

## ADVOCACY

# Then Feminism Can Begin...

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I must confess that as I get older I find less and less time to see the movies and I am really unfamiliar with current developments in Philippine cinema with regard to the portrayal of women characters, or treatment of themes involving women. But I have read various articles by Marra Lanot, Menchu Sarmiento, Nick Deocampo, and others on the topic of women in movies, specifically how women's roles are portrayed. I gather that even with the emergence of talented directors like Laurice Guillen and Marilou Abaya, who have dealt with feminist themes in their movies, the typical movie still belabors the theme of the fallen woman. As Nikki Coseteng once said, directors cannot seem to make movies without rape scenes or women being slapped, kicked around, or brutalized. Hardly a movie passes without the woman ending up distraught, beguiled, betrayed, violated, or at worst murdered. Practically every facet of violence and sexism is portrayed in great graphic lurid detail.

I leave it to the other members of the panel to talk more about women in Philippine cinema because obviously they are more knowledgeable than I am in this regard. What I can do perhaps as one whose academic interests include feminism is to try to explore how women should be portrayed in film, in ads, and in various forms of media. We are all aware of the points that Marra and Menchu have made regarding the degrading, inferior, demeaning and other put-down roles that women are made to assume in the movies. Obviously, this should not be tolerated any longer.

However, the growth of a feminist consciousness in media has produced the opposite trend in which women are portrayed as superwomen who can do everything better than men. We only have to watch Charlie's Angels, Policewoman, Kate and Allie, and many of today's TV programs. The pattern has swung to the other extreme. On the one hand, we don't want women portrayed as weak, passive, naive, and stupid. On the other hand, it is equally undesirable to characterize them as overly aggressive. This latter

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tendency has drawn criticism casting women as castrating, emasculating, battle-axes of the Republic, amazons, and so on. It opens a whole new arena of sexism.

The first thing that must be clear in people's minds is what feminism means in terms of Filipino women. Defining feminism is an extremely difficult task because it means going back to the whole body of scholarship or intellectual tradition which is male-oriented. There has to be a prior process of demystification. Even the basic matter of language, or I should say, especially language, complicates any effort to redefine woman's place in society with its historical bias. Language defines things feminine as childish, child-like, sweet, diminutive, diminished, etc. These reinforces the view or concept of man as central or primary, and woman as peripheral or secondary. We will have to completely overhaul the nature of language to come up with a redefined meaning of woman, feminism, and similar concepts.

If language is essentially sexist, so is the whole body of scholarship over centuries. Every discipline is infected with the sexism virus. Jessie Barnard defines sexism as the "unconscious, taken-for granted, assumed, unquestioned, unexamined, unchallenged acceptance of the belief that the world as it looks to men is the only world, that the way of dealing with it which men have created is the only way, that the values which men have evolved are the only ones, that the way sex looks to men is the only way it can look to anyone, that what men think about what women are like is the only way to think about what women are like."<sup>1</sup> In practically every discipline, the assumptions made about women are often unempirical, meaning they are unsupported by actual fact. By the same token, the assumptions made about men are even more unempirical. That man is superior and woman is inferior is the ultimate truth that constitutes the natural order of things in the universe. This is the basic root of sexist ideology.

As long as we are talking about the established disciplines, let me mention just one example which will bring home this point. I'm talking about Psychology which has perpetuated sexist notions about women essentially because of psychologists like Freud. He asked that famous question, what do women want? In the article "Psychology Constructs the Female", Naomi Weisstein argues that psychologists, just like other scientists or academics, "find what they want to find and what they expect to find." She mentions the

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<sup>1</sup>(Woman in Sexist Society, edited by Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran, (New York: Basic Books), 1971, p. xxvi.)

classic example of Freud's theory that the fundamental female neurosis springs from the fact, mind you, that woman is not a man!<sup>2</sup> Freud did not employ any empirical methodology to arrive at this "truth" about the psychology of woman. It is a socially-determined notion about woman's nature but for centuries it was a major theory of Western psychology.

Even in the more mundane preoccupations, such as advertising, the image of woman conforms to the Freudian or masculine fantasy. In "Seduced and Abandoned in the New World," feminist Wendy Martin demonstrates, using the American novel as an example, that women of independent thought and action are severely punished—they either die or are cast out or go mad, while women who submit to men are rewarded and become objects of marital protection or bliss. Martin has an analysis of *The Scarlet Letter*, based on the biblical theme of the fall of Adam and Eve.<sup>3</sup>

I can mention many more examples, but the point has been made that the oppression of women that feminists talk about has a real basis in historical fact. The rectification of this phenomenon is what pre-occupies feminists today.

At this point, let me address the flip side of my main question raised earlier about the appropriate application of feminism in Philippine culture. Obviously we cannot follow the Western model because we have a different history and culture. The American feminists have branched out into several tendencies—ranging from Marxist to radical to socialist feminism. American feminism has gone through stages. The late sixties and early seventies were the high point of women's liberation. But now the movement has moved closer to the center and its proponents or advocates have resigned themselves to working within the framework of liberalism that underlies American culture.

It is difficult to prescribe what model should be followed in the Philippine situation. Models are intrinsically flawed in the sense that they may not fit the larger realities of a given culture. My gut reaction is to put the role of women in Philippine society within the proper perspective. There is not one type of Filipino woman but several. The typology embraces regional, linguistic, class, and generational distinctions. Whatever and wherever Filipino women are, they have contributed immensely to all aspects of our national and local life. There is a great diversity of women's roles and

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<sup>2</sup>See Naomi Weisstein, "Psychology Constructs the Female", in Gornick and Moran, p. 207-224.

<sup>3</sup>See Wendy Martin, "Seduced and Abandoned in the New World", in Gornick and Moran, p. 329-346.

concerns in Philippine society. Perhaps this has not been captured by the media, movies, advertising, etc., because they have already stereotyped or packaged the Filipino woman as a commodity, a sex object, a martyr, a thing. If only the producers were less motivated by profit and sensationalism, we could look forward to a more dignified and authentic portrayal of women in the arts and media. But this is wishful thinking. Obviously we have a long way to go.

Coming from a political science perspective, I should like to see more images, public images, of women and how they affect power in society. Here I am really not talking about individual female leaders who are now occupying positions of power such as the presidency. The fact that we have a woman president does not mean feminism has arrived in the Philippines. Feminism is more concerned with the collective power of women. Individual success stories may be due to historical accidents or artifacts like wealth, social class, and political connections. Women who have achieved power may in fact be anti-feminist.

There is also a politics of ordinary life in Philippine society in which women play a central and vital role, but it is glossed over because the kind of politics we know and are exposed to everyday is the macho, violent, and partisan kind in which men kill each other for power and glory. And women are never part of the equation. If we could change the politics of our everyday life to make room for the significant contributions of women, then perhaps this can affect the kind of politics at higher levels. This is the kind of feminist politics that should be developed—you have to think in terms of the great mass of women, and not tokenism. Our movies and other media of expression should recognize this.

So, the essential part of the definition of feminism I cited earlier should start from women themselves. It must start from everybody including men. We need a social or cultural revolution of sorts—the kind that can only be slow and long-range. We have to reform our social and political institutions. We have to make some radical, not just piecemeal changes. We keep talking about empowering women, but this is an empty dream if we cannot affect the fundamental character of our social structure.

Perhaps we can begin to think of film as a major medium for this very difficult process of change before we can think of empowering women. Then feminism can begin.