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Ang Katutubo at Dalawa Pang Dula

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ANG KATUTUBO AT DALAWA PANG DULA. By Nonilon V. Queaño. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1983. xii, 117 pages.

These three prize-winning plays, selected by the playwright himself out of thirteen works, reflect the sector of society that Queaño roots for: the dispossessed. "Ang Katutubo" shows his sentiments for the exploited cultural minorities; "Ang Pagbabalik ng Musikero" bears his sympathy for the dispossessed urban poor returning to the barrio; and "Basurahan" contains a searing exposé of the plight of beggars and scavengers.

"Ang Katutubo," the first and longest play in the collection, won the third prize in the 1979 Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature. It dramatizes the Tinggians' fight to regain land they previously owned, lost to capitalists who have constructed a factory, and who now claim ownership of Cordilera lands through government-granted concessions. Conflict explodes when Blitin, a Kalunga security guard for the factory, accuses Akman, an Adasen-Tinggian, of the illegal burning of forests. Akman is saved from the frame-up when Blitin is beheaded. During the investigation, the Tinggian chieftain declares Blitin deserving of his fate, and hails his killer a hero. In a show of tribal unity, the Adasen-Tinggians overtake the arresting policemen and hold a *kayaw* (a traditional dance round a beheaded enemy), and Bakuyag leaves to organize a *bodong* among the Tinggian tribes — a tribal pact to repel a common enemy.

In spite of offers of employment in the factory, the Tinggians are adamant, wanting only to regain the lost land. The beheading of Akman's son, Benito, is the occasion for a ritual at which symbolic episodes show three *diwata* wearing *Inang Bayan* costumes molested, until one is raped by American Imperialists. The play ends as a *bodong* is set to commence, and Akman and Sagmayaw start the fight to regain their land, by burning the factory down.

Very obviously, the play partly belongs to the tradition set by the seditious playwrights during the first decade of American rule. Present here are the same incendiary songs, the same use of characters and nomenclature as symbols, e.g., the *Diwata* (*Inang Bayan*), *Halimaw* (American Imperialist), *Don Bondad* (Filipino Capitalist), *Blitin* (native collaborator), and *Akman* (native hero and leader).

The play also belongs to the realistic tradition, with its handling of contemporary problems such as the construction of factories, the deception and eviction of natives, and the stance of capitalists offering the "boons of industrialization" to "uncivilized natives." The play is enriched by the use of Tinggian myths and cultural practices. The *kayaw* and *bodong* are interlinked with the conflicts and eventual unification of the Tinggians. Finally, the play is made more effective by the Biblical echo in the cry of the raped *Diwata* (*Inang Bayan*): "Mga anak, bakit ninyo ako pinabayaang?" (p. 53).

The end of the play gives clue to its message: the settling of personal grievances in order to unify against a common enemy. Akman must forgive his son's killer for the bodong to materialize. An Adasen and a Borongan Tinggian join hands in burning the factory, and they flee as the song of freedom is sung: "sa umagang may pulang liwanag/kalayaa'y magniningas" (p. 60).

"Ang Pagbabalik ng Musikero" (Special Mention, 1977 Palanca), manifests the author's feelings for the dispossessed urban worker returning to his hometown. One among many relocated by the government from the metropolis, Mang Saro takes his family back to the hometown where he used to earn a living as a member of a brass band. He builds his house close to the cemetery with the financial help of his son, a radio announcer and writer of soap operas. Optimistic about his return, he meets former bandmembers like Huse, who shows him how difficult and competitive life has become, and Felix, now the cemetery caretaker, who extols the virtues of the town.

"Pagbabalik" is an earlier play, in which Queaño weaves reality and fantasy. On the level of reality, he interweaves the sounds of radio news and drama to catalogue for his audience the world of those evicted from the city, returning to a province that is not as it was: the young drink and gamble their lives away even as they beat up strangers; and the old accuse each other of petty charges and engage in petty quarrels. The funeral of an adulterer passes by to dramatize the regression of town morality.

On the level of fantasy, Babae sings her way, collecting flowers while lamenting a beloved who has not returned. At the end, Babae, still looking for her lost husband, disappears in the cemetery while Saro's daughter Lucila runs after her, failing to find the flowers of youth. Returning to his hometown, the *musikero* will not hear the music of freedom but songs for the dead, and will be greeted by dark skies and dead dreams.

Set in a shanty on top of a rubbish heap, "Basurahan" (Special Mention, 1974 Palanca) opens with Pining in the first stages of labor, faced with the choice of giving the baby away to an orphanage, or bringing him up in poverty and possible death in the streets. She catalogues the wasted lives of beggars and scavengers who end in abject poverty, death or prostitution.

While waiting for the midwife, Pitong, her husband, converses with Badong, a blind beggar who has lost wife and son. He wants to fight back at whatever system there is and hurt others, but soon realizes this is futile. As Pining goes into the later stages of labor, she asks Pitong to keep his promises; a garland of *sampaguita* and a different life for their child. He answers by bringing a trunk in from the rubbish heap; it will be the baby's crib: "Diyan siya hihimlay at magiging ganap ang katahimikan" (p. 110).

The child is born, and Pitong looks for a doctor for Pining who has lost much blood. Returning to discover his wife dead, Pitong throws the baby on the rubbish heap; the trunk has become its coffin. In death, the baby won't know hunger, misery, scavenging, scorn. In death, he will be free.

Of the three plays, "Basurahan" is the best structured and most clearly concrete in message. Here Queaño handles his material more tightly and dramatically. The use of the classical unities of time, place and action is heightened by the choric singing and noisemaking of Badong, whose dreams of dead children blend with the baying of dogs that prey on children, and foreshadows the mercy-killing of the baby who will sleep in eternal silence in his crib-trunk.

While "Ang Katutubo" lacks the lyricism and the tightness of "Basurahan," it runs highest in terms of magnitude of concern or vastness of issues tackled. Set against the background of the traditions of natives of the Cordillera, the action becomes macrocosmic to the point of being explosive. "Ang Katutubo" does not end in the realization of futility. The awakening of its main characters, Akman and Sagmayaw — reminiscent of the Lantay-Dupil tandem in Amado V. Hernandez's *Bayang Malaya* — ends in a literally explosive attempt to regain lost land by the burning of the corrupting symbol of industrialization, the factory. As he unravels his theme, Queaño likewise succeeds in capturing the range and ambience of Tinggian culture. The play, ending in action and a note of hope, represents a high point in Queaño's development as a concerned and progressive playwright.

Weakest of the plays is "Ang Pagbabalik ng Musikero," in which the conflict of forces needs some tightening. Its merit lies in its juxtaposition of media background (radio newscast and soap opera broadcast) and the action proper. While radio news tunes the audience in to urban evictions and relocations, excerpts from soap operas dramatize the escapist propensity of the poor for futile romance. Babae, ghostlike creature of the cemetery, flits effectively among the sights and sounds of the cemetery and among the dreams of a family returning to a dead hometown.

Queaño's worthwhile and relevant collection roots for the underdog, the underprivileged, the dispossessed, the disillusioned, some of whom are able to fight back and help themselves. It is a significant contribution, considering the dearth of play collections which hew close to the heart of the Filipino masses and to their collective aspirations for change.

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