

philippine studies

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

Representational Practice in Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere*

Sonia H.C. Choa

Philippine Studies vol. 47, no. 4 (1999): 550–557

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies 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>

Representational Practice in Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere*

Sonia H. C. Choa



Centennial celebration pronouncements on Rizal's role as a national hero continue to acknowledge this point: that his novels in Spanish, *Noli Me Tangere* (published 1887) and its sequel, *El Filibusterismo* (1891), were works that united the Filipino people and sparked their 1896 revolution against the Spanish colonial government. The impact of *Noli Me Tangere* on its public is evident in these historical facts cited by Leon Ma. Guerrero:

It was unanimously condemned as "heretical" and "subversive" by a special jury of the Royal and Pontifical (Dominican) University of Santo Tomas, and subsequently the government board of censorship recommended the absolute prohibition of its importation, reproduction, and circulation in the Philippines. It came to be considered proof of disloyalty [to Spain] to possess a copy (p. xii).

After the Katipunan was betrayed, Rizal was put on trial, the proceedings were a judicial farce, but a political necessity in the times. The charges were absurd on their face, but fundamentally they were a correct identification of the author of the *Noli* and the *Fili* as the "soul," although not the actual military leader, of the nationalist revolution Rizal was condemned to death and executed publicly by a firing squad of Filipino colonial troops on the 30th December 1896 (p. xv).¹

Rizal's martyrdom on account of these two novels has colored most readings of them. Consequently, such readings often breach the boundaries between creative work and the author's personal life, between artistic truth and polemics. One may, however, continue to address the vital link between author, text, and milieu another way.

First published in *Centennial Pintig Diwa* (December 1998).

Note that Rizal had couched his account of his times in the then dominant literary form, fiction. Now this is not simply to say that by virtue of poetic license, the author hoped to have been exempted from subsequent persecution and execution. This is to say rather that the function performed by fictional representation can be examined. This paper shall confine itself to the *Noli Me Tangere*. Furthermore, by noting selected representational practices current during Rizal's times, this study hopes to have a clearer view of this work's significance as a historical novel.

The villain of this novel is clearly the religious order. Elias is made to say,

Do you call external practices the True Faith, or the commerce in girdles and scapulars, religion; or the stories of miracles and other fairy tales that we hear everyday, the truth? Is this the law of Jesus Christ? God did not have to be crucified for this, nor we assume the obligation of eternal gratitude. . . . You will tell me that imperfect as our present religion may be, it is preferable to the one we had before; I believe you and I agree with you, but it is too expensive, for we have paid for it with our national identity, with our independence. . . . The people do not ask for the abolition of the religious Orders, but only for the reforms required by new circumstances and necessities" (pp. 312-13).

Father Bernardo Salvi, the Franciscan parish priest, is behind the fake rebellion that implicates Ibarra. In love with Maria Clara himself, Father Salvi is the chaplain of the convent she enters after her final parting from Ibarra. The reader deduces Maria Clara is the distraught nun on the convent roof one stormy night; this incident in the novel's epilogue suggests that maybe God indeed had "abandoned His temple in the nunnery"(p. 406).

Another Franciscan, Father Damaso Verdolangas, is Maria Clara's natural father and persecutor of Ibarra's family. A major crisis in the novel occurs when Ibarra is excommunicated for hitting Father Damaso. Impressed at the filial piety that led Ibarra to such rash action, the governor general helps Ibarra out of this ban, but not before Ibarra already becomes a marked man to the community.

Theologians might argue that Rizal attacked not the Catholic faith but its hypocritical representatives.

Rizal frankly explained his purpose to a friend: "I was aiming at the friars, but since they were shielding themselves behind the rites and

superstitions of a certain religion, I had to free myself from it in order to strike at the enemy hiding behind it. . . . Those who abuse its name must bear the responsibility (xi).

Leon Ma. Guerrero adds that it is "a church that is Spanish rather than Catholic" which kept the majority of the country "in thrall" (1965, xi).²

Literary historians are sure to find scores of precedents for this in European literature. After all, Europe had given the world Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the spiritual absurdities of Rabelais' *Parisiens*, Moliere's *Tartuffe*, Dumas' *Cardinal Richelieu*. The religious orders have been a favorite and consistent butt of writers. Philippine vernacular literature has Jaena's "Fray Botod" (1891) and del Pilar's anti-friar works (Ex. 1887 *Pasyon*).

This paper is not trying to identify the literary sources of Rizal. Rather, it is placing the so-called "heretical" content of the *Noli* within the context of socially acceptable secular literature that poked fun at friars, religious orders, religious practices. Rizal did not exempt even his beloved Ateneo Jesuits in this satirical exercise. Tasio the scholar tells Don Filippo:

There are three ways of going with the Progress: ahead of it, along-side it, and behind it. Those who go ahead guide Progress; the second group goes along with Progress; and the third group is dragged forward by Progress. The Jesuits belong to this last group. . . . They follow rather than be trampled underfoot or left behind in the dark. Now then, we in the Philippines are at least three centuries behind the chariot of Progress; we are scarcely emerging from the *Middle Ages*. That is why the Jesuits, who are reactionaries in Europe, represent Progress from our viewpoint. The Philippines owed them the beginnings of the *Natural Sciences*, *soul of the nineteenth century*, just as we owe to the Dominicans Scholastic Philosophy, now dead for all that Pope Leo XIII may say or do. No Pope can bring back the life what common sense has condemned to death. . . . The struggle is between the Past, which [with] crying maledictions clings to the crumbling feudal castle, and the Future . . . bearing the good tidings from other lands (pp. 333-34). [italics mine]

The by then hackneyed theme of oppression by the religious orders is rephrased by Rizal into terms his contemporary European reader would understand and could relate to. For the insulares and literate mestizo, he evokes the pageantry and senseless materialism of local

religious fiestas, the muted story of Sisa, perhaps to excite their memories and provoke insight.

Representations of subversion in the novel must also be examined. Not a single debate in the *Noli* concludes with a call to revolution. Protests against the government are always qualified as request for reform, not independence. The only rebellion in the novel is a fake one, stagemanaged by Father Salvi through his chief sexton, and trivialized when the townspeople initially guess it to have been a raid by bandits, an uprising of the Chinese, a quarrel between the parish priest and the commanding officer, an attempted abduction by Ibarra of Maria Clara. Rizal even throws in a "halfwit," Andong, mistakenly apprehended as he relieved himself of his Moslem mother-in-law's cooking (p. 362). In the absence of actual actuations to subvert the colonial administration, the concept subversion simply stays as part of the novel's scale of derogatory epithets which ranged from being called "presumptuous, proud, haughty, a boor, a bad Christian, and more likely than not [to], anti-Spanish and subversive" (p. 98).

To the fugitive Ibarra who wishes to be a "true agitator" calling to "all oppressed" to tell them "it is never a crime to fight for one's country" for it suffers a "social cancer," Elias says the following:

The same sentiments which a month ago led me to ask you for reforms, lead me now to ask you to reflect further. Our country does not think of independence from the Motherland; she asks nothing than a small measure of liberty, of justice, and of love. The discontented, the criminal and the desperate will follow you, but the people will stand apart. I would not follow you myself; I would never resort to these extreme measures while I could see some hope in man. (pp. 388-89)

Elsewhere, Elias asks Ibarra, "It is true that the missionaries won this country for Spain. . . . But do you believe that Spain will keep it because of the friars?" (p. 313). Indeed, by 1898, Spain did not keep the Philippines. The American colonizer was white still, but Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant.

Novels are a form of colonial discourse. By giving the reader a glimpse of the texture of the life the novel imitates, the power relations are made moving and real. Rizal's narrative skill brings to life "Madame Doctor Doña Victorina de los Reyes de Espadana," wife of the quack doctor (*peninsulares*) Don Tiburcio (p. 265), and Maria Clara with her mother's large, "black" soulful eyes but her own hair

"almost fair" (p. 37) and her complexion "perhaps rather too fair" (p. 27), to name a few women characters. To give its readers a better grasp of local color, the plot ambles along, and three fourths of the novel cover events happening between October 30 and Christmas. The moral significance of All Saint's Day is clear to Ibarra but his duties to the dead are cast in a strange light as the novel scrupulously traces his Spanish bloodline to the Basque, Don Pedro Eibar-ramenia (p. 340), and to, as a correspondent writes in his letter,

Pelayos and Elcanos (for, I am informed, one of his paternal grandfathers came from our heroic and noble northern provinces of Spain; it might even be that he was one of the *companions of Magellan or Legaspi*) . . . His [Ibarra] name runs from mouth to mouth, and it is pronounced only to be praised, praises which cannot but rebound to the glory of Spain and of genuine Spaniards like ourselves, who *never belie our blood* no matter how mixed it may be (p. 178). [italics mine]

Ibarra is a Philippine-born Spanish mestizo who considers himself socially equal to even the peninsulares. After all, the wealth of the country belonged to such mestizos; the church was merely a strategist selling its religious favors/influence and the civil officials its Pawns in its bid for hegemony.

How much of a Western Oriental gentleman was the half-breed Ibarra? It is the native Elias, after all, who challenges the alleged racial superiority of Spaniards who think "their race make what they say sacred" (p. 314). Natives are considered simpler and, excepting those being persecuted by civil or church authorities, the natives (like Salome) are allowed their rustic joys in the novel. For entertainment, the populace is kept happy and debt-bound by cockfights and fiestas.

The youthful Rizal (aged 26 as he wrote this novel) may have crowded his novel too much with allusions. Pedantry is a thing he attacks here but he seems guilty of it himself. His strategy is to appropriate the culture of the colonizer so his criticisms of the Spaniard would be credible to European readers. He seems to have absorbed, however, standards that are sometimes detrimental to his nationalist cause. With tongue-in-cheek, he has a Spanish correspondent note the imported *comico-mimico-lyrico-choreographic dramatic spectacle* (p. 177) to be staged on the town square during the fiesta. But he lets the correspondent say as well that the "uneducated classes did not get the point on a single joke" while "the natives, above all the Mayor, greatly enjoyed the Tagalog play" (p. 178) which

must have been a *comedia* (*moro-moro*). His Latinisms are a bit too much even if Spain was perpetuating a feudal medieval culture in the Philippines.

One can find in the *Noli* almost all of the elements comprising the 19th century "knowledge regime" (Foucauldian episteme) mentioned by Robyn Wiegman in her book, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender*: race science, caste notions, natural science like botany, craniology and genetics, a secular perspective on life, linguistics, all of which contributed also to "identity politics" (1995, Chapter 1).³ Leon Ma. Guerrero finds significant the fact that Rizal's novels were published "ominously enough," in "Berlin and Ghent (Belgium) anticipating the apprehensions, prejudices, self-justification, anger and sense of betrayal of the white settlers in Africa and their spokesmen in European parliaments . . . as well, of course, as the counter-balancing idealism, liberalism and resignation to the inevitable both in the colonies and in the metropolises" (1965, ix).

Rizal split the hero's role between Ibarra, the Filipino Spanish mestizo, and the native Elias. This is an astute ploy, the alliance between two different social classes is promising had Rizal not sometimes made Elias take the role of subaltern. Elias sets aside his desire to seek revenge for his grandfather's degradation, destroys evidence that could incriminate Ibarra, saves the latter's treasures, and rescues him still one more time. Elias owed Ibarra his life when the latter rescued him from the crocodile; it seems, however, that Elias never tires of paying this back, often acting as the latter's bodyguard and aide.

Rizal used his colonizer's language in this novel. Earlier, this paper has made mention of that rhetorical excess, pedantry. Rizal's translators, however, do not complain about his Spanish. Proof of his confident handling of it is his satiric usage of malapropisms, regional linguistic variations (p. 227) "saspek," "sabarsiv," even "sanamabits." The referentiality of language was no problem; if anything, his language may have been so transparent as to earn the ire of authorities. The reader is told Father Damaso could speak in Tagalog. There is also a curious episode involving Tasio the scholar who writes in Tagalog but in coded form. When asked "why do you write at all if you don't want to be read?" Tasio answers he is "not writing for this generation but for those yet to come" (p. 152). Rizal the linguist then has Tasio elaborate a bit on phonology and the Latin alphabet. Tasio is also made to reveal his correspondence with the

Chinese and, later, a Japanese recipient of messages he has sent through carrier swallows (p. 153).

Though well-versed in European culture, Rizal seems to have been silent about other countries suffering the oppression of colonial rule, African Dahomey's vengeful practice for their dead (p. 60) is mentioned but not the 1804 independence of Haiti and other Caribbean countries so close geographically to Cuba (where he volunteered to work as a doctor). Asian, African, American natives (aborigines?) are spoken of in almost the same neutral way (p. 60). The presence of the Chinese spices up the novel's local color but no attempt is made to get ideological mileage as regards the opium trade participated in by Capitan Tiago. Rizal mentions religious rivalries among rich devotees, or the Stendhal-like opportunism in both church and civil government. The city-barrio tension and regionalism are not, however, present in his novel, economic dominance by the local elite not questioned.

Rizal's representational procedures stem from his novel's realistic-satiric mode. Nevertheless, he often lapses into the romantic style specially when his characters engage in ideological debates. One might ask consequently if patriotism was really romantic idealism only on the part of the characters. Elias and Ibarra are outcasts only in a legal sense because the novel implies the greater public shares their convictions, with both characters each continuing to receive a beloved's love. Elias even advises Ibarra to leave for abroad because Ibarra would hate his country if some day he were to find himself 'outcast for her sake, and to hate one's own country is the greatest misfortune" (p. 386).

It would seem this novel, though having a revolutionary impact on its audience, was conservative in its fictional methods. Unlike poststructuralists, Rizal never questioned the communication system he used. He counted on readership that had mastered that system's codes. These readers could read between his lines, understood even the language of statuary (remember the baby Jesus in a governor general's uniform), his code switching (Maria Clara's song during the picnic), and could do an allegorical reading (the crocodile incident) if needed. Did Rizal expect his reader to take pacifist arguments in the novel ironically as well? If such were the case, he would not have been surprised at the tragic fate awaiting him. He wrote the novel's sequel also in foreign shores (1891) and returned to the Philippines to show his countrymen "we know how to die for our duty and our convictions" (p. xiii). However, there was no death, only exile to

Dapitan, until 1896 revolution broke out (p. xiv). Signification in his novels had by then affected extratextual historical processes.

Notes

1. Guerrero, L. M. 1961. Introduction: Two novels that make a revolution. In *Noli Me Tangere*, translated by L. M. Guerrero. London: Longmans. (Original Rizal novel published 1887). All subsequent citations to this introduction and the Guerrero translation will simply indicate the page number of the quoted material.
2. Guerrero, L. M. 1965. Introduction: A novel of oneness and prophecies. In *El Filibusterismo*, translated by L. M. Guerrero. London: Longmans. (Original Rizal novel published 1891). Citations to this show the presence of the year and page number at the end of the quoted material.
3. Wiegman, R. 1995. *American anatomies: Theorizing race and gender*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. A copy of this book was donated to the college library by USIS speaker, Dr. Marguerite R. Waller during her professional lecture on the 17th of September 1997.