

Review: Film

A Question of Heroines

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Ang Kababaihan ng Malolos (2014). 85 minutes. Color. Directed by Sari Dalena and Kiri Dalena. Written and produced by Nicanor Tiongson. Cinematography by Kiri Dalena. Starring Hazel Faith dela Cruz as Basilia Villariño Tantoco, Karl Medina as Jose Rizal, Bong Enriquez as Governor-General Valeriano Weyler, and Carlos Celdran as Fray Felipe Garcia. Edited by Keith Sicat and Joris Fernandez. Philippines: Ambassador Bienvenido R. Tantoco Sr.



Official promotional photo of *Ang Kababaihan ng Malolos*. Photo by Kiri Dalena. Courtesy of the Women of Malolos Foundation, Inc. Used with permission.

One evening, a young man approaches a *bahay-na-bato* into which he is politely admitted by a female servant. The servant announces the arrival of the visitor to the lady of the house, who sweeps into the room where the man is waiting and greets him with cheer, telling him to call her “*Tiya*” (Aunt) rather than “*Lola*” (Grandmother) Ilyang. After he courteously turns down her offers of refreshment, their conversation takes a serious turn. It is not until the screen of a tablet computer

glowing in the young man's hand is included in the frame that the viewer comes to realize that the unfolding scene is not, as the architecture, clothing, and customs betoken, set in the 19th century after all—at least not entirely.

In this manner does *Ang Kababaihan ng Malolos* open. Dubbed a musical docudrama, it is a film encompassing territory far from unfamiliar to screenwriter and producer Nicanor Tiongson. Made to commemorate the 125th anniversary of Jose Rizal's "Letter to the Young Women of Malolos" which was written on February 22, 1889, *Kababaihan* is doubtless animated by Tiongson's previous scholarly and creative efforts: first, *The Women of Malolos* (2004), a book that has been praised as "a welcome addition to the emerging field of Philippine local history studies" by reason of its pleasurable writing style and "obviously painstaking research" (Gealogo, 2004, p. 430); and second, *Basilisa ng Malolos*, which its author has called an "anti-sarsuwela," because the production, put on by the University of the Philippines Playwrights' Theater under the direction of Jose Estrella in 2007, aimed to reinterpret, transform, and even subvert the conventions of the form to suit its specific storytelling needs (Ang, 2007).

Even if Ilyang, or Basilia Villariño Tantoco—a woman who, as Tiongson in *Women* (2004) has asserted, stood out for her "strength of will, fearless leadership, and the consistency and strength of her commitment to the liberation of woman and motherland" (p. 317)—is the main character of the film, *Kababaihan* strives to chronicle not her life as such but several historical occurrences from 1888 to 1906 in which she and her contemporaries participated, the most notable, of course, being the one that took place on December 12, 1888. On this date, according to Tiongson, Ilyang, along with 19 other women to whom she was related by consanguinity or affinity—namely Elisea, Juana, Leoncia, Olympia, and Rufina Reyes; Eugenia and Aurea Tanchangco; Teresa and Maria Tantoco; Anastacia, Basilia, Paz, Aleja, Mercedes, Agapita, Filomena, Cecilia, and Feliciano Tiongson; and Alberta Uitangcoy—signed and presented a letter to Governor-General Valeriano Weyler seeking his permission to open a night school in the home of one of their relatives where they could learn the Castilian language.

It was by virtue of these women's decision to seek audience with Weyler that they became inextricably bound up with each other, referred to collectively as "the Women of Malolos," and discussed in laudatory, if not entirely condescension-free, terms by Filipino nationalists who saw in the bold request "not only an example but a justification of their fight for the teaching of Spanish in the archipelago" (Tiongson, 2004, p. 177)—a fight that they were then waging against the friar orders which were vigorously and consistently opposed to attempts by government authorities

to implement the will of a Spanish Crown that had repeatedly decreed that the inhabitants of its lone Asian colony be educated in the official language of the empire.

Over the course of *Kababaihan*, Ilyang operates as narrator for the benefit of her distant descendant who is identified in the credits as “Young Nic.” Taken for granted rather than explained, the ability of Young Nic to become present in a past that is at once filial, local, and national allows him to pose questions to his ancestor about key events, as well as bear witness to these. The exchanges between Ilyang and Young Nic are what organize and link the different episodes of the film together, which, aside from the delivery of the women’s letter, include a confrontation between Jose Rizal and Fray Felipe Garcia at a dinner party; Ilyang’s and her peers’ lending of assistance to the revolution against Spain, and later in the war against the Americans; Ilyang’s initiation into the Katipunan; the founding of the Asociacion Central de la Cruz Roja; and the establishment of the Asociacion Feminista Filipina.

Whether this structure is effective bears asking; Nick Deocampo’s remarks about the influence of television on the documentary film in these parts come to mind. Cleaving to John Grierson’s definition of the documentary as the creative treatment of reality, Deocampo has lamented that the genre has become “presentational” rather than “critical,” “presented to you by an interviewer who strings all of these disparate events or materials for the sheer comfort of making coherent what would otherwise just be incoherent. In other words, resting on a substitute character, such as a strong interviewer...” (Kenny, 2005, p. 224-225)—or, as in the case of *Kababaihan*, a strong interviewee. Whenever Young Nic is onscreen with Ilyang, his sole function is to elicit from her a detailed response, complete with names and dates, for the corresponding sequence to then illustrate. Although this reviewer has not seen *Basilisa*, from which some songs in the film were apparently taken, it might be added that *Kababaihan* does not benefit from what may be more than a passing resemblance to its theatrical forebear. For instance, certain scenes of *Kababaihan*, especially those involving several characters, are blocked in a way that seems to presuppose a proscenium stage, with the actors arranged in lines or semicircles facing the camera.

The chief conceit of the film, that of a student of history who is able to weave in and out of time so as to extract information from the past, has been acknowledged by Tiongson, speaking at the open forum after the February 17, 2014 screening of *Kababaihan* at the Cine Adarna of the University of the Philippines Film Institute, as being inspired by the critically acclaimed *Bayaning 3rd World* (2000). Directed by Mike de Leon, and co-written by de Leon and Clodualdo del Mundo, Jr., *Bayaning*

3rd World follows a duo of filmmakers—numbered rather than named—who, while trying to produce a film about Rizal that lays to rest the controversy over his alleged retraction, conduct a series of interviews with various personalities who were part of Rizal’s life, such as Rizal’s mother and siblings, Father Balaguer, Josephine Bracken, not to mention Rizal himself. When *Kababaihan* and *Bayaning 3rd World* are understood as negotiations with or interventions in official history, the former pales, even suffers in comparison to the latter; unlike *Bayaning 3rd World*, which is irreverent and ambiguous in the treatment of its subject matter, showing how Rizal has thickened and densified into a cultural text replete with multiple, competing significations, *Kababaihan* succumbs all too readily to what Resil B. Mojares (2004) has called “the mendicant desire for recognition and assimilation” (p. 95).

Kababaihan may not have a plot in the classical sense, but its plot, in the sense of the ground it marks and stakes out, or the schema it deploys in order to define, propose, and explain, brings to the fore resonant questions about history and historiography. A film designed primarily “to be shown to high schools and colleges all over the country, so that the patriotism and courage of these women may be known and emulated by the younger generations of Filipinos” (Tiongson, 2014, no page number), its vexed and vexing character as a compensatory representation of women that mainstream history has tended to gloss over or ignore requires scrupulous scrutiny. *Kababaihan* exhibits an outlook that could be referred to as nationalist-triumphalist feminism; its zeal not only to render the Women of Malolos visible but also to valorize them inclines the film to strip historical actors and events of their complexities and contradictions for the sake of constructing a linear, developmental account of Filipinas, typified by Ilyang, coming into their own and thereby contributing to the inexorable march of progress—an account that can then be conveniently subsumed and contained by official history.

Retrieving Ilyang and her peers—and indeed, other women—from oblivion certainly constitutes an important project, but the purposes of such a maneuver demand to be rigorously examined and subjected to continuous, self-reflexive inquiry. If the objective is to just carve out niches and enshrine these women in an extant pantheon of national heroes, then one remains complicit with a dominant historiography that has consistently privileged the national over the local, the public over the private, and, most crucially for this film, the male over the female. Mere insertion into the grand narrative of History, with which *Kababaihan* appears to satisfy itself, may well be a useful starting point for interrogating the soundness of the premises from which that narrative proceeds, but does not demolish these premises or the conditions that make their existence and persistence possible. As Flaudette May V.

Datuin (2002) has argued, one should be wary of “success stories of exceptional women, forgotten heroines, female ancestors, and forgotten sisters” (p. 40)—these may be underpinned by the belief that equality is possible in the public sphere within a hierarchical structure that remains intact, can foster complacency, and fail to make sense of women as historical figures on materialist grounds.

Perhaps most significant among the shortcomings of the film, however, is the character of Young Nic. To the degree that he functions as a kind of *locum tenens* for members of the audience, particularly the young students to whom *Kababaihan* is explicitly targeted, the character seems to embody a counterproductive posture toward the study of history: his relative passivity all throughout—his motives for visiting his long-dead antecedent are not even revealed—suggests that the past is not malleable and contested, but fixed and given, deserving the inert gaze of the spectator rather than the ardent attentiveness of the agent of transformation. In light of this, one is moved to ask: why ought one to bother with history at all?

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