

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

Ang Pagiging Babae, by Barrios

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Philippine Studies vol. 42, no. 4 (1994): 555–556

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Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

Book Reviews



Ang Pagiging Babae ay Pamumuhay sa Panahon ng Digma. By Joi Barrios Manila: Babaylan Women's Publishing Collective, 1990. 171 pages.

"Eh, kasi babae!" This very popular tagalog expression reveals many things about the Filipino attitude towards women. This locution most often implies a characteristic attitude towards feminine identity, especially when uttered by men. It is a remark with a very demeaning connotation.

In a male-dominated society like ours, women are always considered the weaker sex, short of becoming second-class citizens. They are seldom given the chance to speak and be heard; Not that they do not want to share their thoughts and opinions about issues in society, but that opportunities seldom come. Employing men's standards, our culture always casts judgment on women, so that being a woman constantly means struggling for a niche in a chauvinist society.

In her book aptly titled, *Ang Pagiging Babae ay Pamumuhay sa Panahon ng Digma*, Joi Barrios articulates the issue of gender discrimination. Employing the power of poetry, she discloses what a woman feels and thinks about the question of sexism from a woman's point of view. In doing so, Joi addresses her poems to both sexes. She does not only make the opposite gender aware of society's prejudice against women but also, and more significantly, awakens women into an awareness of their own predicament.

The book is divided into five parts, each introduced by a poem bearing the title of the section. The first part, "*Babae Akong Namumuhay nang Mag-isa*," tackles society's regard for women who spend their life alone. This introductory poem deals with the fate of solitary women labelled and judged either as "*hiwalay sa asawa*" or "*matandang dalaga*" or "*kerida*" or "*puta*." However, Joi emphasizes that each state is a product of choice: "*Nais kong mabuhay, makilala/ bilang babaeng mapagpasya,/ babae mang namumuhay mag-isa*." This part includes poems like *Kay Salome*, *Ang Tauhang Hindi Napabilang sa Noli Me Tangere*; *Kay Biheng Maria*; *Kina Sinderela*, *Snow White at Sleeping Beauty*; *Maria Makiling*; and *Kay Maria Clara at Iba Pang Binibini sa Kanyang Panahon*, all of which probe the lives of women who spend some time in their lives as single individuals.

Part Two, *Usapang Babae*, assays what goes on inside a woman's mind. *Dalawang Tula Tungkol sa Pagsilang at Hindi Pagsilang ng Bata* presents a

woman's discernment on the birth and non-birth of a child, while *Putá* deals with the distress of a prostitute abused by individuals around her. The book departs from personal issues to more general concern in Part Three, entitled, *Gahasa*. Abuse of women by social structures is the main point of the chapter. *Gahasa* describes how a rape victim is once more "raped" inside the court room by the existing judicial system. *Paninda* presents women as prime commodities in the marketplace, while *Sabon* tackles the use of women metaphorized as packaged goods in advertisements.

Part Four deals with rituals and ceremonies that women have to go through to attain full maturity. Here Miss Barrios speaks of life's contradictions as a way to attain liberation. In the poem *Bulaklak*, she articulates the paradox of "*Bawat pagbukadkad, isang pag-aklas!*"

And lastly, Part Five summarizes the life of a woman as a wartime life. As a woman grows, "*Kapiling ko . . . / ang pangamba, / hindi ko tiyak ang bukas / na laging nakakawing sa lalaki ng aking buhay.*" Life for a woman is continual fight against gender oppression, danger, and violence. It is an endless struggle, "*walang katapusang pakikibaka / para mabuhay at maging malaya.*"

Unlike other Tagalog poets, Miss Barrios drives her point home by using simple yet frank words. One need not turn to a Tagalog dictionary to capture the meaning of the words. Perhaps it is for this reason that she is able to capture the exact temper and feeling of particular setting and thus, adequately share the message of her poem. The overall format of her book, furthermore, is such that an English translation appears *en face*, thus facilitating translation—or, one can even venture to say—making a statement about how even language *can*, indeed, be sexist.

Miss Barrios fashions her poems in the first person, and presents the reality of the world of women without being dour, pessimistic, or self-righteously indignant. She simultaneously sheds much light on the world of men as having been accepted as the only natural world there is. Miss Barrios is far from inciting a street movement for Women's Liberation. Judging from the personal yet lucid language she uses, she is much too mature and artistic to masquerade Women's Lib in editorialization or profundities. She is a writer of free verse that paints narrative images relevant to the lives not only of the *Filipino* women of today but also of *Filipino* men in whose world Miss Barrios women move, or so we have always thought.

The next time we use the phrase, *Eh kasi babae*, we might want to think twice, thrice even. After all, women deserve respect and recognition inherent to her being a human person, much like men, perhaps, in a very real sense, even *better*.

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