizal's time feminism took the following forms:

1. *Liberal feminism*: This kind of feminism explains the subjection of women as a function of rules, whether formal as in the legal system, or informal as mores and tradition. The rules are discriminatory to women. On account of their sex, women are less equal to men at home, in the workplace and in the society in general. To make them equal, all discriminatory rules must be repealed and sexism must be removed from the existing culture. Associated with this kind of feminism were bourgeois women and men typified by the writers, Harriet Taylor, and her husband, John Stuart Mill, who wrote **On the Subjection of Women**<sup>43</sup> and Jaggard.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Fores-Ganzon, Guadalupe, (translator) *La Solidaridad* Vol. I (Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 1973) p. 13

<sup>42</sup> *Selected Writings of Rizal*, p. 88

<sup>43</sup> Mill, John Stuart, *On The Subjection of Women*, pp. 1-30

<sup>44</sup> Jaggard, Allison, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (New Jersey: Rowman and Allenhead, 1983)

2. *Marxist feminism*: Frederick Engels' **The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State** written in 1884 provides the explanation for women's subjection. Women lost their "mother right" as a consequence of changes in the mode of production. When surplus was created as a result of improved forces of production, men wanted to hand it down to their own children and so demanded monogamy from women since it is only in monogamy that men can be sure of who their children are. The moment women lost control over property they became systematically disempowered by patriarchy and the state. They have been since assigned to reproduction work, which is unpaid, socially unrecognized and therefore not reflected in the Gross National Product while men have been assigned to do production work, which is paid and socially recognized and therefore reflected in the Gross National Product. The sexual division of labor aggravated the low status of women. Under capitalism they have become the proletariat while men are the capitalists. To emancipate women, classes and the bourgeois state must be destroyed through the class struggle. The new state can then emancipate women by putting them in production work and give them equal rights as men.
3. *Anarcho-feminism*: This kind of feminism was popular in Spain during Rizal's time. It explains the subjection of women as primarily the function of the Church and the traditional family. The Church molded women into creatures submissive to the State, clergy, and men. To emancipate women, they must be rid of the indoctrination of the Church and the family through secular education. In 1873, Trinidad Soriano presented a theory of anarchist schooling which was adopted by all anarchists in Spain until the 1930s. In essence the anarchist educational proposals challenged church-state authority which was felt to be responsible for stifling the emergence of true consciousness. The Church promoted superstition and the State repressed individual freedom as a consequence of its function to preserve law and order. Anarchists also tied the issue of secular education to revolutionary consciousness. Scientific education would release the fears of human beings and thus enable them to create a better world for both sexes.<sup>45</sup> Aside from educating women, the anar-

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<sup>45</sup> Bridenthal and Koonz, op. cit., p. 412

chists proposed the destruction of the bourgeois State which should not be replaced by another kind of state for any kind of state will enslave the people living in it. True freedom can only be experienced in a stateless society. The Hobbesian scenario of a war of all against all in the absence of government will not materialize if people formed cooperatives and syndicals, which are sufficient to produce the harmony individuals living in society seek.

4. *Nihilist feminism*: This was popular in Russia in the latter half of the 19th century. Its proponent believed that women have become the subordinates of men because of the Church and State which have influenced the traditional family so much. In order to emancipate women, the traditional family must be destroyed together with the institutions that produced it. Like the anarchists, the nihilist feminists believed in secular education and the formation of cooperatives that should replace traditional organizations like the family and the existing economic institutions. Chernyshevskii's novel, **What Is to Be Done**, written in 1862 became the inspiration of nihilist feminists. Like the heroine in the novel, many feminists in Russia organized cooperatives where women helped one another in sisterhood.<sup>46</sup>

Of these kinds of feminism, what did Rizal choose?

### **Rizal's Brand of Liberal Feminism**

Rizal was a liberal feminist. It is his thesis that women can make or break a nation. If they are irrational, because of the indoctrination by the Church and State which promoted false consciousness, then they can only create an irrational society. If, however, they are rational because they are left alone by Church and State to develop their own subjectivity in their own way, then they can create a rational society. This thesis is implicitly presented in the two novels and explicitly in his "Letter to the Young Women of Malolos".

In the two novels, Rizal presents female characters who are possessed of what it takes to make a nation, if only their minds were rid of the false consciousness implanted and nourished by the

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 346-349

friars. Let us take, for example, Doña Victorina, a character perceived by many to represent the worst a woman can become. A close look at her character, however, shows that she has the courage of her conviction, tenacity of purpose, and the willingness and ability to translate plans into action. Can you imagine what she could do if she were rid of the false ideas implanted in her consciousness by Church and State? Can you imagine what she could do for herself and her country if instead of her colonial mentality she had the consciousness of the Spartan women Rizal wrote about in his letter to the women of Malolos? As it was, Dona Victorina could put the Spaniards in their right places. Tiburcio is nothing without her money, connections, and guile; Padre Damaso is shown to be the ignoramus that he is when the woman in question tells him in public that it was the Chinese, not a Franciscan friar, who invented gunpowder.<sup>47</sup>

Or take Maria Clara. She is also perceived to be a weakling. Yet, miseducated that she was by a traditional family, the Church and the school, she nevertheless manages to stand her ground. She defies Padre Damaso, the symbol of patriarchal, ecclesiastical and state authority.

In my study of the women characters of Rizal I found no one that would not qualify for nation-building if rid of false consciousness. If they are to receive training in women and development as espoused by the United Nations' Forward-looking Strategies formulated in Nairobi a century later and the Philippine Development Plan for Women (PDPW), the companion piece of the National Development Plan of the Philippines currently in place, I am sure that all the female characters of Rizal can become nation-builders in one way or the other.

## **Rizal's Strategy for the Liberation of Women**

If it is false consciousness that is enslaving women, then education is the answer. Women must be given the right to education because they are in charge of the education of men. As mothers, they are a child's first teacher and the model of adulthood. Rizal tells the women of Malolos thus:

*What kind of offspring will a woman have whose kindness of character is expressed by mumbled prayers, who knows nothing by heart except awits novenas, and*

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<sup>47</sup> Guerrero translation, Noli, p. 12

*fake miracles; whose amusement consists in playing panguingue or in confessing the same sins over and over again? ...The mother who knows nothing but to teach her child how to bend its knees and kiss the hand must not expect her son to have anything but the spirit of a slave. A tree that grows in the mud is either light or is good only for firewood....<sup>48</sup>*

Rizal, in view of the above, advised women to elevate their consciousness by listening more to themselves rather than the friars so that they could liberate their children from false consciousness.

*Let us be reasonable and open our eyes, especially you, women, who are the first to influence the conscience of man... Awaken and prepare the will of your children to the just and proper appreciation of honor, of sincere and firm purpose, clear judgment, clean behavior, honest acts, love of fellowmen and respect for God.... And, since life is beset with sorrows and sufferings you must fortify their minds against every stroke of misfortune and inure their hearts to danger. People can expect neither honor nor prosperity as long as they will not educate their children in a manly (sic) way and as long as woman who guides the child in its tender years is slavish and ignorant... The duties that woman has to perform in order to deliver the people from suffering are not unimportant. Whatever they may be, they are duties which can not excel the strength and character of the Filipino woman. Well-known are the power and good judgment of the women in the Philippines; that is why they are blinded and tied and rendered pusillanimous. Their enslavers can now rest at ease, because so long as the Filipino mother remains a slave so long will her children be slaves. This is the cause of Asia's prostration: her women are ignorant and oppressed. Europe and America are powerful because there the women are free and well educated, lucid in intellect and strong of will.<sup>49</sup>*

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<sup>48</sup> Selected Writings of Rizal, pp. 89-90

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 92

Women are also advised by Rizal to help their husbands in the national liberation efforts:

*...When she is married, she must aid her husband, inspire him with courage, share his perils, refrain from causing him worry, and sweeten his moments of affliction, always remembering that there is no grief that a stout heart can not bear and there is no worse inheritance than that of infamy and slavery.<sup>50</sup>*

Rizal also admonished women to emulate the women of Sparta who dedicated their children and men to their country. To love and protect the country is the ultimate virtue.

*...Man, the Spartan women said, was not born to live for himself alone, but for his native land. So long as this way of thinking prevailed and they had that kind of women in Sparta, no enemy was able to put his foot upon her soil.<sup>51</sup>*

Rizal was so sure that if the women of the Philippines would liberate themselves from false consciousness and endeavor to educate their children then what he asked through Padre Florentino in the **Fili** would be answered:

*Where are the youths who will dedicate their innocence, their idealism, their enthusiasm to the good of the country? Where are they who will give generously of their blood to wash away so much shame, crime and abomination? Pure and immaculate must the victim be for the sacrifice to be acceptable. Where are you, young men and young women, who are to embody in yourselves the life force that has been drained from our veins, the pure ideals that have grown stained in our minds, the fiery enthusiasm that has been quenched in our hearts.<sup>52</sup>*

## **The Relevance of Rizal's Ideas**

Rizal saw all the forms of oppression women were subjected to. In the story of Sisa he exposes gender oppression. Her hus-

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 94

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 95

<sup>52</sup> **Fili**, p. 298

band dispossesses her from her paraphernal property, uses her body to satisfy his lust and makes her his private domestic slave. The story of Juli exposes the class oppression women had to endure in feudal times. Because of poverty, Juli becomes a debt peon and is exploited by a woman of her own race. Rizal also saw women's oppression based on race. The Spanish friars treated the native women like their wives: they possessed their being; made them produce children obedient to the clergy; made them work for free in the *convento*; and treated them as inferiors. National oppression is also very well discussed by Rizal. The story of Elias' grandmother discusses how the state can put women down. For this reason, Rizal believed that the first on the agenda for women's liberation is to liberate the country first, for a country that is not itself free cannot possibly liberate its own children, especially the daughters. It is this insight of Rizal that is very relevant today. More and more women of colonized and neocolonial countries are beginning to realize that unless their country is decolonized neither will they cease to be men's colony.<sup>53</sup> The story of Juli encapsulates women's oppression on all levels: national, class and gender. Had she not jumped out of the *convento's* window to her death, she would have been raped. Rizal is saying in her story what the radical feminists say about rape: It is not a crime against any particular woman but a crime against all women. Because women know that men can penetrate their bodies even against their will, the former learn to fear men and bow to them in subjection. Rizal is also saying in Juli's story that colonizers rape the colonized in the same way that government rape the governed; the propertied people the propertyless; men, the women, and adults, the children.

Rizal's insights on the role of women as agents of culture still ring a bell. The Philippines today may be an independent country but a new kind of colonialism, neocolonialism, has replaced Spanish and American hegemony. This time around, the fight against the enemy is formidable. This kind of enemy has no face. And women, as socialization agents keep this faceless enemy alive and well. Victims of colonial mentality, women transfer the same mentality to their young. They do this in seemingly innocuous ways. They bring up their sons and bring down their daughters through sexist socialization. They provide the young with toys that give the message that foreign is high-tech; foreign is powerful; foreign is

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<sup>53</sup> See Mies, Maria, *Patriarchy and the Accumulation of Wealth on a World Scale* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1986)

desirable and good. They exhort their children to get good grades in school so that they can go abroad and earn dollars. And, they make their children promise not to engage in any political activity, for to do so is to court danger. Against this black backdrop must we look at Rizal's call to women to be creators of a new culture that must replace the culture of poverty promoted and developed by the friars. Through women, no longer will the Indios be content to walk side by side with their carabaos on their way to heaven. Through conscientized women the Filipino people will march consciously and surely towards their historic goal of freedom and the good life.

Rizal's silence on the need to struggle openly against gender oppression was, I think, for a tactical reason. Like the orthodox Marxists, he must have felt that unity was of great importance. Fighting the frailocracy needed a united front. The call for "fighting on all fronts" by today's socialist feminists has its dangers then and, maybe, even now. Instead of strengthening the force that will provide the counterforce to class and national oppression, it could very well weaken it by dividing the revolutionary ranks along sex lines.

Though Rizal has given us many valid feminist insights, he can only be considered a limited feminist. He ignored sexism altogether. For example, he makes it appear in his "Letter to the Young Women of Malolos" that women's destination in life is motherhood and parenting is for women only. In fact, he blames the women of the Philippines for the enslavement of the Philippines. They are to blame, because they have allowed themselves to become the conveyor belt of colonialism and the many problems that it has spawned. Should not the men be blamed instead? After all they have been in control of women and children for ages!

## Conclusion

To recapitulate, Rizal expounded on the idea that women can make or break a country. Born with the capacity for rationality like men, women, given the opportunity to develop themselves to their fullest capacity through education, can create the nation where the good life is by turning ordinary boys and girls into good citizens and inspiring their husbands not to live the life of cabbages but of politicized *homo sapiens*.

Rizal is silent on the role of men. Maybe he knew that before long the feminists of his country will make silence speak with the voice of women as the "One" and not the "Other" to men.