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## Nick Joaquin's "Portrait" III. The Invisible Protagonists

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materialism and superficiality, and are our young so vulgar and cynical as Joaquin depicts them? Is there nothing good or beautiful that has come out of accepting modern ways—more specifically, American ways? The younger generation, it seems, chooses to live in a world of reality, but is this only a pseudo-awareness, as Joaquin leads us to believe? In his play the older generation lives in a world of ideals, and it is on the passing away of such a world that Mr. Joaquin has written this elegy. Does this imply that the younger generation has no such ideals or, if it has, is unable to live up to them? This is something to ponder over.

Nick Joaquin's ability as a writer has already been extolled by many and to say here that his play is beautifully written would be adding but little to what has already been said about him. In this play he has managed to present a variety of characters, Filipinos from all walks of life, with varying emotions and sensibilities: the poor and the rich, the old and the young, the poet turned politician, the artist and the bit performer, the idealist and the materialist, the dreamer and the realist—all of them dominated and confused by the speed with which our culture shifted from the European to the American, from the old to the new.

There is imagination and color, depth and intensity in the play, but it seems that much of this was lost in its adaptation for the stage. Some of the very interesting characters, the touching scenes and stirring soliloquies which serve as a means of understanding the author's thesis were unfortunately cut to fit the requirements of a dramatic presentation. This leads one to wonder whether Mr. Joaquin wrote the play for actual production or merely because he felt it his "vocation" to "remember and sing" and grieve for the passing of the old Manila and its way of life because in so doing "something of it is left; something of it survives, and will survive, as long as I live and remember—I who have known and loved and cherished these things!"

It is indeed a distinguished play, a truly Filipino play. It is time that our Filipino dramatists set to work producing more such plays for our stage.

GLORIA A. CASTRO

### III. The Invisible Protagonists

It is possible to say that in Nick Joaquin's *Portrait*, the chief protagonists never appear on the stage.

The two conflicting forces are led by the artist on one side and, on the other side, by the rich American who wants to buy his painting. Yet the drama is set in motion by the *keenly felt* struggle between the two. On the side of the artist stand his daughters Candida and Paula. On the side of the American are Tony Javier, Bitoy Camacho, Manolo and Pepang, and with them are ranged the products of the modern world. The American offers Candida and Paula material security in exchange for Don Lorenzo's painting. The sisters however consistently refuse the offer because to them it would mean giving up their father's art and all that it stands for.

The Marasigan mansion is a symbol of the past and all that was good and precious in it. It represents the age when Our Lady held her rightful place of honor. The people's minds and hearts were at peace then because their trust was in God. There was enough time for everything—time enough for a siesta after lunch, a stroll in the afternoon and the rosary after supper. There was time enough for an enjoyable session of *tres siete* in the evenings when there was company. There was time for *tertulias* and exchange of ideas about music, painting, poetry, politics and the revolution.

All these are no more. The skepticism of the new age is described in the words of Bitoy Camacho:

"After my father died. . . I stopped going to the Marasigan house. . . I had said goodbye to that house, goodbye to that world—the world of Don Lorenzo. . . I was bitter against it; it had deceived me. I told myself that Don Lorenzo and my father had taught me nothing but lies. My childhood was a lie; the nineteen-twenties were a lie; beauty and faith and courtesy and honor and innocence were all just lies.

"The truth was fear—always fear—fear of the boss, of the landlord, of the police, of being late, of being sick, of losing one's job. The truth was no shoes, no money, no smoking, no loitering, no vacancy, no trespassing, and beware of the dog."

What has brought about the big change in Filipino life was the sudden entrance of a new culture through the doors of a new language. A new set of values defies the old standards. The people are attracted to the new and abandon the old. The culture brought with her by America has indeed its own virtues. But as Mrs. Pablo has said in an article on Nick Joaquin published in a

previous number of *PHILIPPINE STUDIES* (III: 187 ff.) there has been an "indiscriminate copying of American culture, with not only its unquestionable contributions to modern progress, but also its plethora of undesirable 'isms'—materialism, pessimism, naturalism, existentialism—most of which originated not from the United States, it is true, but with which we have become acquainted in American writings."

The painting of Don Lorenzo inspires fear in the characters who represent the new generation. It is like a judge pronouncing sentence upon them and their world. Theirs is an unproductive, spiritually barren world where drunken vaudeville performers take the place of concert artists and honor is given away for a commission. Why is it that there is no great poet among them? Is it not because they are rejecting that cultural and traditional background that they are heir to?

A striking contrast between the old and the new is presented from the first appearance of Tony Javier on the stage. The audience realizes that there is a big gap between the world he breaks into and himself. His speech and actions betray a lack of refinement, which lack is glaring in a house whose very furniture speaks of grace and dignity.

"Enough and more is the desolation we have seen, survivors of a captured city. Thus, oh thus salute me and depart, as a body laid out for burial. . . ." Thus Anchises addresses Aeneas in Mackail's translation of the *Aeneid*. The words could very well have been spoken by Don Lorenzo Marasigan when he refused to go on living in the modern age and exiled himself in his room. "Survivors of a captured city"—these are Candida, Paula, their father and his old friends who seem to be completely useless in the present scheme of things.

Anchises wished to perish with the burning city. But it was the will of the gods that he should permit Aeneas to rescue him. In his *Portrait* Nick Joaquin urges the younger Filipino generation to carry with it, defend and uphold the traditions and treasures of the past against the threat of annihilation.

MARIA AURORA MALVAR