

Questioning the Status of Rizal's Women in *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*

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Abstract

To an arguable extent, the novels of José Maria Rizal are European novels of the Belle Epoque, despite their setting, and, as such, they reflect the attitude toward women current in Europe in that era. In his novels Rizal's female characters appear more as stereotypes than archetypes in several broad categories: the good mother (Narcisa), the virgin (Maria Clara, Juli, possibly Paulita Gomez), the harridan (the commandant's wife), the social or religious fanatic (Doña Victorina and Doña Patroncino), for example. In nearly every case in the novels and in his "Letter to the Women of Malolos," however, the individual woman is an exaggeration of an already exaggerated conception of womanhood, with its origins in the work of the Spanish friars.

To an arguable extent, the novels of José Maria Rizal are European novels of the Belle Epoque, the golden age at the end of nineteenth century in Europe although their setting is the Philippines, and, as a result, they reflect the attitude toward women current in Europe in that era. Rizal was influenced by both the French novelists Alexandre Dumas, père, and Émile Zola as well as by the European high culture of his time, and his novels rank with theirs in terms of the large numbers of characters, detailed descriptions of the minutiae of everyday life, and complexity of interrelationships of characters in carrying out the plot. Rizal's novels also reflect the ideas of his times on the status and development of women. His female characters appear more as stereotypes than archetypes and can be discussed within several broad categories: the good mother (Narcisa), the virgin (Maria Clara, Juli, possibly Paulita Gomez), the harridan (the commandant's wife), the social or religious fanatic (Doña Victorina and Doña Patroncino), for example. In nearly every case, however, the individual woman is an exaggeration of an already exaggerated conception of womanhood, with its origins in the work of the Spanish friars.

In his essay, "The Friars in the Philippines," James A. LeRoy, writing in 1903—less than a decade after Rizal's death, barely more than a decade after the *Fili* was published—comments, "The status of women has long been higher among the Filipinos than ever yet anywhere else in the Orient; to the friars' introduction of Christianity belongs the credit" (663). LeRoy, however, presents information that frankly contradicts any notion that the friars contributed in any way to a higher status of women. I do not argue the status of women being higher in the Philippines than elsewhere in Asia; I argue instead that credit for this higher status does not lie with the friars. Indeed, the friars did much to prevent the recognition of status among all Filipinos. With respect to women, however, LeRoy notes that from the beginning of medical education in the Philippines to 1875, "no female cadaver had ever been dissected" (875). Thus, medical personnel there had less understanding of women's anatomy and health than elsewhere in the educated world, where it may have been minimal, and this limited education was provided only to men.

Education of girls and women was restricted for Filipinos: it occurred at the hands of the friars. Secondly, the main text in the primary schools was, according to LeRoy:

a badly printed and cheap little 150-page text-book prescribed by the government for the schools (the same as [was] used in Spain)[, which] was reader, writer, speller, arithmetic, geography, history of Spain and the world (Spain

overshadowing), Spanish grammar (often not taught because the teacher knew little of it), and handbook of religious and moral precepts (many pages). (672)

Little of this information was valuable in developing the intellects of students; little of it applied to the life of the students at all, except perhaps their subjection to the friars; less of it was available to female students. LeRoy states in the latter regard that "educational advantages for the weaker sex in the Philippines have been of the slightest" (677). Although women religious had convents and convent schools in the Philippines after 1565, the education they offered was limited in terms of both curriculum: "music and grammar-school studies," and clientele: "girls of the well-to-do" (LeRoy 677), like Maria Clara Tiago, José Crisostomo Ibarra's fiancée. In many ways, this education differs little from that of Emma Bovary, and reflects a view of women's education held in several European nations, that women were not educable. LeRoy does add that, in addition to the village schools, girls/women were admitted to government normal (teacher-training) schools after they were established in 1863 (ibid.)

By 1863, the Philippines had experienced three hundred years of Spanish domination and the suppression of native cultures, traditions, and authority. While the status of women in aboriginal Philippine societies may remain forever unknown, Rizal's own letter to the women of Malolos identifies the qualities he believes inherent in the Filipino woman. Because his novels can be perceived as anti-colonial (Riggs, 488), Rizal may possibly be arguing against a Spanish colonial image of women, but there is nothing in his novels or other work, unfortunately, that suggests anything other than the late nineteenth century attitude toward women. The most encouraging portrait of women that Rizal provides seems to be that of his mother in her role as mother, nurturer, and educator. His "Letter to the Women of Malolos" indicates his soul-searching on whether Filipino women possess courage (par. 1), and he recounts a recollection of their "sweet disposition, beautiful habits, gentle manners, modesty but [that] withal were mingled complete deference and obedience to every work and request of the so-called fathers of the soul [. . .] due to excessive goodness humility, or perhaps ignorance" (ibid.). Rizal considers, though, that the women of Malolos, through their resistance, signify a change from blind obedience to the friars, women who "are born without chains, free" (par. 3). Yet Rizal blames the mothers of the Philippines:

The present enslavement of our compatriots is the work of our mothers because of the absolute confidence of their loving hearts and of their great desire to improve the lot of their children. Maturity is the fruit of childhood and childhood is in the lap of the mother. The mother who teaches nothing else but how to kneel and kiss the hand should not expect any other kind of children but stupid ones or oppressed slaves. (par. 5)

By raising obedient, unquestioning children, mothers raised people to obey the friars and never seek their own independence of thought and behavior. Rizal contends, though, that good mothers are not created by the friars but by teaching their children "love for honor, sincere and firm character, clear mind, clean conduct, noble action, love for one's fellow men, respect for God" (par. 7). He commends the Filipino woman for her "power and prudence" and recommends she be "free and educated" like the women of Europe and America (par. 8). Her "excess of goodness" has prevented that possibility. But such freedom and education are needed for her to "encourage the weak and timorous man or arouse brilliant ideas" in him, to strengthen the backbone of the Philippine people (par. 10). Yet, in describing Philippine women, Rizal seems to hold the same ideas and ideals as the Europeans of the late nineteenth century: Women should be good mothers to their children, educating them for freedom, and should support their husbands, encouraging

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them and arousing their brilliant ideas; but nothing is said about the development of women except "to imitate the women of Sparta" and "give birth to real men" (par. 11). These ideals do not differ from those of Victorian England or even from those of seventeenth century France in *The Education of Women* by Choderlos de Laclos, where women are free in their natural state but do not profit from education: Maria Clara plays the piano and sings well, but the extent of her education beyond musical performance remains unknown.

While E. San Juan, Jr., in the essay and book "Sisa's Vengeance: José Rizal & the 'Woman Question'" states that "Opposing the confinement of women to devalued and debilitating reproductive labor—the expenditure of time and energy in providing nurture and socialization for dependent offspring—Rizal seeks to install women as citizens equal to men in exercising personal autonomy and sympathetic concern for others" (last sentence of website excerpt), he provides no evidence to support this statement. Contrarily, Sarah Coulter, in an unpublished essay, argues that Maria Clara and Sisa, in particular, are so constrained by the patriarchal ideology of womanhood that they both abandon or relinquish their position in society: Maria Clara by entering a convent (*Noli* 422)—where the reader in the *Fili* learns she dies (207)—and Sisa by going crazy (*Noli* 133). In the *Fili*, similarly, Juli/Huli commits suicide rather than yield to Father Camorra (266).

If, consistent with his "anti-imperialist nationalism" (Riggs 448), Rizal's portrayal of women in the *Noli* and the *Fili* is an attack on Spanish imperialism—whose treatment of the women in the Philippines and elsewhere throughout the empire may be worthy of attack—that portrayal does not have clear limning. No clear egalitarian view of women emerges. Rather, the position of women in Rizal's eyes, even in Europe and the United States, is one viewed through a lens of patriarchy, the lens of his time.

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