

# philippine studies

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

---

## **The Heart of Emptiness is Black**

Review Author: Visitacion R. de la Torre

*Philippine Studies* vol. 24, no. 3 (1976) 366–368

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

---

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at [philstudies@admu.edu.ph](mailto:philstudies@admu.edu.ph).

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>  
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

in Sulu of the first Arab missionary scholar, Mukkum.

But these minor blemishes do not detract from the great service that the author has done in making this study available to the public. Canonists, church historians, students of Philippine history, church administrators and their legal advisors will find this book not only interesting but valuable in their lectures and research. There is a useful index, but the author has not included the table of cases found in the first edition. The superior quality of paper and printing make this new edition more attractive and easier to read than its predecessor.

*Gerald W. Healy*

THE HEART OF EMPTINESS IS BLACK. By Ricaredo Demetillo  
Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1975. 73 pages. Cloth  
P16, paper P10.

To indulge in a play that draws from Philippine tradition, history, or social reality is an experience that the Filipino enjoys, even cherishes. At the very least, he can recognize, if not identify, with the fabric woven through it. To this type of play the Filipino can react with sensitivity.

In this light, Ricaredo Demetillo's award-winning play, *The Heart of Emptiness is Black* (A tragedy in verse) is a significant contribution. He utilizes an indigenous setting (somewhere on the island of Panay) and native characters (a tribal chief, Sumakwel, and his queen, high priest, warriors). This is the second part of an epic cycle centering around the life of Sumakwel, Panay's first ruler. (The first part was Demetillo's *Barter in Panay*). Consequently, this work is rich in cultural details; it captures the pulse of the people as they go about their day, hunting, fishing, loving, performing rituals, or suffering the curse of a plague purportedly caused by marital infidelity.

It is the theme of infidelity which Demetillo dissects. Almost throughout the play, he limns the gloomy, sinister landscape (save for the exhilarating trysts between the doomed lovers, Kapinangan and Gurong-gurong) with his poetic brush of heightened sensibilities. His metaphors, though sometimes quaint and flat, reinforce the powerful ideas which he incorporates successfully in the scintillating discussions among Sumakwel, Kapinangan, and Gurong-gurong. In their own small way, the minor characters, like the chief priest, the ladies-in-waiting and the male servants, glitter with wit and practical wisdom, as they articulate their concern for their tribe, their *datu* and his queen.

While infidelity means primarily one of the marriage partners taking up another person as wife or husband, the play discloses another kind of infidelity — the neglect of one's responsibilities. This kind of infidelity is as serious

as the other. The play's ending subtly points this out. If Kapinangan, Sumakwel's wife, falls prey to Gurong-gurong's amorous advances, it is because Sumakwel, no matter how valiant and just he claims to be, has failed to fulfill his responsibilities as husband and family man. Lacking child and lover, Kapinangan shifts her love and fidelity to Gurong-gurong, the impulsive and stately, audacious and smart warrior, who also happens to be Sumakwel's cousin.

The play does not make Gurong-gurong a hateful character since his only major flaw is loving Kapinangan. Clear and uncompromising as they are threatening are his views on justice: as "only just when it understands the plight of people in society," on love: "Lovers must greatly dare or else their love/Wizens upon the trellis of the heart"; and on religion: "Men offer gifts by spring on tree or caves/ When all the time God dwells in our minds and hearts." Measured against Gurong-gurong, the hero Sumakwel pales in comparison. He fails miserably in running his kingdom and his home. Even in resolving his dilemma – whether to forgive his wife for her infidelity or kill her by drowning at sea – he can only strike back weakly and hesitatingly: "Maybe, I am a coward at heart." The perceptive, bitter Kapinangan accuses him as "A little man besides a brutal chief."

*The Heart of Emptiness is Black* may strike the reader as tolerating perfidy while trying at the same time to uphold fidelity by having both lovers meet their tragic ends. Straddling both worlds, or settling a compromise? This reviewer believes the playwright should have come out more strongly with the other kind of infidelity, equally hideous and unforgiveable – that of Sumakwel's. There is a feeble attempt though, since the play concludes with Sumakwel dramatically inflicting upon himself the hollow existence of a solitary, abandoned man, since "the heart of human emptiness is black." This two-pronged fidelity could then have been more sharply delineated and thus better appreciated.

Demetillo's treatment of the theme of fidelity bears strong traces of the Greek classical tragedies. For instance, he uses a pestilence descending on the tribe as a result of marital infidelity, thereby establishing a causal relation between illicit love and the destruction of tribal crops, women giving birth to monsters or else dying in bloody births. Again the playwright parallels the Greek tragedians when he makes Sumakwel order a search for the root of the curse upon the advice of the tribal high priest. Almost like the play *Oedipus Rex*, inquiry into the source of the plague points to the very house of the searcher, the ruler. So one sees, or better, foresees, Datu Sumakwel at the conclusion of the play – intoning, with defiance or resignation, a classic Greek strain: "I am the plaything of the cruel gods."

What is crucial about the play is its medium. Since it uses English at a time when the star of the Filipino vernacular theater is steadily rising, might it not become like those Palanca prize-winners that remain "dramas on file"?

What is clearly essential for the Filipino theater at this point is the use of a language expressive of the Filipino psyche, a language that will bring the drama closer to its audience. Pilipino as a medium rings with immediacy, intimacy, and most important of all, authenticity. Using a foreign tongue, Demetillo's native characters startle the reader with their academic, almost poetic English. How can a reader or a theatergoer relate with the play as an entity designed to convey social and aesthetic, moral and spiritual values? How can one find meaning in it for his life? The experience may be Filipino, as earlier cited, but if the language alienates, the play half loses its impact.

As early as the 1960s, adaptations and translations of Western plays into Pilipino gave the Filipino theater then dormant or dying (because only plays in English were being written and staged) the much needed revival pill. Such were Rolando Tinio's translations of Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (Pahimakas ng Isang Ahente), William's *The Glass Menagerie* (Laruang Kristal), Strindberg's *Miss Julie* and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (Pagputi ng Uwak), the Teatro Pilipino's seasonal plays, Onofre Pagsanghan's adaptation of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (Doon Po Sa Amin), and the plays put out by Cecille Guidote's PETA (Philippine Educational Theater Association).

These adaptations were followed by original plays in the vernacular, which have brought life to Philippine drama. Theater groups like Dulaang Sibol, Babaylan, Kalinangan ng Lahi, Palihan Aurelio Tolentino, Dulaang Banahaw, in addition to school dramatic guilds, have welded their commitments into giving direction to a theater that has long been in lethargy. It is therefore unfortunate that Demetillo strayed from this path of progress in Philippine theater by choosing to write in English.

Should *The Heart of Emptiness is Black* ever be translated into Pilipino or another Filipino vernacular, it should be performed by the community theater, the most significant development in Philippine drama today. An extremely meaningful play would emerge, much like Father Rodulfo M. Galenzoga's dance-drama *Maranatha* in Kolambugan, Lanao del Norte. Here, in ritual or ceremonial, the play is a communal effort where the drama is lived and experienced rather than merely read or watched. Here, Demetillo's work would breathe life.

*Visitacion R. de la Torre*

POLITICAL REGIME AND PUBLIC POLICY IN THE PHILIPPINES: A Comparison of Bacolod and Iloilo Cities. By Howard M. Leichter. (Special Report no. 11). DeKalb, Illinois: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University, 1975. vii, 163 pages. Paper \$7.

This monograph utilizes a comparative analysis of the politics of Iloilo and