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## Gonzalez's Sabel: A Brown Madonna

Rosy May Bayuga



In a previous article (*Philippine Studies* 43 [1995]: 27–41), the *kaingin* women were presented as a group. In this note, one of them, Sabel of *A Season of Grace* (Gonzalez 1956), takes centerstage. In a review of the novel, Fr. Miguel Bernad makes this observation: "Curiously enough, it is Sabel, not her husband, who seems to be the mouth-piece through which N.V.M. Gonzalez speaks" (1957, 340).

It is clear that N.V.M. Gonzalez intentionally creates Sabel as the most perceptive character in *A Season of Grace*. In fact, among all the *kaingin* women who populate N.V.M. Gonzalez's fiction, she emerges as the embodiment of all the values Gonzalez celebrates in the *kaingin* way of life. She is a woman of remarkable strength, not only of body but also of mind and spirit. Gonzalez (1992) has this to say of her:

Sabel's strength lies on the human community on one side and nature on the other side, plus her own innate resources and her own physical fertility. And, last but not least, a certainty of an all-providing destiny.

Very little is said in the novel of Sabel's physical appearance. Repeated references to her hard work, however, make the reader realize that she is of strong constitution. The reader first meets her along the dry riverbed of the Alag. With Eloy in a hammock pack slung over her shoulder, she walks without complaint under the heat of the morning sun, eager to face a tiring day of harvest in Blas Marte's *kaingin*. While they are walking back to Bondoc after she recuperates from an illness, Doro comments that she is not yet too strong, and she replies, "But I am! Look!" (Gonzalez 1956, 202). And to prove that she is strong, she walks ahead of him. She laughs and declares that she can ably work come harvest time.

More than her physical strength, however, Sabel must be credited for her attitude toward work. She considers work as a lifeline to

survival. In the kaingin, where life relies on hard work, it is one's attitude toward work that really matters. Sabel is uncomplaining. She works without reservations. She is eager to be of assistance to Doro. She feels guilty when in her own judgment she has not done enough.

As soon as she had put Eloy to sleep once more, Sabel tidied up the yard, gathering the loose buri leaves and bamboo sticks in one corner. She wondered what Doro would say when he returned and found she had not made herself more useful. (p. 71)

Besides her household chores, Sabel also keeps watch over their kaingin. She makes sure that it is free from wild pigs and mice, even purposely urinating around its vicinity so that the pigs will leave when they smell her scent (p. 70). When there is a lull in her work, she does not lie idle. She remembers other tasks at hand.

The baby was fast asleep. She put him down gently on his mat in the corner, and the mat reminded her of the buri palm fronds that had been cut to dry in the sun for her to use in weaving mats. She rolled the stripped leaves into a neat coil the size of a cake that a carabao might make on the ground with its dung. While waiting for Doro, she would cut the dried buri leaves into still smaller strips. Perhaps she could start weaving some of the strips into the broken corners of the bags. (p. 71)

Not only at home and in their clearing does Sabel make herself useful. During their days in Tara-Poro, whenever they visited the man whose land Doro farmed, she would find something to do while Doro helped the master with whatever work was at hand: "there was something for her to do in the master's kitchen, some pots to wash, some wet jute rags to dry" (p. 123). Sabel exacts a lot from herself. Seeing the bulk of work that needs to be done in their clearing in Bondoc, she obliges herself to work even harder: "And now it seemed quite clear to her . . . this year she ought to be even more useful" (p. 136). As one writer puts it:

Sabel is the typical figure in the Gonzalez landscape. She is the woman endowed with all the virtues of the farm and the clearing: patience, industry, and quiet humor. Against the background of kaingin life, she is the faithful stoic, taking the cycle of birth, marriage, and death with human grace. (Zapanta 1966, 104)

A virtue of Sabel that is necessary to all the *kaingin* women is initiative. This is what propels her to accomplish a great deal of work. She works beyond expectations. On the day that they start anew in Bondoc, Doro expects not much assistance from her. He knows that it will be difficult for her to finish tasks, saddled as she is by Eloy and Porton. But Sabel works on her own schedule. She takes the water jar to the riverbed spring, digs a basketful of sweet potatoes, and then helps Doro complete repairs around the kitchen. When the time to prepare supper comes, she gets "a smudge of palm-leaf fronds and bamboos going, to drive away mosquitoes, while her pot of sweet potatoes bubbled merrily on the stove" (Gonzalez 1956, 137). Sabel sees the little things that she can do to be of help. She knows that even the most simple tasks can yield much comfort.

Coupled with her will to work hard and her initiative, Sabel is also very practical. The sense of frugality runs in her system. When forced to "buy" an item from Tiaga Ruda's wares, she chooses a beautiful scarf (p. 187), which, though a bauble, is actually the cheapest among all the items. In choosing it, she is not thinking of herself but of the baby, possibly a girl, still in her womb. "It's something not to be worn everyday and will not become old. It's then for our little one that'll come" (p. 188). For her, the scarf is an investment, a treasure for the baby yet to be born. In another instance, even if the chance to indulge her craving for their newly-harvested rice presents itself, she does not. She thinks of the debts they have to pay and the friends with whom they must share their harvest (p. 68). Once, to appease her craving for fresh fish, Doro catches a good-sized bass from the river. As soon as they are ready to go home, however, she reminds him of their need for supplies. The bass goes to Epe Ruda, in exchange for a bottle of kerosene (p. 166).

Despite her preoccupation with daily tasks, Sabel knows that she is, first of all, a wife and a mother. Sabel and Doro are partners in toil. There is beauty in their working together. During the harvest in Blas Marte's clearing, their movements in the middle of the *kaingin* show much grace.

Doro led the way and Sabel followed. She grabbed the palay stalks, clipped each head of grain with a scissors-like action of the *yatab* that she held between thumb and middle-finger, and in the rhythm of bending and cutting that Doro set. (p. 39)

The same partnership is exhibited by the couple in the way they work together in extracting *yuro* from the sugar palm.

With a smooth-headed mallet made from a piece of hardrinded bamboo, Doro pounded the fibrous part off the splitup trunks. The brown flour in the pulp came loose. Sabel collected this in a vat of treebark that Doro had set up. (p. 160)

Sabel makes it a point to be by Doro's side, assisting him in every way she can. As a writer points out, "Sabel follows her husband wherever he leads her, lending him wholehearted support and helping him in all ways possible" (Tan 1974, 81). When Doro and Blas Marte are felling trees on the new kaingin, Sabel follows them, even bringing her two children with her. "Not that she could do anything; rather, she felt that she simply had to go. And she brought both Eloy and Little Porton along—how else could she manage?" (Gonzalez 1956, 144).

More than Sabel's strong support in all of Doro's endeavors is her acceptance and understanding of Doro's personhood. Doro is in some ways an insensitive person. He has the tendency to be insensitive to Sabel. Whenever they are walking together, he always rushes ahead, leaving Sabel behind. He does not care that Sabel is burdened by a baby's hammock slung over her shoulder. On the day that they are going to Blas Marte's harvest, instead of helping Sabel carry the hammock, he tells her, "Why don't you fix it, Sabel, so that it will not hurt?" (p. 17) He does the same thing on their way home from Alag, after Sabel recuperates from an illness.

In two instances, Doro urges Sabel to sacrifice the hen given to her by Nay Kare, which would have been made into broth to make Sabel strong again after giving birth. The first time, Doro uses the hen to start a poultry farm (p. 66), a venture which fails. The second time, he hands the hen over to Epe Ruda (p. 126). Doro is also a habitual drinker. He pours out his frustrations by drinking *tuba*. When Sabel is pregnant with her second child, Doro comes home drunk in the middle of the night. He hurls false accusations at Sabel and proceeds to physically harm her. Sabel defends herself, then with unfathomable calmness packs her bag, bundles up Eloy, and walks to Nay Kare's hut, where she gives birth. As soon as she can talk, pale and weak, she tells the guilt-stricken Doro, "It's a boy" (p. 144). There is no trace of anger in her voice.

Well aware of Doro's weaknesses, Sabel remains a loving wife. Once, Doro wakes up from a lonely dream and finds great relief when he feels her lying on the mat beside him. Her warmth assuages him.

Sabel lay by his side. This was her hair that smelled of sunshine; this smell that he breathed in was that of sweat that had dried on her back and on her neck. He drew her close to him and she responded, looking for his hand and then putting it round her waist. He held her thus for a long time, and she pressed against him and then let him hold her breast. (p. 152)

Three times in the novel, Sabel sings "her little song" (p. 136), a song that is of her own making, with no definite lyrics, but always with the same message. In this song, she says that she is going on a long, long journey. She expresses her aspiration to reach a distant land, "beyond the mountains, beyond the seas" (p. 72), a place beyond Alag, beyond Tara-Poro, far away from the Mindoro kaingin.

Who could say, the song asked, how long she would be away? No one. But he should grow up and be a strong, healthy boy. Someday, he might wish to make that journey, too—to this land where she was going, Sabel said in her song. . . . A distant country beyond the mountains, beyond the seas. (p. 72)

By singing this song, Sabel is saying that even if she cannot fulfill her dream of going on that long, long journey beyond the Mindoro kaingin, she will still be happy if her child will be able to do so when he grows up. She sings this song twice to Eloy, then once to Porton. The wish is always the same—that her baby "grow up and be a strong, healthy boy . . . And then he might make that journey too" (p. 120). N.V.M. Gonzalez has this to say of Sabel as a mother:

Sabel has her bitterness, but it is subsumed by her humanity as a woman. It is like saying—as a woman, there's no point being bitter. You have a baby. You notice she sings a song. That song is sung three times. And everytime it is sung, the song is the same, the words are different. But the rhythm of the song is the same. So, you might infer from that that her bitterness at the exploitation she has seen and she has survived, has already been assuaged by her motherhood, and by her acceptance of her fate. (Gonzalez 1992)

Sabel is a dedicated mother. Her children occupy her thoughts most of the time. In the midst of harvest in Blas Marte's kaingin, her mind is on Eloy, who is with Clara. "She thought she heard the baby crying. But here we are, little one, so that soon we shall have new rice" (Gonzalez 1956, 40). The difficulty of the work fails to

dampen her spirit. She cares not that she is bathed in sweat and dirty with the dust that comes from the palay head (p. 39). What matters to her is that she is harvesting new rice and that Eloy will soon have gruel. When the time to eat the noon meal comes, she runs at once to Eloy to give him her breast that is bursting with milk (p. 40).

As much as possible, Sabel wants her children beside her. She takes Eloy to Nay Kare's hut when she feels that she is about to give birth to Porton (p. 111). She brings both Eloy and Porton with her to where they will pound *yuro* (p. 159). They also tag along with her to the new kaingin where Doro is felling trees (p. 144). As long as she can manage, she wants them near her, safe and sound. Only once, forced by circumstances, did she leave Eloy alone in their hut, his strapped waist tied to a bamboo slat. She had no peace of mind the whole time she was away, though, and resolved never to do that again (p. 18).

Beyond this physical closeness, there is a deep bond between Sabel and her children. She provides their needs, making them strong and healthy, and then she draws strength from them. They are her source of courage. On the night that the mice attack their kaingin, Doro rushes outside to chase them away. Sabel stays behind with Eloy.

She would not again leave Eloy alone. She wanted him there with her, as if she drew courage from him. (pp. 74-75)

Sabel is a truly indispensable helpmate to her husband and a nurturing parent to her children. Her care and compassion, however, extend beyond her family. She is a good member of the community and a kind sister to everyone.

On the way to visit clearings to help in the harvest, Nong Tomas, the elderly Poroanon, gets sick. Sabel takes it upon herself to care for him, even if he is a new acquaintance. She makes Doro gather *dita* bark in the marsh for the old man, then she prepares a brew out of the bark. "I'll help the old man, I'm sure," she says (p. 81). Upon reaching Oryong, one of the places where they all intend to help in the harvest, she stays with Clara and Nong Tomas, while the others scramble to the kaingin. She makes sure that Nong Tomas partakes of the dita brew. She also makes more of it to tide the old man over (pp. 81-82).

Though steeped in poverty, Sabel is very generous. Even if Nay Kare expects nothing from her, she gives the midwife a cavan of their rice harvest (p. 68) and some ears of corn from their corn harvest

(p. 185). She is also generous with Clara. Besides giving the girl a portion of their harvest, she also puts in a good word about her to Doro. "She takes care of our Eloy very well," she tells Doro (p. 63). Sabel's generous heart extends to all. She is also concerned for the feelings of the other Poroanons, whose coming to Blas Marte's harvest is synonymous with the coming of the horde of mice that lay to waste the kaingin, and who thus might have felt alluded to when mice became the topic of conversation over lunch. "She noticed Nong Tomas and Ora Basion looking at each other. Nong Tomas, especially—what with those long eyelashes of his. . . . Of what could he be thinking?" (p. 51). Sabel does not want anybody's feelings to be hurt.

The needs of others are important to Sabel. In the same way, she knows that she can count on others when her moment of need comes. For it is such in the kaingin—the community is of one heart. The women are sisters to one another. Thus, Nay Kare helps deliver into the world both Eloy and Porton. She and Nay Rosa take care of Sabel when the latter gets sick (p. 171), and Nay Rosa looks after both Eloy and Porton for the duration of the illness (p. 172). As for Clara, she takes care of Eloy as if he is her own baby. With the assurance that help from her sisters in the kaingin is always within reach, Sabel gains much strength.

Nature is another well of Sabel's strength. She has a special closeness to nature. As she and Doro pick up their share from the clearings where they help in the harvest, Sabel walks with Eloy slung on her shoulder, while Doro rides atop the carabao's back. Even though tired and dusty, Sabel still finds pleasure in looking around her, appreciating the beauty of nature.

Looking about her, Sabel realized they were nearing the sea. There was a glimmer of the beach ahead. A few urgings of Doro's and the carabao lumbered along into a coconut grove. Sabel heard the twitter of sunbirds and, quite clearly now, the soft murmur of the sea. (p. 88)

More than a refreshing sight for the eyes, Sabel knows that nature is an ally. She believes that the wind helps poor people riding makeshift boats reach their destination (p. 22). She acknowledges the help of the stars when she and Doro, together with other poor folk like them, cross the Sipolog Strait to find new life in Alag (pp. 28–29). When Nay Kare asks Sabel to tell her where Porton will take his looks, Sabel answers:



He'll take after the young moon peeping over the mangrove trees and after a freshwater crab just cooked and opened and found to be full of that rich red substance inside its shell. Maybe, also, after a sweet-potato that has been roasted the night before and saved for eating in the morning; and then he might take after a glass of the buri tuba that his father likes to drink so much. His cheeks will be red like tan-bark, who knows? (p. 196)

When the midwife laughs, Sabel explains, "I know, because these are the things we love" (p. 196). Sabel's affinity with nature makes the writer Zuraek consider her as one with it:

Sabel seemed to be more attuned to nature than Doro. At times, she seems to be nature itself. Doro thinks of her hair as soaked with sunshine; Eloy and Porton are compared to seeds twice; the babies are often depicted nursing on her beautiful breasts as men would on nature's bounty. (Zuraek 1971, 14)

In the bosom of nature, Sabel finds company in solitude. On the day that they return to Bondoc to strike out for the second time, she feels the welcome of the parrots.

That, she now told herself, must have been the same flight of parrots that had greeted them the first day they set it out here—when only Eloy was with them. (Gonzalez 1956, 132)

While still abed due to illness, her eyes brighten when she sees herself already back in their clearing in Bondoc.

Sabel's eyes brightened, somewhat as though all of a sudden she saw herself out there in the clearing, harvesting the grain already and the dog Otom somewhere round, running about, frightening the little lizards that sunned themselves on top the charred *lauan* and *dao* logs. (p. 186)

Constant communion with nature enriches Sabel. The solace nature offers makes her reflective. Her thoughts veer away from the mundane and focus on higher realities. She senses the oneness of all creation. She believes that everyone has the right to drink from the fount of nature. This frame of mind makes her a very generous soul, respecting even the horde of mice that attacks their kaingin one night. "There are others on the land. People that are not people. People

that are not our kind" (p. 77). Instead of cursing the mice, she feels compassion for their plight. She reflects on the truth that they are just like the *kaingin* people—poor folk that need to survive.

Sabel reflects about everything that comes across her path. She fathoms the message of every event. Upon the death of Nong Tomas, she tries to unravel the mystery of death. For her, Nong Tomas remains alive. It is only his physical body that is gone. She senses him in the smell of candles and in Clara's limping along the river shore (p. 97).

Nong Tomas lived for Sabel in many ways, in many places. This person whom she scarcely knew was like someone she had met long, long before, had become a dear friend, and now had gone on a journey. (p. 97)

On the way to the cemetery, Sabel also reflects on the name of the cemetery—Bangdanan. She tries to find the relation of the name to the meaning of death.

Still, it bothered her. . . . Bangdanan. Death, then, was an excuse? That was what Bangdanan meant in the Tara-Poro dialect. (p. 97)

The burdensome *kaingin* way of life fails to daunt the spirit of Sabel. She rises above the strain of daily struggles. She is imbued with the certainty that destiny will provide for all needs. Hers is the faith of a child in a Provident God.

The isolation of the *kaingin* clearly does not allow Sabel to practice the usual rites of religion. There is no mention in the novel of any priest. The condition of the makeshift church in the *bayanan* of Alag attests to the reality that masses are hardly celebrated there. The burial of Nong Tomas seems not to have been presided over by a priest. During the prayers for Nong Tomas, Sabel shows a lack of knowledge in reciting litanies. Though she is kneeling beside Nay Kare, who seems to be very versed in reciting the prayers, she can only catch two words, *Ave* and *Dios*, and she responds to the prayers with only these words. It is also noticeable that while praying, she cannot keep still. Bending her head low, she notices that the church is dirty. Her gaze could not avoid the heap of chicken dung that she had not cleared away with her bamboo stick (p. 96). Her eyes roam around. Her concentration is not on the prayers.

Her eyes sought the rest of the mourners around her. The men were kneeling, too. The coffin lay on the dirt floor between them. It seemed as if they were all of them breathing uneasily, and Sabel breathed uneasily also.

At last there was a little stir. Sabel turned to Nay Kare at her right and caught the old woman at that instant making the sign of the cross. Sabel followed the movement of the old woman's hand as faithfully as she could, feeling as if someone were watching her. (p. 96)

As soon as they are through praying, however, she asks herself, "Was someone—anyone—watching her? Reading her thoughts?" (p. 96). She senses that a power greater than she is observing her, aware of her innermost being.

The reader does not see Sabel as a woman who fervently recites novenas and litanies. She is not predisposed to paying exorbitantly for the holy images being sold by peddlers. But the reader does notice Sabel's closeness to God. Sabel senses God's presence in everything. She senses God in the stars that guide them to safely cross Sipolog Strait in a *lip-lip*.

How did we manage to come all the way across Sipolog Strait? What helped us safely across that which people have told us are twenty-five miles of deep water? The stars last night? (pp. 28–29)

She senses God in the magnificence of the hundred-year-old *dao* tree in the new kaingin where Doro and Blas are felling trees. "A *dao* tree. Did she know which one that was? Over there, where the parrots had their nests!" (p. 146). She does not want them to cut the *dao*. She stands in the middle of the kaingin, fascinated by its majesty. There it stood against the sky. Must it go simply for that reason? Sabel's answer was *no* (p. 146). Most noteworthy of all is that Sabel finds God among the "good folk," the mice that come to pester the ricefields. "They're all God's children—we all are," she says of them (p. 52).

From the brutal landscape of the Mindoro kaingin emerges Sabel. Sturdy. Stoic. Self-sacrificing. Her hands and feet are firmly planted in the kaingin soil, wresting a living out of its bounty. But her eyes are fixed on heaven—saluting the sun in the brightness of day and paying homage to the moon and stars in the glory of night. Strong of body but gentle of manner, practical but compassionate, thrifty but generous of spirit, Sabel epitomizes the women of the ash-covered loam.

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