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The Third Infinite

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The Third Infinite. By Lakshmi Gill. Toronto, Canada: Tsar Publications. 1993. 173 pages.

Lakshmi Gill was born in Manila, the third daughter of an Indian businessman-philosopher and a Spanish-Filipina mestiza. She was brought up in upper middle-class comfort and educated in the Philippines, and later in the United States and Canada. This autobiographical essay is an account of her young years in the Philippines, where she and her sisters—Sis One and Sis Two—attended Maryknoll College, a convent school run by Maryknoll nuns. The childhood memories of education at Maryknoll provide the framework for Lakshmi's quest for ethnic, national and personal identity. This is a Bildungsroman, much like Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The perceptive reader will find many parallels between the protagonists of the two novels on the political, religious and personal levels. Joyce's Ireland is not unlike the Philippines of the Fifties and the Sixties. Nor is Jazz very different from Stephen Dedalus.

The author says that the setting of her novel is "Manila in the 1950s. The war is over; memories of the Japanese occupation are fresh; America entices. Elvis is King, and James Dean a sweet daydream, but the nuns at the Maryknoll Catholic school lay down the discipline. This is the world of Jazz (as Lakshmi calls herself in the novel), Sis One and Sis Two, three daughters of a man who is a former Indian nationalist and his Filipina wife. The exciting, fast-changing and tumultuous life of a modernizing Asian country is brought to us in this impressionistic view of young Jazz that is laced with the benefit of ironic hindsight. As the three girls come of age, and their innocent privileged world is transformed, the conflicts of ethnic, national and personal identity come to the fore, and they choose their separate ways, all intimately related to the Catholic ethos of service, charity, knowledge and love."

The Three Sisters

All three daughters embark on their own quest for meaning. Sis One is the rebellious editor of the school newspaper who does not graduate cum laude because of her controversial editorials. "We have only to look at ourselves, to listen to the way we talk, to note how we feel or write, to realize

that, in spite of the many cultures we have assimilated, we are still one people with our own unique ways, customs and traditions. . . . It is only now, more than ever, that we are starting to be truly conscious of our native surroundings. Each of the writers in this issue is attempting to express what is truly Filipino in the best possible way she can (Editorial in the *Knoll*, Maryknoll Student Publication, p. 107). "The student body loved the issue. Some nuns gave my sisters and me cautious looks. They seemed to wait to see what this upstart would do next" (p. 108).

Sis Two immerses herself in social action to help lighten the burdens of the poorest of the poor. "*Ay, ay kalisud, kalisud san binayaan, adlaw gab-i. . . .* How sad the sadness of the abandoned, day and night" (Visayan Ballad, p. 94).

Jazz is the third sister. Reviewer Domini Torrevillas calls her "an intellectual in the making who is haunted by questions of morality and truth." Why, Jazz asks, would her 16-year-old maid get pregnant by a Senator's married driver? Why has Mama forbidden her to read *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *The Fountainhead*, and hidden them in her closet? Why are Filipinos the way they are? Why do the nuns tell us to do so many foolish things? The book is a diary, although Gill calls it a novel, of Jazz's reflections about life—about politics and politicians, nationalism and religion, the whims and fads of the day, and a young girl's ceaseless questioning. It is a young girl's recollections of the angst of growing up under the influence of historical, social, economic forces that formed the foundation of a nation emerging from the ruins of the Second World War. "For the degradation of being a slave is only equalled by the degradation of being a master" (Virginia Woolf, p. 74).

Memories of Childhood

Gill uses three strands to hold the novel together. The first is the autobiographical reflections of the young Jazz as she questions and reflects on the meaning of existence. This "Memories of Childhood" theme is perhaps the most delightful quality of the novel. Gill talks about Elvis Presley, pencil skirts, Dick Bogarde, and *The Catcher in the Rye*, about growing up in a convent school, shaving her legs, admiring her sisters' boyfriends, and the streaks of rebellion in a young girl's life. These memories give the reader an insight into the character of the young heroine, and an excellent picture of upper class Philippines in the Fifties and Sixties. With the benefit of hindsight, Gill raises the questions that ought to trouble us all as we emerge into adulthood.

The Charge of the Light Brigade

The second structural theme of the book is the Battle of Balaclava (25 October 1854) and the charge of the Light Brigade. This is obviously Gill's memory of Tennyson's poem taught as an elocution piece in Maryknoll. The

novel is divided into four parts, with one of the military orders of Lord Raglan to the Light Brigade as the theme of each part. The first order (or infinitive) is "Cavalry to take the ground to left of the second line of redoubts occupied by the Turks." The second order says: "Eight squadrons of Heavy Dragoons to be detached towards Balaclava to support the Turks who are wavering." Historians tell us there are two conflicting versions of the third order (The Third Infinitive!). It was "Cavalry to advance and take advantage of any opportunity to recover the Heights. They will be supported by the infantry which have been ordered to advance on two fronts." Or the order was: "They will be supported by infantry who have been ordered. Advance on two fronts." The fourth order was: "Lord Raglan wishes the Cavalry to advance rapidly to the front—follow the enemy and try to prevent the enemy from carrying away the guns. Troop Horse Cavalry may accompany. French cavalry is on your left. Immediate."

The sequence of the orders provides the framework for Gill's account of growing up in Manila. "Cavalry (Gill obviously identifies herself with the Light Brigade) must advance and take the ground (how true of every young man or woman!)" "The Turks are wavering." (What a perfect picture of a teenager!) Clearly the ambiguity of the third order (The Third Infinitive) and the subsequent destruction of the Light Brigade is the main theme of Jazz's life and of the novel. "Precisely what am I to do?" Its ambiguity is the obvious symbol for the ambiguity that the teenager Jazz finds in all of life. The fourth order is the solution to the problems of teenagers: "Advance rapidly to the front. You are not alone. The Troop Cavalry will accompany you and the French cavalry is on your left. Do it now! Immediate!

Don't delay!"

To Know, Love, and Serve God

For those familiar with the context of the Catholic convent school and its influence on young Filipinas, there is another interpretation of "The Third Infinitive." A careful reading of the text reveals that Gill is also using the Catholic phrase "To know, love, and serve God" as the three infinitives and the third theme of her novel. The Third Infinitive—and perhaps the most important one for the young convent school girl—is to "serve God."

While I wrestled to know God, Sis Two loved him without question. Blindly as in blind faith. She acted like the peasants who swarmed Quiapo Church moving toward the altar on their knees, white handkerchief on the floor, rosary in their hands. They knelt there, praying loudly, then lifted one knee to peel the handkerchief off, lay it on the next square in front of them, then thrust their knee forward onto the cloth, propelling the rest of their body on. Thus, inch by inch, they moved closer to God.

Sis One served him. She knew her catechism by mind, heart and soul. Each day she proved her mettle by going out to the poor and, in helping them, served God. She went to daily Mass, received daily Communion, went to weekly Confession, prayed on her knees even when no one was watching, took off her brown scapular only when she showered, and kept the gold cross necklace on every moment of her life. She wrote a poem called "I am a Christian."

Sis Two never thought of theology. She got an A in *Schola Cantorum* because she sang God's praises eloquently. She didn't win the Marian Year Catechetical Contest because she never opened her book. She didn't need to. She knew God already. She just loved him. That was that.

Duly armed, Sis One would go to heaven. She did everything right. (She obeyed the Third Infinitive—to serve God!) Sis Two would join her because God is love. (She obeyed the Second Infinitive—to love God!) And I? I struggled with the First Infinitive (to know God!). (pp. 66-67)

It is clear from Gill's recollections of childhood and especially from Chapters 6 and 7—"Oh God of Loveliness" and "How worthy to possess your heart's devoted love!" (Catholic Hymn)—that Gill's recollections mirror an essentially religious search for self. Chapter 12, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" is a touching meditation on "The Our Father."—"Give us this day our daily bread, forgive us our trespasses, lead us not into temptation, deliver us from evil." "Feed me, forgive me, guide me, save me. . . Everything depends on clear directions" (p. 93) and the right Infinitive!

We Must Persevere

Lakshmi Gill's book may defy classification as a novel. One reviewer says that "It fails as a novel because it has no plot, just a retelling of circumstances." But it is the retelling of those circumstances through the eyes of a perceptive teenager that makes the book the success that it is. It is a masterful account of a young girl's growing up in an alien world—cultural, religious, nationalistic, and personal. In the teenager's diary there is a good deal of social, political and religious commentary on the Philippines in the Fifties and Sixties. Throughout there is the intense feeling of a young girl emerging into womanhood, "trying to find a way of becoming what I would like so much to be and what I could be, if there weren't any other people in the world" (Anne Frank, p. 53.).

Maryknoll and other graduates of Philippine convent schools will find many echoes of their school days in this novel—the passions and dreams of young school girls in the Philippines. "Veterans" of the Fifties and Sixties will revel in the nostalgia of the author's memories—"Red, white and blue

stars over you, Mama said. Papa said, I love you" (A 1940's Skipping Rope Verse, p. 3). "Ti di di dum ti du. I love you. Ti di di dum ti di, you love me. I love you in the evening and I love you in the night. I love you in the morning when the sun is shining bright." (Tap Dance Song, p. 13). All readers will discover many insights on the trials and tribulations of adolescence—its dreams, its hopes, its questioning, its rebellion. "This life a theater we well may call, where every actor must perform with art; Or laugh it through and make a farce of all. Or learn to bear with grace the tragic part" (Palladas, p. 68). For the Filipino, there is much to reflect on in Jazz's thoughts on Filipino history and cultural dictates. "A man in the Philippines is only an individual. He is not a member of a nation" (Jose Rizal, "The Indolence of Filipinos," p. 128).

Lakshmi Gill is at work on a second novel. We can look forward to more of her passionate insights on life and growing up in the ethnic, national and personal conflicts of an alien world. "In the heart of every man there is conflict. True. In the heart of every Oriental, this is more than just a conflict. it is a struggle—a search. . . . We must persevere. We must wear out our knuckles" (p. 110).