

## Looking Through the Sweetheart, Flamboyant and Insane: Rereading Rizal’s Critique of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Filipina in *Noli Me Tangere*

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to show how Jose Rizal, in the *Noli Me Tangere*, portrayed the Filipina’s struggle for an identity and role in nation building at the height of the resistance against the Spanish colonizers and the global clamor for enlightenment. Through character analysis, three iconic women characters in *Noli Me Tangere*—Maria Clara, Doña Victorina de Espadaña, and Sisa—I critically expose images of female subjugation and/or voluntary passivity, which must explain Rizal’s persuasions as he described how a Filipina should see herself as stated in his “Letter to the Women of Malolos.” In this historical and critical hermeneutic, we shall see Rizal’s discourse as product of his dialogue with the Western Enlightenment thinkers but is still deeply embedded in the Filipino value-system.

**Keywords:** Rizal, Filipina, female, Noli me Tangere

Jose Rizal (1861–1896) might not be a philosopher but he can be placed within the ranks of Gandhi, Tagore, and perhaps even Confucius for possessing a moral intellect that had become a catalyst for his countrymen to think better of themselves. His works provoked both intellectual engagement among his contemporaries like Wenceslao Retana,<sup>1</sup> Ferdinand Blumentritt, and Miguel de Unamuno;<sup>2</sup> and political action that brewed the Philippine Revolution of 1896. As such, Rizal reinforced his people’s desire to discover and act according to a dignified identity which can only be addressed in the atmosphere of political and intellectual sovereignty.

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<sup>1</sup> Wenceslao Retana, *Vida y escritos del Dr. José Rizal* (Madrid: Victoriano Suárez, 1907).

<sup>2</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, “The Tagalog Hamlet,” trans. by Antolina Antonio, in *Rizal: Contrary Essays*, ed. by Petronilo BN. Daroy and Dolores Feria (Quezon City: Guro Books, 1968), 3–16.

Rizal's works, which range from the creative to critical in forms of poems, essays, novels, letters, and an historical annotation, convey views that are influential and, "remain(s) the key to an understanding of the reconstruction of the Philippine past as a means to forge a national identity."<sup>3</sup> These works paved the way to forthcoming historiographies and social criticisms that are grounded on theory and well-poised to rouse philosophical discussions.<sup>4</sup> In Ricardo Pascual's institutional interpretation of Rizal's novels, he notes with hope an interpretative point of reaching what may be called Rizal's philosophy of history: "that aspect of his intellectual pursuit which would bring to focus all his endeavors in historical studies, in social analysis, in persuading his people to work towards the realization of the national community, in defending his people against the insults and calumnies of virulent writers."<sup>5</sup> In whatever form they may assume, the works of Rizal are definite sources of social reflection and critical hermeneutics. Schumacher supports this point: "as long as the writings of Rizal continue to be read, and Filipinos continue to reflect on the kind of society their forefathers wanted to create, Rizal's thoughts will continue to be subversive of all societies which fail to bring justice and freedom to the Filipino people."<sup>6</sup>

### The *India* as *Filipina*

It is clear that this renowned apostle of nationalism pondered on the meaning of freedom and enlightenment in the midst of oppressive Spanish colonization, which helped to shape a collective consciousness. One of his influential biographers Leon Maria Guerrero, who called Rizal "The First Filipino," writes:

It was Rizal, as we have seen, who taught his countrymen that they could be something else, Filipinos who were members of the Filipino Nation .... The

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<sup>3</sup> Ambeth Ocampo, "Rizal's Morga and Views of Philippine History," in *Philippine Studies*, 46:2 (1998), 211.

<sup>4</sup> Noteworthy are the works of John Schumacher, Teodoro Agoncillo, Petronillo Daroy, Ricardo Pascual, and Florentino Hornedo. See particularly: John Schumacher, S.J., "Rizal the Revolutionary and the Ateneo," in *Philippine Studies*, 26 (3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter, 1978), 231-240; Petronillo BN. Daroy, "The Ideas of European Idealism in the Fiction of Rizal," in *Philippine Social Sciences and Humanities Review*, 30:2 (June 1965), 109-183; Ricardo Pascual, "Institutional Interpretation of Rizal's Novels," in *University College Journal*, 5-6 (1964), 78-85; Florentino Hornedo, "Noli Me Tangere: Creating an Idiom to Legitimize a New Paradigm of Power," in *The Noli Me Tangere A Century After: An Interdisciplinary Perspective (Budhi Papers)*, ed. by Soledad S. Reyes (Quezon City: Phoenix Publishing House, Inc., 1987), 81-87.

<sup>5</sup> Pascual, "Institutional Interpretation of Rizal's Novels," 85.

<sup>6</sup> Schumacher, "Rizal the Revolutionary and the Ateneo," 236.

Filipino Nation was a narrower concept, more exclusive than the Universal Church and the Empire on which the sun had, once upon a time, never set; but, for those who would call themselves by the new name of Filipinos, it was also a larger and more comprehensive community ... with duties and responsibilities were more urgent and immediate .... But Rizal's concept of a Nation ... was moral, general recognition of mutual rights and duties. 'What is the use of independence if the slaves of today will be the tyrants of tomorrow?' He never confused national independence with individual and social freedom."<sup>7</sup>

For his own well-stated and valid reasons, Rizal is the first native (*Indio*) who proclaimed himself a Filipino.<sup>8</sup> As he mentioned "Filipino" in his writings, from poetry to the more straightforward works, such as the *Sucesos* and the constitution of the *La Liga Filipina*, Rizal excluded no native (*indio*), and did not discriminate any gender. As a matter of fact, his regard for the female native, the Filipina, is to be noted with complete fervor and utmost respect. While mainstream and sensationalized history extols a kind of chauvinism over this simpatico-macho-guapito cosmopolite who got himself romantically involved with women near and far, Rizal have always meant well to the Filipina. In his times which was crossing the threshold of the twentieth century, Rizal was convinced that Filipino womanhood should rise from conservatism and even if bewildered work for empowerment. Salvador Lopez suggests that such bewilderment may be gleaned on whether Rizal presented Maria Clara as a paragon or caricature: "Lured on the one hand by the attractions of the new emancipation, she is on the other hand as yet too strongly attached to a lingering ideal of Filipino womanhood to brush aside the traditional conception of her sex which she imbibed with her mother's milk."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Leon Maria Guerrero, *The First Filipino*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed. (Manila: National Historical Institute, 1991), 496–497.

<sup>8</sup> A clear qualification is in order: while Rizal was the first to proclaim the *indio* as Filipino, it was Padre Jose Burgos, the mentor and friend of Rizal's brother Paciano, who first used the name "Filipino" in their campaign to secularize and Filipinize the Catholic parishes. Rizal was said to revive the idea in his poem *A la Juventud Filipina* (To the Filipino Youth) in 1879. See Quennie Ann J. Palafox, "Filipinos to be called 'Rizalines': Gen. Artemio Ricarte's Rizaline Constitution," in *National Historical Commission of the Philippines* (4 September 2012), <<http://nhcp.gov.ph/filipinos-to-be-called-rizalines>>.

<sup>9</sup> Salvador P. Lopez, "Maria Clara – Paragon or Caricature?" in *Rizal: Contrary Essays*, 81.

A serious look at his literary works and letters allows us to speculate about his critical depiction of some stereotypes of the female native, of which this paper is exactly all about. Through character analysis of three iconic female characters in Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere*—Maria Clara (the sweetheart), Doña Victorina de Espadana (the flamboyant), and Sisa (the insane)—I wish to show how Rizal critically portrayed the struggles of the Filipina as an individual and as a member of the state. From his social critique, I shall move on to his other works which state what should be done for the *India* to be identified as a dignified and empowered Filipina.

### Rereading Beyond Rizal: On Three Images of the Female in *Noli*

In the preface of his annotations of Morga's *Los Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas* (1889), Rizal claims that the *Noli* was written to depict the present state of his motherland during his time.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, this literary exposition is done to admonish the natives to look back at their profound past. *Noli Me Tangere* (Latin for "Do not touch me"), according to the author, is a novel that generally exposes the "social cancer" in the Philippines as ruled by the arrogant friars and corrupt government officials and inhabited by complacent natives.<sup>11</sup> It is done to describe the life, beliefs, hopes, desires, laments, and grievances of the Filipinos; as well as to unmask the hypocrisy of religion which impoverished them. A critical hermeneutic<sup>12</sup> is in order when reading the *Noli* as it contains symbolisms and allusions that reflect a cultural institution or social movement at lay in the Philippine society. Numerous symbols pertain to the women characters and the movements of women, which shall be discussed in the course of this essay.

The plot of *Noli* follows the life of Juan Crisostomo Ibarra, an *ilustrado* and cosmopolite who returned to the Philippines after his studies with the best intentions of putting up a school but have immediately come into conflict with a society dominated by corrupt friars and apathetic civil officials. For this paper though, Ibarra will have to take a sidestep so that focus may be given on three select female characters, the allusion that Rizal gave them, the specific stereotype of the Filipina of Rizal's time they represented, and what

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<sup>10</sup> Ambeth Ocampo, "Rotten beef and stinking fish: Rizal and the writing of Philippine History," in *Meaning and History* (Manila: Anvil, 2001), 114.

<sup>11</sup> Augusto de Viana, *Jose Rizal in our Times: A Guide for the Better Understanding of the Philippines' Foremost National Hero* (Manila: Books Atbp. Publishing, 2012), 187.

<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note that Manuel Dy asserts that Rizal was actually doing critical hermeneutics without being aware of it. This is because the whole novel can be viewed as a critique of Filipino cultural values, coupled with an implied analysis of social systems and a prophetic vision. See Manuel Dy, "Values in the *Noli Me Tangere*: A Critical Hermeneutics," in *The Noli Me Tangere A Century After: An Interdisciplinary Perspective (Budhi Papers)*, 91. He interestingly grounded this study by using Gadamer and Habermas.

more they could mean out of this rereading. This will be done in agreement to Linda Acupanda McGloin: "the significance of these women characters lie in their symbolic portrayals of a people of many images and of a country torn apart."<sup>13</sup> More than this, the need to define a nation's identity in the spirit of Rizal's Filipino also calls for the need to liberate the bewildered impressions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Filipino either as a colonial paragon or a caricature of oppression.

### The Sweetheart

We begin with Ibarra's sweetheart, Maria Clara, who is Rizal's allusion of Leonor Rivera of Kamiling, Tarlac, his sweetheart during his days in Santo Tomas. While he was in Europe, Leonor was forced to marry an English engineer. But beyond Rizal's signification, Maria Clara embodies the desired image of a Filipina of the Spanish colonial period—beautiful, prim and proper, religious, virginal, cultured, submissive, and, most of all, with a blood that is more European than native. She is known to be the daughter of Don Santiago delos Santos and Pia Alba who are both natives, but at the latter part is discovered to be an illegitimate child of Pia to the Spanish Franciscan Padre Damaso, former *cura paroco* of San Diego. McGloin opines that Maria Clara's ancestry must be noted since it bears the idealized model of a Filipina through time: the Roman Catholic's Virgin Mary, who is European and foreign. This may also represent a kind of confusion in identity formation among Filipinos who at that time were not called such, but as *indios* (natives).<sup>14</sup> Reading beyond Rizal, we may say that just as how Maria's discovery of her real roots caused a big change in her life, a conscious return to her roots may also give a Filipina good sense of self-affirmation.

In his interpretation of the character, Pascual notes that Maria Clara and her double-faced ancestry represent how the Philippine culture was regarded at that time to only have emerged upon the coming of the colonizer. Accordingly, the marriage of Capitan Tiago and Pia Alba (as that among natives) symbolizes the pre-Spanish Philippines which was anthropologically judged to not have any promising future as represented by an heir. But Doña Pia conceived Maria out of Padre Damaso's abuse and for that brought an offspring that would be a hybrid of a Spaniard father and a native mother.<sup>15</sup> Out of this symbolism, Pascual speaks of the so-called Maria Clara culture:

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<sup>13</sup> Linda Acupanda McGloin, "Colonization : Its Impact on Self-Image of Philippine Women in Rizal's Novels and Today," in *Friends of the Filipino People Bulletin* (Spring/Summer 1992), reproduced in Bert M. Drona, *The Filipino Mind*, <<https://www.thefilipinomind.com/2007/01/women-in-jose-rizals-novels.html>>.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Pascual, "Institutional Interpretation of Rizal's Novels," 79.

“Institutionally interpreted Maria Clara would represent the prevailing culture in the Philippines at the time of Rizal’s writing, a hybrid culture which was priest-dominated but displaying the strong characteristics inherited from the mother. This Maria Clara culture exhibited, as the novel portrayed, a strong religious leaning, being fathered by a dominant religious institution—the Catholic—and the noticeable underpinnings of perseverance and modesty, buttressed by faithfulness to a decision made—characteristics contributed by the native parentage.”<sup>16</sup>

The Maria Clara therefore is the native culture which embraced Christianity in all its dimensions. This culture is best paired with the Ibarra culture, which is described by Pascual as the Filipino culture developed in Europe. The engagement of Maria and Ibarra speaks of how an amalgamation of these two cultures may direct a very promising development of the Philippine society.<sup>17</sup> Hornedo supports this claim as he mentions that Rizal finds the archetypal portrayal of persecuted lovers as pathetic (proven by the removal of the chapter “Elias and Salome” in the published edition), and would rather highlight the drama between two rich lovers as vehicle to challenge the powerful in the Philippines at that time.<sup>18</sup>

Maria Clara is a hybrid, she belongs to the elite but is kind and amicable to the lower members of the social strata, friendly to the young and courteous to the elderly. Such good heartedness, though, may not be equated to active social involvement because deep within is a woman who could not do what her heart desires. Reading beyond Rizal once more, we see in Maria Clara a repressed woman who is overwhelmed by her own despair over a lost love, Ibarra.<sup>19</sup> After which, we find in her a kind of resilience for having known the important truths that made her finally decide on her own. But her interior strength did not bring out a powerful assertion of what she exactly wants. This is actually not a surprise for a woman who is known to receive bad news by developing fainting and then running to the bedroom. After losing Ibarra, she refused the prodding of her family to marry a peninsular named Linares, and made them understand that she had finally decided to

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 79–80.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Hornedo departs from Pascual by seeing the romantic tandem as a conflict of the main lines of force between liberalism and frailocratic authoritarianism. See Hornedo, “Noli Me Tangere: Creating an Idiom to Legitimize a New Paradigm of Power,” 82–83.

<sup>19</sup> McGloin, “Colonization: Its Impact on Self-Image of Philippine Women.”

choose between death and the nunnery. The presence of options indicates Rizal's confidence that a woman is capable of making her decisions, but is oftentimes confronted by conflicting values and, in this case, between love and filial piety. Overwhelmed by her two options, it is mentioned at the epilogue of the *Noli* that Maria is able to have both—by sinister forces, she died (committed suicide) in the nunnery.<sup>20</sup> This tragedy reflects Maria's earlier and most failed choice, she did not side with the filibuster, reform, and patriot but with the two most unworthy men in the novel: Padre Damaso as the seducer and Capitan Tiago as the cringing and submissive colonial.<sup>21</sup> For Guerrero-Nakpil, Maria Clara's failure to respond to the patriotic needs of the hour was her biggest failure.<sup>22</sup>

With the above, it is now difficult to size up how Rizal would want this heroine to become a symbol of a typical woman in what he would like to be a strong nation. Contrary to the popular Filipino regard of Maria Clara as the model of an ideal Filipina, her character is intended to portray a melancholic transition of an idealized womanhood from paragon to parody.<sup>23</sup> She is meant to portray virtues gone astray, either by abuse or petty shortcomings. "Her loyalty is the loyalty of the vanquished in spirit, her modesty the modesty of the timid ... a character that is fundamentally unsound without being contemptible, that is weak and yet appealing."<sup>24</sup>

### The Flamboyant

The next female character is Doña Victorina de los Reyes de De Espadaña, Rizal's allusion to Doña Agustina Medel de la Asca, a rich landlady in Manila who owned Teatro Zorilla and other urban estates. She was married to Coca, a bald and poor peninsular from Spain who was a stutterer, and she overdominates.<sup>25</sup> Doña Victorina is the wife of Tiburcio De Espadaña, a peninsular who had come to the Philippines as a petty official in the Customs but by bad luck had become a fake doctor in the provinces. Victorina is described in the *Noli* as a woman in ill-fitting gowns adorned with false frizzies, laces, and jewelries and often with rice-powder on her face.

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<sup>20</sup> The sinister description of Maria's death at the closing of the novel is based on an actual occurrence that happened to Rafael Comenge who reported it to the authorities with the frustrating results described in *Noli*. Meanwhile, Padre Salvi who is presumed as the perpetrator of the rape of Maria Clara alludes to a certain individual whom gossip has linked to several scandals in the Santa Clara monastery. Carlos Quirino, "Noli and Fili: Their Historical Authenticity," in *Historical Bulletin*, 7:2 (June 1963), 136.

<sup>21</sup> Carmen Guerrero-Nakpil, "Maria Clara," in *Rizal: Contrary Essays*, 87.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>24</sup> Lopez, "Maria Clara – Paragon or Caricature?" 83–84.

<sup>25</sup> Quirino, "Noli and Fili," 134.

When somebody mentioned that she was the only strong-spirited person (colloquially, “*malakas ang fighting spirit*”)—in this tiresome country, she quipped in defense that she is the only ammonia in this tiresome country. She was more Spanish than Augustina of Saragossa but speaks the language badly.

Victorina’s superfluous and boisterous character is ridiculous, but is said to enrich the plot. Bernad notes, “She is a ridiculous figure whose only reason for existence in the novels is that she provides some of the humor. And yet she is a believable character. There were doubtless many Doña Victorinas in Rizal’s day, just as there are still a few in ours.”<sup>26</sup> She is known for her uninformed social-climbing, who thinks she is clever but is actually an ignorant person unaware of her ignorance.<sup>27</sup> Her pretensions went as far as using her husband’s fake title that she prefers to be called Doctora Doña Victorina de Espadaña. In his interpretation of the novel, Hornedo thinks that Victorina’s total vanity reflects how the discourse of the time pretends to the truths of the time.<sup>28</sup> In Rizal’s time, speaking the truth requires a title credential that goes with prerogatives and privileges. In order to keep up with authority and social ranks, some sense of superiority must be posed so that that inferior ones will always obey.

It is said that Doña Victorina has been taken by Tiburcio as his wife for the thought that her flamboyance may save him from savageness. “She was a pretentious old woman, domineering and mannish, but hunger was more terrible, more domineering and pretentious still ... Don Tiburcio preferred to take charge of her rather than to become a public charge from hunger.”<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, the character Doña Victorina is a reflection of how colonialism subdues the natives through assimilation and making them believe that the colonizers are of superior race. This is seen with her efforts to look Western and to consume Western goods. Reading beyond Rizal, this could mean another identity loss through conscious deformation. And Tiburcio marrying her may also signify how the foreign lands take advantage of our strengths and how we succumb to them for the thought that they are of greater descent.

To amplify that rereading, due credit should nevertheless be given to the strength of this woman because of her capacity to overpower her peninsular husband:

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<sup>26</sup> Miguel A. Bernad, S.J., “Humor and Craftmanship in the Opening Chapters of the Noli,” in *The Noli Me Tangere A Century After: An Interdisciplinary Perspective (Budhi Papers)*, 47.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Hornedo, “Noli Me Tangere: Creating an Idiom to Legitimize a New Paradigm of Power,” 83.

<sup>29</sup> Jose Rizal, *The Social Cancer (Noli Me Tangere)*, trans. by Charles Derbyshire (New York: World Book Company, 1912), Ch. XLII.



Whatever she said had to be done, for he had succeeded in dominating her husband completely. He (Tiburcio) on his part did not put up any great resistance and was so converted into a kind of lap-dog of hers. If she was displeased with him she would not let him go out, and when she was really angry she tore out his false teeth.<sup>30</sup>

It is ironic that a woman who tries to be “somebody else” can subdue her equally problematic object of insecurity. For a thought, it may be considered that Victorina’s flamboyance could just be a hyperbolic expression of what she exactly does not want (a sarcasm typical to women), but still—being able to assimilate what you just try to imitate does not address the identity crisis.

### The Insane

The third female character, Sisa, was named after Narcisa, one of Rizal’s sisters.<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, mainstream interpretation acknowledges this character as the icon of the *loca-loca*, the insane. In *Noli*, Rizal describes her as a native woman living in a hut outside the town, married to a drunkard and gambler, and the mother of Crispin and Basilio, the two sacristans who are accused of stealing the cura’s money. The loss of these two boys drove their mother to insanity. Sisa is the typical mother who offers paid services like dressmaking and all other honorable tasks she can think of doing. She grows a small garden of vegetables, which is the source of their food on the table and gifts to the authorities when begging for favors. Fundamentally, Sisa is a wife who patiently tolerates the afflictions of life and a loving mother to her sons. This love for her sons, however, does not necessarily imply that she is also a good mother because her sufferings drove her to madness and death. For Hornedo, Sisa belongs to the periphery of the society and her inability to comprehend the entire discourse of the society to which she was supposed to belong brought her madness.<sup>32</sup> Sisa is the face of the silent victims of oppression, and of women who are too ignorant and/or weak to survive. Just like Maria Clara who by the way had also gotten half-crazed at the end of the novel, Sisa has more heart than brains. But unlike Maria Clara who belongs to the upper class, Sisa and her sons have been oppressed not just by the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., Ch XLII.

<sup>31</sup> Maricris Irene V. Tamolang, “How ‘Sisa’ got her name and other Rizal stories,” in *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (21 June 2011), <<https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/16700/how-%E2%80%99Sisa%E2%80%99-got-her-name-and-other-rizal-stories>>.

<sup>32</sup> Hornedo, “Noli Me Tangere: Creating an Idiom to Legitimize a New Paradigm of Power,” 84.

Spaniards but also by their fellow natives like the Sacristan Mayor and Doña Consolacion. Such details contribute to Daroy's contention that the story of Sisa have somehow contributed to the kind of tension rising between Ibarra's ideals and the social will (i.e., the real condition).<sup>33</sup>

Among all the female characters in the *Noli*, it is Sisa who is most (if not the only one) depicted as a mother. And with Rizal's eloquent description of this woman who is beautiful but made uncomely by later sorrow and suffering, this iconic figure of oppression and insanity also symbolizes the motherland—the Philippines and the typical Filipino, submissive to all miseries yet very protective of one's honor. Romero furthers this point and helps us to read beyond Rizal:

She was all forgiveness, all heart, and this reaction invited further exploration. To Sisa, this was resignation to her fate. But when applied to a people, such an attitude may be an acceptance of laziness and a selfish disregard for rights and duties. Sisa in fact is both self-effacing and courageous. She could not assert her essential ideals but she held on to her martyrdom. Perhaps this is because of acceptance of the fate of her sons. She wanted to save them from oppression and suffer any humiliation for their sake.<sup>34</sup>

### Rizal and the Filipina

From the above, we infer with an anticlimax: none of the three characters are positively portrayed in the *Noli*. As a matter of fact, Rizal did not enshrine any female character in the novel. It was Hornedo who boldly declared, "he (Rizal) certainly underestimated women. But no matter ... That this land will be better is our hope."<sup>35</sup>

Our critical examination of Maria Clara, Doña Victorina, and Sisa showed Rizal's conviction that Filipino women are potential contributors to the nation if their minds are removed from the false consciousness implanted and nourished by the friars. They should have had a clear perception of their identity and roles as woman,<sup>36</sup> more than exuding external beauty, obedience,

<sup>33</sup> Daroy, "The Ideas of European Idealism in the Fiction of Rizal," 147.

<sup>34</sup> Ma. Corona S. Romero, Julita R. Sta. Romana, Lourdes Y. Santos, *Rizal and the Development of National Consciousness*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Quezon City: Katha Publishing, 2006), 97–98.

<sup>35</sup> Hornedo, "Noli Me Tangere: Creating an Idiom to Legitimize a New Paradigm of Power," 87.

<sup>36</sup> Albina Pecson Fernandez, "Rizal on Women and Children in the Struggle for Nationhood," in *Review of Women's Studies*, 1:2 (1990–1991), 28.

and modesty. Keen observation may convince us that Doña Victorina's strong character could put the Spaniards in their right places, and Maria Clara should also be given due credit for at least defying Padre Damaso who symbolizes the patriarchal, ecclesiastical, and state authority.<sup>37</sup> However, their efforts might not even count for a single self-governed and determined act.

There are numerous historical documents that show Rizal's take on Filipina identity and roles, which may also be treasure chests of his limited notes on feminism: among these are his letters to his sisters, the poems "Mi Primera Inspiracion" ("My First Inspiration") and "Hymno al Trabajo" ("Hymn to Labor"), the essay "La Indolencia de los Filipinos" ("The Indolence of the Filipinos"), and his letter to the young women of Malolos, a group of 20 young women who requested Governor General Weyler for permission to open a "night school" so that they may study Spanish under Teodoro Sandiko. It is also important to note that it was in Rizal's time (and so he might have witnessed) the emergence of these schools of feminism: the liberal feminism of Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill who wrote *On the Subjection of Women*, Marxist feminism as per Frederick Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), anarcho-feminism which must have proliferated in Spain due to its emerging liberalism from the late 1800s up to the 1930s, and nihilist feminism which was the seedbed of Russian feminism. The last was inspired by Chernyshevskii's novel, *What is to be Done?* written in 1862.<sup>38</sup>

Albina Pecson Fernandez notes that among these schools of feminism, Rizal's thoughts on the Filipino woman makes him a liberal feminist: for Rizal, women can make or break a nation. If they are irrational because of indoctrination that promotes false consciousness, then they can only create an irrational society. But when left alone by the Church to develop their own subjectivity, they are capable of creating a rational society.<sup>39</sup> For Rizal, a woman builds a society by (though not limited to) being the seedbed of humanity — she bears and gives birth, nourishes and educates; she does not only build a family and home but a nation. For Rizal, such role is not just fundamental but decisive to the future citizens of the nation; that even if wives are meant to stay at home, they deserve to be educated to develop freedom of thought and awareness of their rights. Whatever a mother shows to her children is what they would become, and so in his letter to the women of Malolos, Rizal writes:

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 27–28.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

What offspring will be that of a woman whose kindness of character is expressed of mumbled prayers; who knows nothing by heart but *awits* (hymns), novenas, and the alleged miracles; whose amusement consists in playing *panguingue* (card game) or in the frequent confession of the same sins? What sons will she have but acolytes, priest's servants or cockfighters? It is the mothers who are responsible for the present servitude of our compatriots, owing to the unlimited trustfulness of their loving hearts, to their ardent desire to elevate their sons. Maturity is the fruit of infancy and the infant is formed on the lap of its mother. The mother who can only teach her child how to kneel and kiss hands must not expect sons with blood other than that of vile slaves .... Let us be reasonable and open our eyes, especially you women, because you are the first to influence the consciousness of man.<sup>40</sup>

In a nutshell, we enumerate the qualities that, according to Rizal, mothers have to possess: 1) be a noble wife, 2) be like Spartan mothers who rear their children in service of the state and 3) create an atmosphere of dignity and respect for men around her. She must "awaken and prepare the will of her children towards all that is honourable, judged by proper standards, to all that is sincere and firm of purpose, clear judgment, clear procedure, honesty in act and deed, love for the fellowman and respect of God."<sup>41</sup> To the unmarried, Rizal advised that they should not be deceived by good looks and should choose a man with 1) a noble and honored name, 2) a manly heart and 3) a high spirit incapable of being satisfied with engendering slaves.

In this letter, Rizal laments about the backwardness of Asia which is due to the ignorance of women and their treatment as slaves. He compared such marginalized condition with those in Europe and America where there are women who are free and well-educated and endowed with lucid intellect and a strong will.<sup>42</sup> Now what gives him the right to compare? We must then note that aside from his possible familiarity with the feminist schools of his

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<sup>40</sup> Jose Rizal, "To My Countrywomen, the Girls of Malolos," trans. by Epifanio de los Santos (from the Tagalog original published in *El Renacimiento* in 1903), in Epifanio de los Santos, "More About Rizal (Translation)," in *Revista Filipina (The Philippine Review)*, 2:1 (1917), 26–27, <<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/p/philamer/acp0898.0002.001/38?view=image&size=100>>.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

time, Rizal had direct contact with intelligent women and even feminists while in Europe:<sup>43</sup>

1. While touring the United States he met a certain Miss Smith, from Boston who gave him a comprehensive history of Chicago and annotated for him various places of interest. In the manuscript, Rizal called her Madam de Block who is said to be travelling for a "scientific mission," that is, to India to study Indian women.
2. The office that printed *Noli* in Berlin was run by feminists from the *Typographische Institut*, a school that trained women in printing.
3. Through friends and "special women" he met along the way, most notable of which is Nelly Boustead, whom he admired for her exceptional intelligence and have nearly married.

In his letter to Trinidad on 11 March 1886, he admonished her sister to read and read, and adorn herself with knowledge which is very important for women. He described German women as serious, studious, diligent, and highly cultured; they are not afraid of men, are more concerned with substance than with appearances, and do not quarrel.<sup>44</sup> This little comparison was actually meant to admonish Trining to seriously reconsider studying, as response to her letter dated 14 March 1883 where she told her brother Jose that she already stopped going to school.<sup>45</sup>

That we may be prevented from any assumption that Rizal's dialogical excursus on women (Filipina) empowerment ends with a recommendation to merely emulate the occidental ways, we end this essay by noting that despite the above, there is something about the Filipina that the women of other nations do not have. In the same letter to Trining, Rizal writes:

In our provinces, women still preserve a virtue that compensates for their little instruction—the virtue of industry and tenderness. In no woman in Europe have I found the latter virtue in such a high degree as among the woman there. If these qualities that nature gives to the women there were exalted by intellectual qualities, as it happens in Europe, the Filipino family has nothing to envy the European.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Fernandez, "Rizal on Women and Children," 24.

<sup>44</sup> Jose Rizal, "Letter to Trinidad," in *Jose Rizal: Letters with Family Members* (Manila: National Historical Commission of the Philippines, 2011), 223–224.

<sup>45</sup> Rizal, "Letter to Trinidad," 93.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

In truth and in deed, there is really nothing to envy about the colonial West if the Filipina has a full and enlightened knowledge of herself, and Jose Rizal will always be there to give a haunting reminder:

The power and good judgment of the women of the Philippines are well known, and it is because of this that she has been hoodwinked, and tied, and rendered pusillanimous, and now her enslavers rest at ease, so long as they can keep the Filipina mother a slave, so long will they be able to make slaves of her children.<sup>47</sup>

With that in mind, and through courageous efforts to build herself, the Filipina will be able to restore her fame and honor in their pristine conditions. She will not just be known for her beauty and amiable character, but also for her fortitude of mind and loftiness of purpose.

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<sup>47</sup> Rizal, "To My Countrywomen, the Girls of Malolos," 27.

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