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The Revolution According to Raymundo Mata as Narrative Transformation of the Philippine Revolution

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Abstract

This paper takes a look at the narratives of the Philippine Revolution in a Philippine novel in English. Philippine novels about the revolution and the war against America describe the revolution as elites' initiation, and the masses are merely followers with no noble vision. *The Revolution* challenges such an elite-and-masses dichotomous relationship, and deconstructs what seems to be monolithic identity and linguistic background in which the narratives of the Filipinos are embedded. Doing so breaks down, whether consciously or not, the conventional notions of colonialism, state, nation and self, and in a sense detaches the subject from the material concern and relation to the outside world. *The Revolution* reveals the shift of an attention from the customary search for a nation to poststructural deconstruction of such an aspiration. The celebration of ambiguous, uncertain and multi-vocal perceptions and languages in the novel replaces nation-bound vision and identity.

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Six decades of Philippine literature in English has produced only a few novels about the Philippine Revolution and the war against America.[1] In a study on four of these novels[2], Maria Martinez-Sicat found that they presented the Philippine revolution in a dichotomous discourse where elites-landlords were the leaders of the Revolution and the masses were ignorant followers. The stories unfold the Revolution as a critical moment of history centered on the lives of elites and their visions of the nation. Even if non-elites are protagonists, they are represented as caricatures or persons incapable of thinking in terms of the state or nation. This literary practice, far from establishing other ideas, is tied to the socio-economic condition of non-elites. Sicat argues that an elite centered-discourse is implicated in Philippine social structure and consciousness: it contributes to the (re)production of the exploitative relationship between elites and the masses and the social structure in which hegemonic power of the elites continue to block the realization of genuine justice for the impoverished majority. Claiming that literature can be employed as an ideological weapon for social change, Martinez-Sicat asserts that if new narratives of the Revolution were to be written, these should replace elitist orientation with that of the masses. Only then can Philippine literature effectively work out to reconcile political divisions in belief, class, language, religion, ethnic, and the nation.[2]

Fifteen years after Martinez-Sicat (1994) published her investigation, another English novel about the Philippine Revolution has been produced. Gina Apostol's *The Revolution According to Raymundo Mata*[3] deepens the divisions between elites and the non-elite. Using a distinctive narrative style which differs from those of other English novels produced in the Philippines, *The Revolution* renders the Philippine Revolution as an ambiguous, multiple, and fragmentary history where ambivalent identity replaces the vision of unity, and mockery wins over criticism.[4]

The Revolution According to Raymundo Mata presents a story of the Philippine Revolution as a hero's memoir. The memoir, written by Raymundo Mata, an unknown figure of the *Katipunan*, constitutes the body of the novel. It is divided into five parts: Raymundo's childhood in the province of Kavite around 1872; his student life in Manila where he indulges in sexual pleasure while engrossed in Rizal's first novel; an accidental mission to Dapitan as a *Katipunero* and his encounter with

Rizal. Raymundo's night-blindness earned him a position, pretending to be a patient to see the ophthalmologist, to cover up the important mission; a petty dispute that leads to the discovery of the secret society and the outbreak of the uprising, and the final part involves the interlacing of Raymundo's writing and Rizal's unfinished third novel which Raymundo steals from Dapitan. His memoir is probably written years before and collated during his capture in Bilibid prison under the custody of the U.S..[7] It is later discovered in a state of total mess. Self-claimed editor Estrella Espejo describes the memoir as an "assortment of unpaginated notes and mismatched sheaves packed in a ratty biscuit tin and stuffed in a tattered medical bag, the edges of the papers curled up in permanent rust." (2)[8]

The peculiarity of Raymundo's memoir lies in rather its language than its present disorganized state. Publisher Trina Trono had to entrust the memoir's translation to Mimi C. Magsalin, a graduate student at the Cornel University, because the memoir sounded "linguistically deranged." (3) Although a personal account is necessarily discontinuous, arbitrary and fragmented, the "mishmashed linguistic tract" (80. footnote 173) adds complexity to reading the memoir. It contains a curious variant of Tagalog in Part One, switches to Raymundo's mother tongue, Spanish, with occasional smatterings of Waray, pidgin and random Cebuano in Part Two, and shifts to surly Ilocano, cryptic notes of Chabacano, and English in the latter part of the journal, which is interspersed by "an admirable grasp of vulgarisms, licentious metaphor, and of-color puns."(3) Such a puzzle-like text, which a translator could barely understand is capable of generating multiple meanings and interpretations. Estrella Espejo, psychoanalyst Dr. Diwata Drake, and translator Mimi C. Magsalin (pseudo) unravel conversational arguments in footnotes below Raymundo's text. The footnotes produce an effect in which readers feel like reading a text with the three commentators. However, the footnotes help readers understand Raymundo's text by giving some background explanation and interpretations; they also complicate the explanations by presenting contrasting interpretations and making the reader "create some of (his) own" (42. footnote 59) in the process.

The symbol-like text would beset readers as they go on reading, even with its English translation, because they have to confront undecipherable expressions in the text. Dr. Darke cautions at the beginning of the book, "This text seems to contain false states, red

herrings, dead ends, mysterious trails. The patient reader will embrace the flapping embryonic gills, the infant passages from which the Filipino necessarily emerged, including alphabet games, morality plays, and frank delusions. Let him. The rest of you may proceed at your own discretion...As always the text exists at your leisure. You may tumble through it as you wish; but don't please do not blame us for your concussions" (36). Interpretative arguments of the three women in the footnotes complement such a reading of the text.

Readers would expect that the novel offers an alternative view of the revolution, different from those provided by the people who claim entitlement to official memory and national identity. Presenting the "unofficial" voice is itself much favored in postcolonial literature and scholarship. As Apostol states elsewhere,[9] the novel represents multiplicity (of history, selves, voices, etc) by deconstructing monolingual narratives,[10] homogenous perspective, and historical dichotomy (such as Bonifacio versus Aguinaldo, which represent Peasants=Redeemers versus Petty-bourgeois=Betrayers. 109, footnote 261). Deconstructing homogenous concepts and binary oppositions has been practiced in the field of historiography by some historians such as Rey Ileto and Vicente Rafael, however, *The Revolution* employs the poststructural tact to the extent that the narrative turns schizophrenic.[11] It deals with the historic event as "a puzzle: traps for the reader, dead-end jokes, texual games, unexplained sleights of tongue." (290) In other words, the novel is an unfathomable "text" with multiple meanings. Thus, it turns a world into something ambiguous and uncertain.

The breakdown of the linguistic coherence challenges the conventional notion of identity. Raymundo Mata, an author of the memoir himself, is presented as an ambiguous figure. Apostol constructs him from the record that states, "On June 15, 1896, Dr. Valenzuela left Manila aboard the steamer *Venus*. To disguise his real mission, he brought with him a blind man named Raymundo Mata and a guide, going to Dapitan to seek Rizal's expert medical service."[12] This recuperated historical character Raymundo Mata is described by Espejo in "Some Notes on Author's Patrimony" (21-27 and Part One) as "Raymundo Mata, a member of the *Katipunan*, bookish, a bit dreamy, night-blind ... descendant of a Spanish military official, General Juan Manuel de la Matta." Dr. Drake interprets Raymundo's Spanish ancestry in a footnote that he "contains within himself the prime enemy of the people" (24.

footnote 9). The following footnote, however, reminds readers that there may not be a blood relation between the Spanish general and the protagonist.[13] What is certain is that Raymundo Mata was a son of a dramatist, an actor and fan of Padre Burgos, one of the three priests executed in 1872. Raymundo's grandfather was a half Basque-soldier, married to a Chinese vendor but his Chinese ancestry was completely erased from the memoir. (35. footnote 16) His mother was a Visayan artist, who died of tuberculosis when she was young.

Raymundo was virtually abandoned and brought up by his uncle, an assistant parish priest in a *kumbento* since his father had left him and joined the rebels. Raymundo followed later his father's footsteps, took up arms and joined the Katipunan in August 1986. He was captured by Americans and he died in Bilibid jail. Not much is known of Raymundo's view of the American phase of the revolution (24) because his memoir is silent about it. A character such as Raymundo, who "as a petty-bourgeouis [sic] Basque-Filipino-(ghost-Chinese) quadroonish type, from landowning, military and lamp-oil-selling castes," (109) itself represents a complex identity that repudiates the conventional dichotomy of the masses versus *ilustrado*, and the oppressed Filipinos versus the Spaniards. A case in point is that Raymundo's encounter in an actual battle with his own father, infamous Cavite tulisan, who then appeared before Raymundo as the leader of the *Guardia Civil* (253).

By dismantling a simple, dichotomous framework of history and identity in which the "authentic self" has a single character and speaks one language, *The Revolution* lures readers to "imagine the self as a jumbled aggregate of fragments and bits of languages." (106. footnote 252) Such fragmented and isolated conception of self is bound to affect one's relationship to outside world. The economic and political preoccupation of the protagonists in the four novels in *Imagining the Nation* and its absence in *The Revolution* attest to this. In Kalaw's *Filipino Rebel*, revolutionary ilustrado, Ricafort enumerates to the American Governor General the damages inflicted on the Philippines: the loss of the army of the revolution to protect the country; economic dependence on America; the spirit of patronage, the pork barrel and other political favors from leaders.[14] Ricafort insists that the Philippines would have been better off if it was left alone. In *Po-on,* irrational execution of ecclesiastical power, such as cutting off Ba-ac's right arm and setting fire to Po-on for Ba-ac's murdering the priest make Istak turn his back on the Catholic Church

though he never abandons his faith in God. Although Martinez-Sicat thoroughly criticizes *The Three-Cornered Sun* in that it disparages non-ilustrados by depicting them at best loyal and at worst anarchic leaves the superiority of property owners an unquestioned assumption.[15] The vivid description of the physical and mental degradation of tenants carved by the generations of exploitation appeals to readers.

> Their generation, linked by debts that sons and unborn sons inherited, had known no rights. Their faces sightless in sleep, their bodies exhausted by the effort to keep alive...The arrival of guns gave them only vague hope of escaping the cycles of their poverty and dying. The darkest one, Tante, had eight children alive. To bury his dead five with rites entitling them to the next world, he had to bind himself to Juancho's father [the landlord] for another eight years.[16]

A poststructural novel such as *The Revolution* decisively departs from the dichotomy of elites and the masses that represent oppressors and oppressed respectively; based on such conceptualization, Martinez-Sicat seeks the triumph of the latter over the former. As a result of multivocality and heterogeneous identity, characters in *The Revolution* do not take decisive political action nor do they speak out. Raymundo Mata's relatively well-off background did not let him mingle with peasants or the masses, but more than that, the novel does not speak to readers with the immediacy of the novels in *Imagining the Nation*.[17] More precisely, the poststructural novel stops speaking to readers. *The Revolution* does not describe the masses as ignorant and of little worth, nor does it represent *ilustrados* as revolutionary because the latter do not commit to the struggle for legitimacy as a power holder of the nation. Nothing of the sort of suffering that shapes, for example, Istak's personality and his life, appears in the novel. Multivocality in *The Revolution* results in the lack of depth in the experience of characters that shape their worldview. Such superficial development of characters leaves readers "nothing but texts."[18]

Like Raymundo's complex ancestry, identity repudiates any simple unification of his past, present and vision for the future. *The Revolution* does not allow readers to construct mentally the unified past, the present and envisioned future. Instead, it offers historical contradictions. To Espejo's assertion, "to beat the Spaniards and raise the flag of Philippine independence must have been everyone's desire," Dr. Drake responds:

> ...(remember the citizens of places such as Tanza who sided with the Spaniards; remember also the hundreds of Filipino Guardia Civil foot soldiers who remained under the Spanish flag; remember Filipinos who hid and rescued their Spanish priests; and how about the provinces that did not join the war?; et cetera). It makes sense that the Narrative ignores these gaps, as an author might downplay episodes that do not propel his themes. We construct history from desire. This is not a novelty. We prefer not to know that the war was a battle for people's heart as much has a revolution against the colonial order; we prefer to ignore that the people's hearts were part of that order. But to acknowledge it perhaps puts the act in perspective and defines the scale of rebel struggle. It might highlight that heroism you cherish (132).

Revising the dichotomy of the Filipinos versus the Spaniards again appears, with pathetic tone, in Aguinaldo's personal revenge against a fellow Filipino. Insulted by Spanish speaking port officer, Ramon Padilla, who looks at non-Spanish speaking *gobernadorcillo* Aguinaldo condescendingly, the latter vents his anger at Padilla. Raymundo's exclamation, "But Supremo, Ramon Padilla is a Filipino, from Pandacan, not a Spaniard" is only answered by Aguinaldo with "All the more reason to slap him" (160).

Only when the Supremo took on Miong's [Aguinaldo] cause with the resources of a general, calling upon his men to fetch the darned Padilla, to throw the gauntlet of a duel-the poor man's choice of weapons, knife or nightstick-and settle the time and place of revenge, did Miong admitted-that his cause was stupid (161).

But the petty pride of the *gobernadorcillo* prevents him from openly admitting his stupidity. Only a sincere apology from Ramon Padilla spares the bloodshed.

Unlike other novels that deal with the revolution, such as *Po-on*, in which Istak confronts until the end the question whether invisible national community takesprecedence over his family or an immediate community, *The Revolution* tends to laugh off or ridicule historical episodes. *The Revolution*, for instance, talks about Raymundo's absence in a gathering in Manila where Rizal is invited since he is busy divesting lady Orang of her breeches (134). The fatal discovery of the secret society, which leads to the immature break of the revolution, is brought about by

the "dumb" competition over a promotion in which the financial reward is worth two pesos. Furious Caviteno, Patino, hands over the information of the secret society to (who? the Spaniards) to avenge himself against his rival, *Katipunero* Polonio. "It's enough to make you weep" (226).

If the Philippine Revolution, as Espejo claims (25), began with the novel, Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere*, provoking a sense of nation, *The Revolution* dismantles such aconcept of nation. The implication would be significant if, as Linda Ty-Casper poetically expressed, "it is through literature that we can hope to liberateourselves and our countries from being stereotyped, simplified, reduced to beings who have to be colonized in order to be set free...It is in history that we recover our place. It is in our literature that we recover our history."[19]

Literature as constructing history and the search for identity are a topic for another paper but it suffices to say that the transformation of literary narratives is the transformation of consciousness towards nationhood. Overall, the multivocal text of *The Revolution* deconstructs historical contradiction and binary concepts, which have dominated the understanding of history, in order to bring into the text the hybrid and complex nature of Philippine languages and experiences. Enthusiastic conversion of the past into the comical, personalized chain of events erases the material basis of the text. In the novel, the multilingual voices prevent readers from constructing the physical world of the characters. In other words, it hardly determines speaking subjects in relation to the outside world. Making identity and voice uncertain leaves us in the postmodern state of, as Frederick Jameson puts it, "the fragmentation of the subject." Such a conception of self makes a collective experience such as that unfolded in the novel almost impossible.

In the community theater in Kenya in 1982, which is to recuperate their culture and language through the struggle against neocolonial condition, one of participants said:

> During rehearsal so far, I have discovered so much I did not know about my own history. I can say with confidence that I know and I'm still learning –a great deal more about my own culture. Knowing more about my past has made me [m]ore sensitive to my present situation and that of my future and the future of my children.[20]

If literature has material relevance, the celebration of the ambiguous self and the world should fire our imagination of the self and construction of society. In the case of *Revolution*, the creation of community or nation remains unsolved and undetermined.

Endnotes

[1] Maria Martinez-Sicat. 1994. *Imagining the Nation in Four Philippine Novels.* Quezon City. University of the Philippine Press. pp.22.
[2] Maximo Kalaw's *The Filipino Rebel: A Romance of American Occupation in the Philippines* (1929); Linda Ty-Casper's *The Three Cornered Sun* (1979); Sionil Jose's *Po-on* (1984), and; Alfred Yuson's *Great Philippine Jungle Energy Café* (1988).
[2] Ibid. pp.132.
[3] Gina Apostol. 2009. *The Revolution According to Raymundo Mata.* Manila. Anvil. Quezon City.
[4] Daryl Delgado. "Interview with Gina Apostol" in Kuritika Kalutura. 15(2010). Ateneo de Manila University. pp.292.
[5] Martinez-Sicat. pp.92.
[6] Ibid.pp.91.
[7] Apostol. pp.24., and pp.99. footnote 227.
[8] Subsequent quotations from *The Revolution to Raymundo Mata.* Manila will be indicated by page numbers in parenthesis.
[9] Gina Apostol. "On Writing a Novel about Philippine History." bibliolepsy https://sites.google.com/site/bibliolepsy/
[10] Dr. Diwata Darke argues that "...As if the 'authentic self' had a single character, speaking only one language and in correct syntax to boot. Whereas perhaps it is less tempting but more analytically productive to imagine the self as a jumbled aggregate of fragments and bits of languages, "foreign," "native," and others, a signifying soul wantonly spliced: especially the Filipino soul-so tugged about into linguistic quarters who knows where and when which of its languages-Tagalog, Spanish, English, Waray and so on-will draw blood? pp.106.
[11] Frederic Jameson. (1984). Drawing on Lacan's description of schizophrenia, which is a breakdown in the interlocking syntagmatic series of signifiers that constitutes an utterance or a meaning, Jameson grasps this linguistic malfunction and the psyche of the schizophrenic by

way of a two-fold proposition: first, that personal identity is itself the effect of a certain temporal unification of past and future with the present before me; and second, that such active temporal unification is itself a function of language. If we are unable to unify the past, present and future of the sentence, then we are similarly unable to unify the past, present and future of our own biological experience or psychic life. pp.72.

[12] ninos classrooms
http://www.ninosoriadeveyra.com/1/post/2010/2/history-in-footnotes.html

[13] pp.24 footnote 10. "Are you kind of forgetting the fact that General de la Matta and Raymundo Mata many not be related?" (Trans. Note).

[14] Martinez-Sicat. pp.44.

[15] Ibid. pp.83.

[16] Linda Ty-Casper. 1979. *The Three-Cornered Sun.* Quezon City. New Day Publishers. pp.50., cited in Martinez-Sicat. pp.84.

[17] I borrowed from Frederic Jameson's phrase. Jameson juxtaposes Van Gogh's painting of the peasant shoes and Andy Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes*, contemporary visual art. While Gogh's painting can be read as the objective world of agricultural misery, of stark rural poverty, and the whole rudimentary human world of backbreaking peasant toil, Warhol's shoes no longer speak to us with any of the immediacy of Gogh's footgear. Jameson goes on to say that Warhol's shoes do not speak to us at all. pp.59.
If Warhol's shoes (Jameson argues that it foregrounds in commodity fetishism) are considered distinctively postmodern, I assume that literature that is not speaking to readers, particularly the absence of ideological speak, is poststructural.

[18] Jameson. Ibid. pp.66.

[19] "The Historical Novel as Fiction," Jaime An Lim. *In Tinuha: History in Philippine Literary Texts.* Victor Sobgo, ed., National Commission for Culture and Arts. 2003. Pp.77.

[20] Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. 2011(1986). *Decolonizing the Mind. The Politics of Language in African Literature.* James Currey/Heinemann. pp.60.

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