

philippine studies: historical and ethnographic viewpoints

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

Mina Roces

Women's Movements and the Filipina: 1986–2008

Review Author: Ma. Lourdes Veneracion-Rallonza

Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints
vol. 60 no. 4 (2012): 563–566

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>

Huks does not distinguish between men and women. In the preceding page is a photo of the captured wounded Commander Betty on a wheelchair surrounded by the press and not at all fearsome looking. Under the photo, Lanzona's caption partly reads, "Not much was written about Commander Betty except that she was 'beautiful and fragile,' and she was constantly hounded by 'the press and radio representatives from Manila' who were captivated by her sexual aura and military presence" (136). Huk leader Celia Mariano is a portrait of calm defiance in a photo taken, Lanzona says, a day after her capture. There are also the obvious propaganda photos of babies and children branded by the government as "huklings," to sound like ducklings and therefore more like nonpersons. One shows the thin figures of "huklings" already "safe" inside a big playpen in Camp Murphy's "hukling nursery" and being visited by President Magsaysay's daughter "as part of her birthday activities" (140). Another is of two soldiers carrying two "huklings" and showing them to a third soldier. Lanzona cites the original caption that reads, "Two Huklings, abandoned children of Huk parents, are in the hands of the 20th BCT men who came across the babies . . . in Bulacan" (141).

While interesting, the many photos that the author includes in the pages of her book are but contrapuntal to the Huk amazons' own narratives and do not diminish the power of their memories as history. Their history has been silenced for many decades. Lanzona has retrieved it for them. In doing so, she has succeeded in putting a more humane face to the Huk movement.

It is only right that Lanzona's book, *Amazons of the Huk Rebellion: Gender, Sex, and Revolution in the Philippines*, hitherto available only in the US has come home to be read by us Filipinos as an important part of our history.

Teresita Gimenez Maceda

Department of Filipino and Philippine Literature
University of the Philippines-Diliman
<tet.maceda@gmail.com>

MINA ROCES

Women's Movements and the Filipina: 1986–2008

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012. 277 pages.

Although women's movements in the Philippines have been praised for their gains and contributions both nationally and internationally, not too many scholarly works have been written about them—how they came to be and what their contributions were as woven into the narrative of personal and institutional politics. In particular, there has been no systematic reflection on what is probably the greatest achievement of the women's movement in the discursive realm, that is, the (re)construction of the Filipina. Mina Roces's work sets out to fill this gap. In this light, she aims to address the main area of inquiry on how women activists theorize the notion of Filipino woman and how this conception underpins their work and advocacy. Congruently, Roces navigates through various (and oftentimes clashing) discourses on the "Filipina" embedded in societal mindset and practices as well as in the activists' political project template. As Roces argues, the women's movement, in challenging the grand narrative of the "Filipina," presented a counterhegemonic discourse replete with a double narrative or "the deployment of two contrasting discourses—a narrative of victimization and a narrative of activism" (3). How the women's movements "managed" this double narrative in the context of their political agenda is the central theme of the book.

The book begins with a brief discussion of the history of the women's movement in the Philippines in both formal and informal political spaces and in domestic and international spheres. A very informative explanation on the "constructed" image of the "Filipina" as tied with different historical milieu lays the groundwork for locating the hegemonic discourse on the Filipino woman. By and large, the ideal "Filipina" conjured by our colonial past was that of a chaste, ever obedient and suffering woman, and proverbial martyr—a virgin bride, a subservient wife, and a "complete" woman by virtue of motherhood. Women who went against such image were considered as societal aberrations; women in history who supported and fought in revolutionary or other social movements were silenced, invisibilized, and relegated as mere addendum to men. Challenging this

grand narrative necessitated the deployment of a counterimaginary—that of the *babaylan*, the mythological persona of the precolonial Filipino woman who had the power to bridge the spirit and earthly worlds. The *babaylan*, in so far as the then emergent feminist consciousness was concerned, was an essential symbol—a starting point for the women’s movement to reclaim a buried discursive persona to serve the political agenda of (re)constructing the “Filipina.” Following this contextualization, the frame of the whole study was laid down: the representation of the “Filipina” and how she has been (re)fashioned by the women’s movement and the spaces she created to locate her political agency.

Part I of the book explores the double narrative deployed by women and women’s groups in their collective journey to provide a counterhegemonic discourse on the “Filipina.” It begins with the experiences of progressive nuns who were at the forefront of political activism against the Marcos regime during the 1970s and 1980s. These nuns, though radical in so far as breaking the mould of traditional nunnery confined in convent spaces, had to contend with their own double narrative. On the one hand, they towed the feminist line in bringing to light the religious roots of women’s oppression and in empowering women by demystifying martyrdom as “useless suffering”: they also brought to light issues on rape, domestic violence, sexual harassment, and provided women education about their bodies, their sexuality, and health. On the other hand, since they still belonged to the Catholic institution, they had not gone all the way to advocate against very intimate women’s issues such as divorce and reproductive rights. Nonetheless, as Roces claims, their contributions to feminist theorizing and activism were of critical importance.

Apart from these activist nuns who saw themselves establishing various women’s organizations, the rest of those involved in the women’s movement strategically challenged the hegemonic discourse on the “Filipina” in order to advance legislations. In the process, they were able to push the public out of their comfort zones and face women’s issues that were perceived to be taboo. Prostitution, domestic violence, sexual harassment, and rape were brought into the public sphere. These topics were discussed in various media such as radio and television shows, theatre, songs, and novels pioneered by different women’s groups. The political project then was to challenge the cultural mindset about the “Filipina” and the life she was expected to lead—embedded suffering and all for her family, regardless of whatever toll it took

on her dignity as a human being. In carrying out this agenda, particularly in the context of advancing changes through legislation, the women’s movement deployed the double narrative of “victim” and “agency.” For example, in pushing for the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act of 2003, the victim narrative was used to shift the “discursive blame onto the traffickers, pimps, and clients” (53) from prostituted women. These women were imaged as victims of poverty, family pressures, violence from syndicates and procurers of sex; their agency came from their decision to ally with the women’s movement in pushing for this legislation and in participating in their programs so they could have alternatives for themselves.

Strategically, the women’s movement deployed the victim narrative in order to paint the picture of how women suffer from violence in their homes, workplaces, and communities. Such was necessary in order to push for key legislations such as the Anti-Rape Act, the Anti-Sexual Harassment law, and the Anti-Violence Against Women and Children Act. However, the narrative of agency was likewise used in order for these women to celebrate their survival: despite the violence they suffered they transformed themselves as activists pushing for women’s human rights. As Roces explains, this was the thesis–antithesis template for the “Filipina” as a worker (i.e., modern-day slave to militant activist), as an indigenous woman (i.e., icon of indigenous resistance to coopted actor in nationalist movement), as a wife (i.e., battered wife to independent woman), and as women (i.e., relational being to individual). The double narrative seems to work in so far as it serves the purpose for which it was created.

The second part of the book discusses the myriad of spaces and methods used by the women’s movement in educating the public, particularly women, on various concerns. Experts’ insights were the main fare of women’s talk shows that brought to light terms in the feminist lexicon such as “trafficking,” “sexuality,” “lesbianism,” “sexual harassment,” and “reproductive health” (128) as well as “partner infidelity” and “domestic violence” (129). Oral testimonies were also featured to illustrate the experiences of real women. For Roces, radio and TV shows on women’s concerns functioned as some kind of an alternative classroom where the teachers were the expert resource persons and women who shared their testimonies, the curriculum was on women’s studies divided into several modules, and the students were the listeners/audience. In this sense, radio and television were instrumental in breaking certain societal taboos on topics hitherto not openly discussed.

“Giving the women information and options was important in instilling feminist consciousness, a necessary step before one could be an advocate” (140). Other forms of enticing the agency out of women came in the form of rituals, dress, theater, songs, and novels (that discussed the sensitive topic of abortion). All of these, according to Roces, ushered the “Filipina” into the world of activism—“their rites of passage in the process of becoming an activist,” their “practicum” to be part of “a metaphorical army of feminist revolutionaries” (169). Education through creative and innovative means was integral to the remaking of the “Filipina.”

The last part of the book concentrates on locating the “Filipina” activist in different spaces. In this light, the discussion flows on the convergence of national, regional, and transnational discursive realms. Knowledge exchanges have always been two-way: Filipina activists bringing to the Philippine context women’s concerns while learning from others about their experiences; they impact international discourses (particularly in the discursive spaces in the United Nations) while, at the same time, embracing international perspectives learned from their counterparts from other countries. Although not always having points of agreement in order to forge transnational sisterhood, solidarity in advancing women’s concerns has been the focal point of their work. Whether as feminist nuns, as individual experts, or as women’s organizations, women activists from the Philippines have shown the rest of the world what the “Filipina” is all about: “from interrogating ‘the Filipina woman’ to engaging with ‘the international woman’” (183).

In conclusion, Roces’s work on the women’s movement and the imaging of the “Filipina” provides us with a narrative on the contribution of the movement in bringing to light the “woman question” in the context of the Philippine experience. On this note, it gives us a sense on how social movements frame a political project and attempt to offer counterhegemonic discourses to affect change. The deployment of contesting narratives (i.e., victim-agent) and their gains in legislation and in challenging the sexist cultural mindset cannot be denied. What is still lacking, though, is a reflection on the part of the women’s movements themselves—how they have dealt with their own “personal as political.” This story, despite being an integral part of the reconstruction of the “Filipina,” has yet to be fully told. And herein lies the remaining gap—present but dangling in silence.

Ma. Lourdes Veneracion-Rallonza

Department of Political Science, Ateneo de Manila University
<mrallonza@ateneo.edu>