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Women of the Ash-Covered Loam

Rosy May M. Bayuga



The stories of N.V.M. Gonzalez bring the reader to different places—from the backwoods of Mindoro with its subsistence farmers and fishermen, to a town in Romblon with its touch of Spanish past, to the seedy suburbs of Manila during and after the war, and to the United States in a time of decadence. Gonzalez's name and fame, however, are synonymous with the Mindoro *kaingin*. The *kaingin* world, described by Leonard Casper (1964, 27) as "a land of neither clocks nor calendars but only almanacs marked with the seasons of seedtime, caretaking and harvest, for indivisible earth and man," teems with simple folk, who, in Fr. Miguel Bernad's words, "live crudely, primitively, off the recalcitrant soil or off a river" (1956, 111). From the womb of this ash-covered loam emerges Sabel, who, according to Dolores Stephens Feria (1991, 34), is "one of the few great women characters in the whole of Philippine Literature." She is the perfect representative of the *Kaingin Women* whose images in the fiction of N.V.M. Gonzalez are the main subject of this article.

Of the three novels of Gonzalez, one is set in the *kaingin*, *A Season of Grace*. Its major female character is Sabel. Of his five collections of short stories, twelve stories are set in the *kaingin*. Of these twelve, six feature the *kaingin* women. Three of these *kaingin* women are major characters in the stories. These are Baray in "The Baby" (1947), Karia in "Owl in the Moon" (1947), and Paulina in "The Planting" (1947). All these characters are found in the short story collection *Seven Hills Away*. The three other *kaingin* women characters featured are Nanay, Tarang's mother in "Children of the Ash-Covered Loam" (1954), Paula, Pisco's stepsister in "Lupo and the River" (1954), and Pare Crispin's wife in "Hunger in Barok" (1947).

In a study conducted in 1985 about the *kaingin* system of farming, Prof. Ponciano L. Bennagen (1985, 53), an anthropologist, and the former chairperson of the Department of Anthropology of the University of the Philippines wrote:

Kaingin in itself is not simply a technology of subsistence; it is a way of life. It has its own appropriate social organization as well as its appropriate set of values, attitudes and beliefs.

Kaingin life is more than just a means of survival. It is a way of life. For the kaingin people, each day is a communion with the soil. They know that being kaingineros demands that they spend almost all their time in their kaingin—first to clear a patch of land, then to plant, weed, guard it from wild boars and mice, and finally to harvest. Then, they have to repeat the cycle all over again.

How does N.V.M. Gonzalez see the women of the kaingin? What shapes and forms do they assume in his sight? What does he think goes on inside their minds and hearts? How does he feel towards them? How does he see them in relation to the land of Mindoro and to the entire cosmos?

A recent study summarizes the women's plight in these terms: "... barely literate, entrapped in their own limited world, living and struggling way below the poverty line" (Ofreneo 1985, 1). Though this generalization is based on a 1985 study of women in the rural areas that is presumably restricted to the lowlands, it may be adapted as a framework for analyzing the different aspects of the life of kaingin women. Kaingin women share far more similarities than differences with other rural women throughout the Philippines. Ofreneo's recent findings, which are similar to N.V.M. Gonzalez's older portraiture, show that not much has changed over the last several decades.

Physical Strength

The enormity of work in the kaingin requires a great deal of physical strength. Circumstances harden the physique of the kaingin women to adapt to the physical demands of their environment. Only with hardy bodies can they withstand the heavy burden of work in their mountain clearings.

Karia, the wife of Bruno in "Owl in the Moon," is described as a "small but pretty girl, hardly a woman yet" (Gonzalez 1964, 23). Despite this seeming fragility in looks, she is a strong woman who is "eager to help Bruno in every way" (p. 23). When Bruno enlarges their hut, she gives him ample assistance.

it was she who started making shingles of leafy rattan fronds, and with Bruno's knife she split bamboo for the flooring. Indeed, she would have gone to build the whole lean-to by herself, had not Bruno dismissed her good-naturedly, saying that that was no work for a woman. (pp. 23-24)

It matters not to Karia if the work is hard. As long as she can do it and her body can withstand it, she performs the task without much ado.

Paulina in "The Planting" can easily cope with her husband Paulo's fast pace. In the early dawn, with light not yet dispelling the darkness hovering above the forest on the mountain range, she walks with him to their clearing, with their *onga* in a hammock slung over her shoulder. Paulo himself is surprised at her.

All the time he had been thinking that she had not caught up with him, what with the weight of the boy, but glancing back he saw her almost behind him. (p. 19)

While working, even if Paulina visits the *onga* from time to time, she manages to keep abreast of Paulo in planting seed rice.

Baray, only sixteen, a year younger than her husband Lukas, ably faces the workload on their hillside clearing. She helps in weeding and reclaiming the clearing from the rattan and ferns that had overgrown it during the long years that it had been left fallow. Nanay, Tarang's mother in "Children of the Ash-Covered Loam," is capable of doing all the work that her husband does. She pounds rice, cooks, helps in the weeding and planting, and even fixes the pigpen by herself. Paula in "Lupo and the River" has all the indications of physical strength. Pisco's description, as he sees her in the light of day, reveals this.

The light from the door limned well her large legs. As she walked to the door, Pisco caught a glimpse of the full and firm curves of her breasts. (Gonzalez 1977, 37-38)

Her large legs indicate strength and the capacity to work in the field. The full and firm breasts point to the capacity to nurture a baby. The wife of Pare Crispin in "Hunger in Barok" is perceived by Mang Cesar as a "thin, though strong-limbed woman" (Gonzalez 1964, 35). She is an able partner of Crispin in their *kaingin*.

In *A Season of Grace*, all the women exhibit strength of body. Sabel, Nana Ina, Manang Terak, the Poroanon women—all of them work diligently on their own clearings. They move from one clearing to another to help when harvest time comes. Even Clara, though she is a cripple, displays physical fitness. She takes care of all the babies during harvest time, attends to Nong Tomas when he gets sick, weaves mats, and runs errands when necessary. Nay Kare, the midwife, ably cares for all the sick, and all by herself attends to the delivery of babies.

It is early dawn when Paulina gropes her way, her *onga* in a hammock slung over her shoulder, following Paulo to their hillside clearing, ready to plant seed rice. Paula's whole day is spent washing, filling the water jars, and pounding rice. She also cooks their meals. Nanay, on the other hand, tied down in the long slack of the afternoon with Cris, sorely detests the idea that she cannot pound her rice. But when Tatay comes home, she resumes her busy day. Sabel is occupied with two babies, but finds time to weave *buri* bags and do other chores around the house. She also goes to where Doro is working when she can.

Strength of Character

However strong and sturdy the kaingin women are, they cannot survive the rigors of kaingin life if they do not possess at the same time strength of character. The kaingin women characters in the fiction of N.V.M. Gonzalez all exhibit an inner strength.

For kaingin women, work is a responsibility to be attended to with openness, without waiting for the help of others. Nanay, upon seeing the sad condition of the pigpen, goes to the thicket herself to fix it. Tatay chides her for doing so: "Tatay said, 'You could have waited for us; that was work for us'" (Gonzalez 1977, 13). Nanay's reply to Tatay's admonition is, "Still, work that had to be done" (p. 13). Her work recognizes no gender. It is a task waiting to be done by whoever is willing to do it. Paula shares a similar attitude with Nanay. When the peddler Aguacil comes to Malig and stays in their hut, Paula takes it upon herself to help him. When people from up the river come to look at his wares, she caters to their needs. "Manding Paula it was who sometimes attended to them. She opened the hampers herself and discussed prices and terms" (p. 65). She incorporates the task of selling Aguacil's wares in her daily routine. It

is not for any ulterior motive, but for the joy of lending a helping hand. Clara, despite her withered leg, is also very helpful. During the wake of Nong Tomas, she is an active errand runner, moving to and fro, serving and helping.

With the aid of her stick, Clara limped about from the workers' circle to the merrymakers group in the hut, from the reach of the fireglow to the sourcespring of laughter and the songs of the wake, now to fetch a handful of nails, now a glass of tuba for the carpenters. (Gonzalez 1956, 92)

Anything that needs to be done, the kaingin women do. They have no reservations about work. They do not complain when confronted with work.

Kaingin women do not need to be told what to do. The harsh environment compels them to seize every opportunity to work, to be able to support the needs of daily life. Ofreneo's (1985, 2) study posits that the rural women need to help augment the family's income by income-generating activities.

The fact is most of our rural women have to do some form of productive work, whether income-substituting or income-generating, to ensure their own as well as their family's economic survival.

Sabel and Clara are both gifted with skillful hands that weave beautiful mats out of stripped *buri* leaves. They use this skill to full advantage. The mats are used to barter for rice, fish, or other supplies. When only a half-sack is left of Sabel and Doro's stock of rice, Sabel tells Doro,

"Shouldn't I be gathering *buri* leaves and start stripping them and weaving some *buri* sleeping-mats and rice sacks?" Sabel asked. It was her way of saying she'd like to help him, really. They could get some rice in exchange for sleeping mats. (Gonzalez 1956, 8)

The mats are also used as gifts to reciprocate the kindness of others. Sabel gives both Nay Rosa and Nay Kare mats. The one she gives to the latter is the one she herself used when she gave birth to Eloy.

Nanay, on the other hand, takes good care of the pig that Tatay brings home. The idea of its having a litter prods her to care well for the pig. When Tatay comes with the pig, Nanay immediately thinks of feeding it.

Then she took the bolo and, crossing the yard, she went past the hinagdong tree where Bokal was and into the underbrush. She returned with six fresh ripe papayas; she wanted then and there to cut them up and feed the pig. (Gonzalez 1956, 8)

When work beckons, the kaingin women respond as fast as they can. They lend their helping hands in every task. Paulina is her husband Paulo's able partner. Together, they plant seed rice in their clearing. "Paulo began making holes in the ground with a long sharp-pointed stick and into these she dropped the grains, then covering them carefully with her feet" (Gonzalez 1964, 20). Total dedication characterizes their work. Paula, still unmarried, works with the dedication of a married woman, as Pisco observes. "With wash under her arm and a long bamboo water container or a jar on her shoulder, Paula was the very picture of diligence" (Gonzalez 1977, 42).

The kaingin women take their responsibilities seriously. They know that it is necessary for their survival. It matters not if they are pregnant, sick or physically handicapped. Clara, when Sabel chides her that she is not one for working, exclaims: "Oh, but I want to work Manang!" (Gonzalez 1956, 21). Withered legs notwithstanding, she works like all the other women. During harvest season, since she cannot work in the field like the others, she attends to the children of those who work.

Survival in the kaingin requires practicality. Nanay is a picture of practicality. In the kitchen, she does not indiscriminately throw away food. She distinguishes what can be consumed and what can be fed to the pig. When Tatay brings home the *ubod* of the betel nut or the sugar palm, she makes the most of it. "And the soft portions Nanay usually saved up for supper; the hard portions she allowed him to take to the pig" (Gonzalez 1977, 12). Not only in matters of resources is Nanay practical. She is also quick when deciding about domestic matters. On the night that the storm is brewing, she prepares an early supper because she said that, if a storm should come, it would be difficult to do any cooking in the stove (p. 23). One example of the kaingin women's practicality is the way they assure their babies's safety when they need to leave them. Paulina, before she runs to help Paulo plant seed rice in their clearing, ensures her onga's comfort in this way,

Converting the blanket into a hammock by suspending it between two young sugar palms, she rocked and sang and fondled the child there for a while until he was quiet. (Gonzalez 1964, 19)

When they need to bring their babies along, *kaingin* women carry them in a hammock slung over the shoulder. This makes walking easier and faster.

Partners in Life

Dr. Gelia T. Castillo, professor of Rural Sociology at the University of the Philippines in Los Baños, confirms the fact that the Filipino rural women are partners of their husbands in the management of the household.

Filipino wives as housekeepers actually function as "co-managers" of the household rather than just implementors of their husband's wishes. The wife is the uncontested treasurer of the family and most decisions made in the household, on the farm, and in financial investment are made jointly by husband and wife. (1979, 131)

Nanay shares with Tatay the decisions in the house. When Tatay comes home with the pig, Nanay interrogates him. Upon learning that the pig is from Paula (someone to whom they apparently owe much), she tells Tatay, "We shall pay everything we owe them next harvest" (Gonzalez 1977, 10). Only when Tatay tells her that they will have half of the pig's litter, is she appeased over his acting without consulting her. In "Lupo and the River," Crispino Olarte and his wife Tia Unday, fisherfolk, work together for their profits. Crispino's weakness is tuba. Because of this drink, he and Unday have a hard time collecting payment for the fish. "Tuba made Crispino many friends, and it was difficult to get one's friends to pay for the fish that they took home with them" (p. 40). Tia Unday always gives Crispino a scolding on account of this. She herself, however, shares Crispino's passion for the drink, and sometimes ends up as carefree as he about the profits. Sabel and Doro also share decisions regarding their resources. It is imperative for them to discuss together what they should purchase from Tiaga Ruda. When Sabel decides on her own to buy a scarf, Doro scolds her by asking, "You thought of getting trousers for me also?" (Gonzalez 1956, 188). Sabel then explains to him why she was forced to take the scarf.

These examples show that the *kaingin* women stand on their own. They have a right to express their own ideas. Castillo's study (1979, 131) adds this note: "Most Filipino wives are not just housekeepers

and decision-makers but are also companions to their husbands even outside the home." Housekeepers and decision-makers all in one. This is very true of the *kaingin* women.

The kitchen is Nanay's turf in "Children of the Ash-Covered Loam." She prepares food, discards what cannot be eaten, and decides the right time to eat. Her role however, transcends this domesticity. She also has a word in the family's resources. Sabel is expected by Doro to cook his food, clean the house, and care for the children. But these responsibilities are not all that she manages. She is with Doro in deciding about their life. Paulo leaves it to Paulina to care for their *onga* as he busily goes about their *kaingin*. He likes to think that he handles *kaingin* work better and faster than she. It is she, however, who looks into the future and, like a prophet, maps out what awaits their *onga*. As Castillo points out in her study, there is more to the rural women than their set responsibilities as housekeepers and decision-makers in the household. *Kaingin* women are also constant companions of their menfolk. They literally work alongside their husbands, wresting a living out of the soil.

Nanay goes with Tatay to the other clearings to help in the planting. "In the nearby *kaingins*, people had started planting; and so that they would come over to help later on, Tatay and Nanay were often out there working" (Gonzalez 1977, 14). Paulo and Paulina also work together in their clearing. Both good-humored and young, they find joy in their work.

They both laughed. It made the work seem so much fun. With his stick in hand, he had to sidle up the side of the hill almost like a warrior planning an ambush. Paulina's laughter ringing behind him would be enough reason for him to straighten his back and turn around for a glance at her and the green foliage surrounding the ash-covered clearing. (Gonzalez 1964, 21)

The same is true of Sabel and Manang Terak who are always by the side of their husbands. They make an interesting picture as they proceed with the work.

Oh, yes, there was Blas Marte, with his wife Terak and his mother-in-law, Nay Ina. Both women were quick at handling seed rice. It took Blas Marte and Doro both to make those holes in the ash-covered ground for the women to slip the seed grains in. Sabel, although handicapped by having to carry Eloy around . . . was no slow planter of rice seeds herself. (Gonzalez 1956, 155)

As helpmates, always by the side of their husbands, the kaingin women exude freshness and charm even in the midst of work. Paulina's good humor is intact even if Paulo tends to be sarcastic with her as they plant seed rice. "The brittle young laugh of hers" rings through their clearing. Paulo thinks of her as "never dull nor quick to take offense . . . full of just the right humor and good sense" (Gonzalez 1964, 20). Baray is also full of good humor. Whenever Lukas talks about his plans of building a house, a shed, a wooden sugar mill, and other farm amenities for her, she exclaims: "But all of that?" (p. 55) Although she considers his plans too idealistic, she pretends that she believes in him.

The Kaingin Sisterhood

There is a strong bond of sisterhood in the kaingin. Burdened by responsibilities, the kaingin women take consolation from one another. Each is concerned for the welfare of the other. Tia Orang, the midwife, comes to Tarang's home to help Nanay and Tatay in the planting. Not finding the two there, she leaves this message to Tarang, "If I do not see your mother, Anak, tell her that Tia Orang has come. Tell of my passing through, and of my helping in the planting when the time comes" (Gonzalez 1977, 16). When next she visits Nanay, she makes Nanay lie down on the mat, and with the aid of crushed ginger roots soaked in oil, she presses Nanay's sides and abdomen. This ritual is performed to help pave the way for a new baby.

Much like Tia Orang is Nay Kare. Herself a midwife, she extends a great deal of help to Sabel. Sabel and Doro are but three days in Alag when the first pains brought on by Eloy's impending delivery assail Sabel. She is at the well near Nay Kare's hut washing her clothes, and she at once runs to the midwife. "I can look after you. Have no fear" (Gonzalez 1956, 34). Nay Kare tells her. When Doro comes to find out what has happened to his wife, Nay Kare proudly replies:

Go now, and don't worry. Do what you have to do. We, women, can take care of ourselves. (p. 34)

We women can take care of ourselves. This may well be the battlecry of the kaingin women if ever they form a formal sorority within the kaingin world. But the kaingin women are beyond words and

rhetoric. They simply do their work—with the aim of creating a better life for everyone.

As for Sabel, she stays with Nay Kare and enjoys the selfless care provided by the midwife.

Nay Kare did not want her to move about too much until she was stronger. She ate some rice gruel that Nay Kare prepared. She drank broth made from boiled clams and ginger. There was a drink, a heady tonic, that the old midwife made her take. (p. 34)

For someone who is a new acquaintance, to be given the care that Nay Kare gives is very uplifting. Nay Rosa is also a very caring woman. When Sabel gets sick while staying with her in Alag, she fetches Nay Kare, and the two of them take care of Sabel. She then asks that Eloy and Porton be brought over for her to look after them. When Doro and Sabel decide to go fishing in Bakawan, Manang Terak says, "The babies will be your worry," then she offers, "Maybe, you'll want to leave them here with us" (p. 162). During Sabel's confinement, Terak visits and brings five eggs and a pullet. That, for poor folk, is a handful of blessings. But that is not all. When Doro comes over, Terak tells Blas,

And get a dozen fresh young ears for Doro. There ought to be a dozen at least that you can give him to take along when he goes back to Alag. (p. 177)

As for Clara, she cares for Eloy as if he were her own child.

One perfect example of the sisterhood in the kaingin happens at the burial of Nong Tomas. Ora Basion, Nay Pas, Inggay and Sabel go ahead of the hearse. When Inggay starts tolling the cracked bell of the makeshift church, Nay Kare and Sabel beg her to stop, because the church is dirty. Sabel then starts cleaning the place.

The church was not ready at all. She picked up a stick and began to clear some dirt away. After only five strokes or so of the stick, she was able to put together to one side a pile of dirt big enough to make a smudge with. (p. 94)

Like Sabel, the other women also do their share of cleaning.

Her other companions had not stood by idly. There was the far end of the shed to clean up; chickens had roosted there and now their droppings glared at them from atop a piece of board that was to serve as the altar. (pp. 94-95)

Kaingin Motherhood

If sisterhood is a grace, what more is motherhood? Given their lonely and work-laden life, the kaingin women find their greatest fulfillment in their own fertility. It is motherhood that gives them a glow of happiness. When Tia Orang visits Nanay and performs a ritual that perhaps helps hasten pregnancy, Nanay's countenance displays an inner satisfaction as she looks at Tia Orang,

Nanay was smiling at her. She lay smiling at everyone, her eyes traveling from one face to the next. A blush reddened her cheeks. (Gonzalez 1977, 29)

With seven-year-old Tarang and Cris who was hardly two, Nanay already has much wealth. Yet she has room for one more child, one more fount of joy. Baray is a lonely child-woman trapped in their clearing. On the day she will finally go with Lukas to visit her mother in the village, she has apprehensions in her heart. All these disappear, though, when she gazes at her baby.

The child was half-asleep and Baray for a moment held her breath and bent down to touch its soft cheek with her own. Then, with her free hand, she began to fondle it, touching its face and delicate hands and feet, like a little girl toying with a doll. (Gonzalez 1964, 57)

Like Baray, Paulina's heart overflows when she is with her onga. Even if Paulo chides her for being a slow worker, she does not mind him. What matters to her is the assurance of the onga's safety and comfort, as she leaves her work and checks him where he hangs on a hammock suspended between two sugar palms. "The child was comfortable and safe enough, and she hurried back to her work" (p. 21).

Motherhood is a gift. A baby is a blessing. It is a miracle from above. Tia Orang, discussing the possibility of Nanay's third child, says with conviction: "But time enough, time enough!" To which Nanay replies, "Then, let it be" (Gonzalez 1977, 27). Their words have a spiritual undertone. They leave it to a Supreme Being to give to them that which they can only wait for. Sabel expresses the same ideas, when, contemplating about her family, she sighs:

Time was when there were but the two of them, and then there were three of them. It would be only a matter of years and then there would be five or six of them. There would be any number, God willing. (Gonzalez 1956, 68)

Friends of Nature

Isolated in their own clearings, each day of their lives spent in the bosom of nature, the kaingin women develop a particular closeness to nature. They understand its language and know its whims. Nature is their friend.

It is her knowledge of nature that makes Nana Ina caution Sabel against breastfeeding Eloy after coming from the harvest. "Don't ever let the baby have any of that heat and tiredness!" (1956, 41). This is the wisdom of old age. In the same way she admonishes Sabel and Doro, when the two are on their way home from the harvest:

Nana Ina, clacking her tongue, warned Sabel not to go directly to their side of the river. If they left right away, the thickish earth-heat would be at its worst before she and Doro could reach the bintalan, down the trail across the dry bed of the Alag. (pp. 63-64)

A true kaingin woman, Nana Ina knows even the nuances of the earth's temperature.

It is the midwife, however, the doctor in the kaingin, who displays a knowledge of nature that surpasses that of all the others. It is only with roots, herbs, natural oils, and animal teeth and skin that she heals, but these serve her vocation. Nay Kare helps deliver both Eloy and Porton into the world. She also nurses Sabel back to health when the latter gets sick. Despite the crudeness of her implements, the midwife performs her job effectively.

Midwife as Priestess

Besides being a healer, the midwife also performs rituals in the kaingin. Tia Orang rubs Nanay's sides and abdomen with ginger root and coconut oil. This ritual is done so that a new baby will come forth from Nanay's fertile womb. Nay Kare performs rituals, too. On the day that she allows Sabel to take a bath after giving birth to Eloy, she plants a coconut seedling in the middle of her yard and asks Sabel to cover the sprout with earth. The same ritual is repeated after Sabel's recovery from illness. Right after Porton sees the light of day, Nay Kare, under Doro's watchful eyes, performs a ritual for keeping the Evil One away. She asks Doro to get a pinch of rice-husk and a knife, without telling him where he could find these. Doro is held in awe as she proceeds with her rite.

From a tiny buri bag she carried about with her, under her camisa, the old woman produced a strip of snake skin and a crocodile tooth. With the knife she tore off a portion of the snake skin; then she began scraping white powdery bits off the end of the tooth, which she collected into the clam-shell. The snake skin burned easily, but the rice-husk smothered the tiny fire. (p. 113)

Nay Kare then makes a small wad out of one corner of her kerchief and dips it in the burning things.

Nay Kare let the bits of burning ashes remain on the cloth. Then she applied the cloth upon the baby's brow and temples and chin, making thus the sign of the cross. (p. 114)

Nay Kare may really be considered a priestess, as she whispers what seems to be incantations in Sabel's ear when the latter is recovering from an illness.

Then, with a forefinger, she made the sign of the cross right over Sabel's belly, mumbling some strange words and phrases to herself. (p. 185)

Antonio Pigafetta, the Italian chronicler who accompanied Ferdinand Magellan, recorded in his chronicles that in the Visayan islands, the women held the esteemed rank of being priestesses in some native rituals. To this day, women play the role among several tribal groups in the Philippines. The Tagbanuas of Palawan have their *babaylan*, the majority of whom are women, who serve as intermediaries who guide a person's relationship with the dead. The tribe of Mandayas in Mindanao also have a *baylan* or medium, who is usually a woman. Among the Kalingas in the Cordilleras, the medium during large ceremonies is "always a woman" (Cordero-Fernando et al. 1977, 338).

Reflective Individuals

Closeness to nature is the stepping stone of the kaingin women to becoming reflective individuals. The kaingin—isolated, nestled high up in the mountains, seemingly very close to heaven—is conducive to contemplation. Often solitary in their clearings, with the majesty of nature enveloping them, the kaingin women find themselves reflecting about their life. Reflection enriches them. It gives them a

chance to look at themselves, their life, and their world, with a different perspective.

Paulina, contemplating the future of her onga becomes no less than a prophet.

A prophet. Could she be any less? That she had borne her husband a child was not all. Would she not have to bring him to manhood, until, as the saying goes, the road would come to its forking place? (Gonzalez 1964, 22)

Baray, on the other hand, in a moment of reflection, becomes suddenly and truly aware of her child. "Never had she felt so sure that Toto was whole and live and perfect" (p. 57). A thousand doors open to the kaingin women because of reflection. They find contentment in poverty, deliverance in the midst of trials, and most important of all, sense the presence of a Provident God.

In the bosom of Mother Nature, it is easy for the human soul to sense a higher reality. In the kaingin, where life is an endless communion with nature, the kaingin women's faith in God easily grows. God is the stronghold, the unseen power that guarantees help to those who believe.

When Tata Pablo's eyes dim in his old age, Nay Rosa asks Nay Kare if the latter knows of a cure, to which Nay Kare replies in the negative. Faced with this reality, Nay Rosa sighs, "Then, it's prayer we must try" (Gonzalez 1956, 209). She then seriously considers ordering a religious image from Epe Ruda, who is on his way to Batangan. "Let it cost three or four or five cavans" (p. 208), she declares. When a peddler passes through Alag once, Nay Kare also buys her own religious image. It is a colored print of the Corazon de Hesus, sold for seven gantas of rice.

Conclusion

The kaingin women are physically hardened by their environment; imbued with a strength of character; full of concern for others; ideal helpmates to their husbands; loving mothers to their children; friends of nature; and daughters of Providence. These descriptions compose a collective image, a portrait, of kaingin women as drawn by N.V.M. Gonzalez. Whether or not the portrait bears any resemblance to the kaingin women who actually lived in Mindoro during the 1930s and 1940s is immaterial. For reasons of his own, both as a Filipino male

and as a fiction writer, N.V.M. Gonzalez drew for readers this highly flattering portrait of one particular kind of Philippine women.

Fr. Bernad (1956, 111) praises the way Gonzalez presents the details of kaingin life.

He is a good writer, and the chief virtue of his craftsmanship is his attention to detail. This gives to his stories a local color that is authentic and a vividness that is almost photographic. One gets from these stories an impression of wet earth and swampy river, of *batels* crowded with passengers and of nipa huts congested with sleeping bodies at night, of pigs grunting in their pens and traveling vendors opening their *tampipis* to disclose gaudy treasures of cheap merchandise and holy pictures.

The kaingin world in the fiction of N.V.M. Gonzalez is a harsh environment. It demands the total dedication of the kaingin people and especially of the kaingin women.

Gonzalez says (interview by author, 19 December 1992): "We are not survivors. We are celebrants." His portrayal of Kaingin Women in his fiction is his way of celebrating the strength and beauty of the Women of the Ash-Covered Loam.

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