

THE NOVEL IN THE PHILIPPINES

PETRONILO BN. DAROY

LITERATURE IN THE PHILIPPINES CONTINUED TO BE LARGELY ORAL until the initial years of establishment of the Spanish colonial regime. The Roman alphabet in the country gradually changed the native script, the prayers and other religious and didactic materials continued to be disseminated orally. These new literary materials did not really replace the native literature. On the contrary, the native literature was solely assimilated to the colonial letters. Radical changes, however, began to take place in the "content" of the indigenous and oral literary traditions. Christian ideas and morals began to creep into the ancient literary forms of the Filipinos such as the *salawikain*, the *lagda* and even the epics, while regional literary traditions slowly came to be replaced by a body of literature that was largely derived from Hispanic and European models, and, bore no immediate relation to the social organization and economic life of the people. Religious materials, and later the *corrido* provided a unifying body of literary tradition, simultaneously disseminated in various regions. Thus a body of literature, directly reflecting the new centralized organization of the archipelago began to take the place of the regional literary traditions of the Filipinos.

Tomas Pinpin's establishment of a printing press initiated a radical event in the level of literacy in the Philippine society. His publication of the *Doctrina Cristiana* and later on, *Ojas Volontas* reflected the growing literacy among the people and a shift from a pre-literate consciousness to that based on print. The *Ojas Volontas* provided the people in the country a vehicle for their taste in historical events and real happenings in the colony. Previously, the *corrido*, and its natural adoption, the *awit* were largely occupied with exotic and fantastic events and characters. Mythical places and kingdoms formed the setting of these narratives. *Ojas Volontas*, on the other hand, gave the people a more empirical and "truthful" account of life happening in the colony. It formed a taste for "facts."

By the seventeenth century there were about two newspapers in the country. The increase in journalistic publications was in direct relation to two factors: 1) the increase in the number of a literate audience, and, 2) the development of the colonial society which "thickened" the texture of culture and therefore multiplied the events to be reported about. Related to these developments, was the rise of a native middleclass directly involved in the economic life of the country, particularly in agriculture and commerce. The participation of this class in politics was limited, but its initial interest

and aspirations were in the printed materials that were beginning to circulate.

The Secularization Movement expressed the feeling of the Filipino middleclass about its position in the colonial society. Although considered principally as a religious issue, it had economic and racial undertones. The rich parishes in the archipelago were in the hands of the foreign clergy; the Filipino priests were disqualified from these parishes by reason of their "native" status. Politics at that time was inextricably involved in religion, and the assignment of natives to parishes was considered a "tactical" error. The loyalty of these priests was suspect.

Consequently the first expression of "nationalism" took the form of a religious question. The first and only system of instruction opened in the Philippines was religious, and the religious vocation was the first opportunity open to the Filipinos for personal advancement. By the eighteenth century, several Filipinos, mostly *peninsulars* or coming from the middleclass had been ordained for the priesthood. Supported by the Filipino middleclass, the native clergy began to question the structure of the colonial society, of which the status of the Filipino priest was only a reflection. Although these priests did not demand disengagement from the total body of the Catholic hierarchy in Rome, they initiated some sort of protestations within the Catholic fold in the Philippines. *El Catolico Filipino* became the vehicle for this dissent. The writings of Father Pelaez and Jose Burgos established a close intimacy between letters and society; Father Modesto Castro was also to describe the education of the native "ladies and gentlemen" in his *Urbana at Felisa*, showing in the process how Tagalog, predominantly used previously as a medium for verse could be suited to the prose description of simple details, individual behavior. Alienated from the masses by their very status in society, the discontent of the new ilustrados lacked mass support. Because of this, they were prevented from actually engaging in open political struggle. Literature became the instrument for their "politics."

What may be gleaned from Burgos' *La Loba Negra*, for instance, is the presentation of a political possibility for the ilustrado class. Governor Bustamante was not a native, but represented the type of liberal administrator, occasionally sent by Spain to the colony. This liberalism of Governor Bustamante has often been mistaken as essentially deriving from his tolerant attitude towards the Filipinos. This is I think to identify liberalism with the more popular notion of *liberality*, meaning to say, a generous attitude towards divergences, either in terms of point of view or of values. The fact is that Governor Bustamante is liberal in one of the essential meanings of liberalism, i.e., a believer in the secular state, in the principle of the separation of powers in government, and of church and state, and in the efficacy of laws as reflective of human reason. Although a member of the religious

order, Burgos thought that the nature of the church was and ought to be separate from the body politic. In the fate of Governor Bustamante, he saw the error of what could take place if the friars were to continue to hold so much power.

But the second part of *La Loba Negra* deals with the series of killings perpetuated by Governor Bustamante's wife. The monastic supremacy in the Philippines was not impregnable because other Filipinos, forced to become outlaws, were equally desirous of change. Doña Luisa de Bustamante joined a band of outlaws, and, in a series of murders that brings the quality of the novel to the gothic, succeeded in the assassination of her husband. She was killed. Her daughter, married to a Mexican disguised as a jeweler, lived in the city. Her wealth gave her sanctity from persecution.

Burgos' perception in the novel is acute. The bourgeoisie, unaffiliated with religion, could be a power in society. Its economic position makes it an independent entity, representing a powerful interest in politics. This is the meaning of the seemingly unrelated *Epilogue* of the novel where Burgos foresaw a revolution. The role of the bourgeoisie as among the powers in society merely marks a stage in the history of freedom. The harmony resulting from the sharing of powers in society among the traditional sources of authority and the new middleclass would soon be shattered by the emergence of the masses who will gradually take advantage of the developments of science and use technology in their fight for their own interests.

La Loba Negra was based on a historical incident. But it is a realistic novel in more than the historical element. Its realism derives from its factual reconstruction of society and its psychological analysis of motives. More significantly, its principal characters are of the middleclass in dialectical relationship with the established authority of society. Its central theme, too, is inextricably involved with money. Governor Bustamante's strict accounting in the treasury leads to his assassination by the friars.

The position of the middleclass in relation to the colonial authority also forms the central concern of Rizal. At the time of the writing of the *Noli*, the ilustrados had gone beyond the profession of priesthood and had occupied minor bureaucratic positions, like Pardo de Tavera, in the colonial government. Some had been given recognition for intellectual or artistic achievement like Luna, and sent as *pensionados* to Europe. There were also lawyers, like Marcelo H. del Pilar, who were beginning to contest the legitimacy of some colonial ordinances and policies. The ilustrados, therefore, had gained the social status corresponding to their economic position in society. As a matter of fact, the relative affluence of some ilustrado families enabled their sons to enjoy a life of leisure, like Buencamino and Paterno, or to study in Europe, like Rizal. These scions of the ilustrado class began to claim a share in political power in the colonial society. It was from this class that the idea of representation in the Cortes originated. The

illustrados were not really for independence; rather, they regarded themselves part of the entire society under the Spanish monarchy, co-equal with the rest in rights and privileges. This was precisely the sentiment of Crisostomo Ibarra in the *Noli*. He had none of the anti-Spanishism of Elias and the masses. His downfall at the end of the novel represented the crisis in its complicated relationship of the Filipino bourgeoisie with the colonial authority. It showed Ibarra temporarily a victim of the reaction of the traditional sources of authority in the colony, principally, the monastic authority. In the *Fili*, Ibarra, or Simoun, recaptures the old privileged position of the bourgeoisie and defines the nature of the class' capacity to collaborate with the colonial authority. As a source of capital, it can share political power, but it cannot claim this power solely. The liberalism of Simoun is founded on economic individualism: the right of a man to own property and to use this for the social good (the "revolution" he was trying to instigate) and to advance the same right of other individuals.

Rizal understood the economic basis of political attitudes. In the *Fili* Simoun's power is directly related to his wealth symbolized by his jewels. The relationship of Simoun to property tends to diminish in his consciousness the importance of such ideas as family ties, and even nationalism. In the novel, he is not associated with family, which accounts for the air of "mystery" about his person, whereas the subject of nationalism was discussed by him only in Chapter VII in his encounter with Basilio. But at the end of the chapter, we become aware that he had all along been perpetuating an intrigue. His motives were revenge on his accusers in the *Noli* and against his having been dispossessed of property. In the *Fili*, particularly in this chapter, he had used nationalism to involve the students in his scheme.

To comprehend how central is the idea of property in the novel, one has merely to refer to a chapter seemingly unrelated to the plot, the chapter on Cablesang Tales. The surprising element in the story of Tales is in the manner with which Rizal dismisses the idea of legal contract in reference to property. To him, the title to the land in the possession of the friars does not legitimately settle the question of ownership. Rizal awards the right to Tales because he had made the land productive and in the context of the novel, the capacity of the individual to render property socially useful determines his "right" to own it. This idea is nearly a summary of the petition of the Laguna tenants led by the Rizal family, presented to the colonial government concerning their "right" to the land they had been cultivating.

This position of the Filipino ilustrado in relation to the idea of a larger society — the nation — was not without its hints of uneasiness. Rizal himself created Elias as a counterpart to the ilustrado Crisostomo Ibarra and in Kalaw's *The Filipino Rebel*, the middleclass Martin betrays the national interest, but towards the end, the novel promises a resurgence of the social struggle. We are made aware that Martin's bastard will protest against

the corruption his father had helped create in society. But it remains a vague suggestion.

The fact is that Kalaw, like Burgos and Rizal, belonged to the ilustrados. The perspective of human individuals and society he offers derives from his position in the socio-political structure. He belonged to one of the wealthy families in Lipa, and during the pre-Commonwealth era occupied a position of authority in the new institutions established by the colonial regime. An opposite perspective, during the early days of the American occupation, was provided by Lope K. Santos' *Banaag at Sikat*, namely, the view of society from the angle of laborers. Santos started as a laborer in a printery; at the turn of the century, and during the commonwealth, he was catapulted to position of power in the government. *Banaag at Sikat* testifies to his early experience. The socialism in the novel, however, is fake because it is not integrated to the framework of the narrative. Ultimately, the book reduces itself into a crude morality play, sustained by the opposition between wealth and labor.

The Filipino novel, however, was to continue its chronicle of the Filipino middleclass. In Laya's *His Native Soil* we see Martin Romero as a product of the colonial dispensation. His advancement had been made possible by a government *pension* to study in the United States where he assimilated the ethics of capitalism. Upon his return, he tries to work this out in the feudal society in his province. The family business he established becomes in his mind an early stage of a corporation. In his efforts to succeed in the business, he tries to reform the attitudes of his relatives and the community. To him everything relates to the idea of gain or profit, and towards this end, he denigrates the clannishness, the sentimentalism, and the nepotistic tendencies of his relatives. *His Native Soil* is a minor compared to *La Loba Negra* as the *Noli* and the *Fili*, but Laya adds a dimension of perception to his novel not available in Burgos to Rizal, namely, the requirement of economic liberalism for controlling the instinctive or "humane" values. Not only does Martin Romero inhibit familiar emotions; he also repulses the more anarchistic sexual instincts.

The realism of the Filipino novel, therefore, derived from its convention of documenting the struggle of the middleclass for social status or political authority. This struggle took two directions: 1) against colonial control of the polity and the economy, and, 2) against the condition of the native society and its traditions which resisted the modern economic scheme of the middleclass. Thus the Filipino bourgeois novel reflected the sense of "modernity" of the middleclass culture. After the Second World War, we witnessed a decline in the Filipino novel of the energy of protest. The change of political power, from colonial authority to the native middleclass, fulfilled the "nationalist" aspirations of the middleclass during their struggle against colonialism. To the extent that, in 1957, an American critic surveying Phil-

ippine literature, was to remark that Philippine literature was characterized by its failure to come to grips with reality. The fact was that the middleclass had realized its aspirations. They were in control of politics, of the bureaucracies, of the educational system, and, in the economic field, they were in co-equal terms with the previous colonialists. The social world, for the bourgeois Filipino novelist, ceased to be an interesting context for investigation; nor would he expose his self-created anomalies.

The withdrawal of the novelist from the social world led him to explore (and indulge) his own psyche (Edilberto Tiempo's *Watch In The Night*; Nick Joaquin's *The Woman Who Had Two Navels, May Day Eve, Guardia de Honor*). This shift in attention led to the abandonment of realism, but did not present new viewpoints in the treatment of society.