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Song of Yvonne, by Brainard

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Song of Yvonne. By Cecilia Manguerra Brainard. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1991. 186 pages.

"*Song of Yvonne* developed when I turned in to the collective 'wounding' that Filipinos experienced in World War II. It is my way of documenting the triumph of the Filipino spirit over foreign oppression."

These words, from the preface of *Song of Yvonne*, provide the background upon which the novel unfolds. Spanning a period of four years, from 1941 to 1944, the novel tells of the trials and tribulations of an upper middle-class Filipino family struggling to survive during the Japanese occupation of the Philippines. The events are seen from the perspective of Yvonne, a precocious nine-year-old girl, with a philosophical bent and a penchant for Filipino folklore.

The novel follows a chronological pattern, tracing the family's escape from Ubec, their hometown, south to Mindanao and then back north to Taytayan, a stronghold of the Philippine resistance movement. The fortunes of the Macaraig family become inextricably tied to the resistance movement, when Fernando "Nando" Macaraig, Yvonne's father, becomes a member of the movement. An engineering professor, the mild-mannered and American-educated Nando is drawn gradually into the movement out of necessity—to ensure the safety of his family in the face of the advancing Japanese forces—and conviction that he should do his part in helping liberate his people.

Ms. Brainard uses the experiences of the Macaraig family and their companions to explore various interconnected themes. One major theme is the double-edged role of religion in times of persecution and suffering. *Song of Yvonne* highlights the value of religion and pious practices as a means of support in times of trial. Angelina, Yvonne's high-strung mother, is a good example. When forced to leave her comfortable home to settle in the mountains of Mindanao, she says "It's only prayer that's keeping me going right now." Moreover, when faced with the possibility that her husband might have been killed by a rival resistance group, Angelina turns to the rosary for solace. Another example is the family friend, Doc Mendez, who battles to keep his sanity when his family is massacred by the Japanese. He voluntarily undergoes the traditional ritual of crucifixion on Good Friday as a means of coming to terms with his feelings of pain and guilt.

These examples are, however, contrasted with others which tend to show up the superstition and erroneous theology that often underlie and contaminate many traditional religious practices. *Song of Yvonne* begins with an example of this, by narrating Yvonne's and her cousin Esperanza's experience of confession, where they are castigated by the priest for being "bad girls." Another example is the request by two elderly and fervently Catholic spinsters that Doc Mendez should take a one-kilometer detour in the carrying of his cross (a prelude to the crucifixion ritual), so that they can witness the

spectacle from their balcony. The consequent physical strain on Doc almost costs him his life.

Closely related to the religious theme is that of morality. *Song of Yvonne* highlights the fact that especially in difficult situations, questions of morality are seldom, if ever, clear-cut. Examples of moral dilemmas abound in the novel. To save Angelina and Yvonne from certain capture and torture by the Japanese, Nida (another family friend) resorts to seducing a Japanese soldier, resulting in her subsequently bearing that man's child. As a member of the resistance, Nando has to kill a Japanese soldier when he attempts to escape. And when the leader of the resistance movement is killed, the peace-loving Doc, who had dedicated his life to curing the sick, reluctantly takes the helm, so that the fight against the Japanese could continue.

Perhaps the most important theme in the novel is that of nationalism. *Song of Yvonne*, while more specific in its documentation of the sufferings of the Filipinos at the hands of the Japanese, also refers to the Philippine-American War and the hardships that it spawned. This emphasizes the point that, ultimately, the destiny of the Filipinos is their own responsibility. Nando realizes this near the end of the novel, when he begins to see that his American allies are primarily protecting American, rather than Filipino, interests. Thus, in contrast to their earlier attitude of aiding the Americans in an American campaign, it becomes clear to Nando and his comrades that it is a Filipino fight that they are engaged in. This inspires them to fight harder for their own people. *Song of Yvonne*, then, is a reminder to Filipinos of their history of being exploited, disappointed and persecuted by foreigners, not so much to kindle hatred or animosity toward the latter, but rather to inspire Filipinos to strive for greater independence and self-determination. It is, then, a story of a people's brave struggle.

Ms. Brainard has achieved what she set to do. A non-Filipino may be less able to identify with many of the sentiments described in the novel, not to mention the Tagalog words which are scattered throughout the narrative. But even a non-Filipino is able to sense the depths from which the novel springs and the message which comes from its pages. *Song of Yvonne* is a call to the contemporary Filipino to recall, reflect upon, and integrate his rich history into modern-day life. Ms. Brainard further polished this novel and had it republished in New York under the title *When The Rainbow Goddess Wept* (E.P. Dutton, 1995). That will certainly give non-Filipinos a chance to read this interesting work.

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