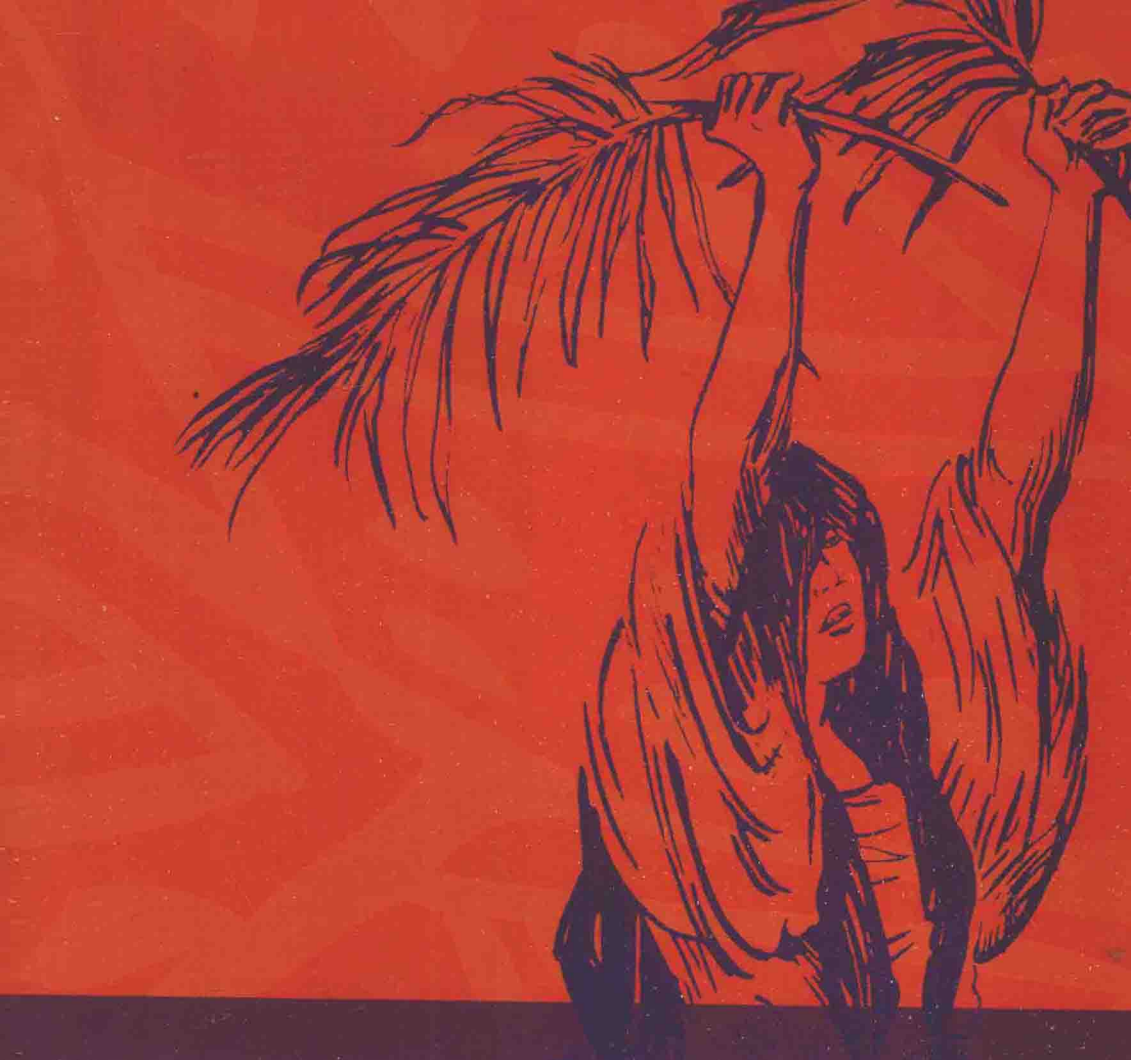

WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS AND THE FILIPINA

1986–2008

Mina Roces

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Designed by Julie Matsuo-Chun

For Mikey Roces and Martyn Lyons

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All translations from Tagalog are my own, except for the song on p. 25. I have provided the original quotations in some endnotes.

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Contents

Introduction

WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS AND WOMANHOOD

Maria, Maria

Since the 1980s, feminist songs have been part of the repertoire of women's activism. These songs revealed a preoccupation with Maria (a metaphor for all Filipino women) especially with her roles, her character, and her stories. These songs implored "Maria" to reject traditional stereotypes and embrace new role models. For example, one song titled "Maria" advised women that they should not allow themselves to be treated as toys that could be discarded or as subjects confined to the kitchen and the bedroom, but instead should model themselves on past women revolutionaries.[1] The lyrics of another song, "Sabon" (Soap), compelled women to reject television's two stereotypes of themselves as either sublime helpers (maids), or decorative objects.[2] The words of the song "Babae" (Woman), condemned weak women who were preoccupied with finding a man, and suggested women be inspired by revolutionaries and political activists.[3] Finally, "Bangon, Maria" (Arise, Maria) demanded that women wake up and break their chains.[4]

Feminists from the 1980s made the task of theorizing the feminine a priority. Because it was important to them that traditional constructions of the feminine be unpacked and dismantled, defining the Filipina—what she *was,* what she *is,* and what she *will become*—was central to activist ideologies. Furthermore, discourses on the feminine were imperative in the struggle against patriarchy. Representations of the

feminine were used in strategies such as lobbying for legislative changes. At the same time, women activists also were engaged in the business of critiquing cultural constructions of the feminine for the purposes of altering stereotypical sex roles. In this sense, representations of the Filipino woman were crucial in the feminist reeducation campaign—in the overall plan to resocialize the populace to give symbolic capital (prestige) to its women vis-à-vis its men. Thus, the question of Maria's heritage and identity (past, present, and future) has been central to the agendas and ideologies of women's movements since the 1980s.

This book is about the feminist project and its interrogation of the Filipino woman in the period from about the mid-1980s until 2008: locating her in history, society, and politics; imagining her past, present, and future; representing her in advocacy; and identifying strategies that transform her. The focus is on how women's organizations imagined and refashioned the Filipina in their campaign to improve women's status in the legal and cultural contexts. The drive to alter women's situations included a political strategy (for lobbying, campaigning, and changing legislation) and a cultural strategy (to change social attitudes and women's own assessment of themselves). Intrinsic to the achievement of these goals was analysis of the status of women and a feminist critique of that status. Although it is true that the women's movements were focused on altering legislation, lobbying, research, political advocacy, and education (to alter cultural attitudes), all these activities made it necessary to invoke discourses about the Filipino woman. Representations of Filipino women were of critical importance to feminist advocacy. They were important in justifying demands for legislative changes, they were needed as ammunition for criticizing gender relations in society, and they were crucial in the campaign to refashion women as advocates. I am interested in the cultural side of the feminist agenda: how women's organizations critiqued womanhood and how they themselves engaged in fashioning an alternative woman. This cultural production has been identified by feminist scholar Delia Aguilar as the realm in which women have been the most energetic and passionate: "The publication of books and journals, staging of plays, music composition, the visual arts, performances on radio and TV—in these utilization of women's talent, imagination, creativity and resources has been both remarkable and inspiring."[5] This study examines the history of this feminist project.

In particular, this book addresses the following specific questions: How did women's activists theorize the Filipino woman and how did they use this analysis to lobby for pro-women's legislation or alter social

attitudes? What sort of "new Filipinas" did they propose as alternative role models? How were these new ideas disseminated to the public? And finally, what cultural strategies did they deploy to gain a mass following? Although inevitably the discussion surveys the history of women's movements since the 1980s, the emphasis is on the ways the Filipina has been imagined as intrinsic to women's advocacy.

Discourses on the Filipino woman were necessary in the projects of representing women for particular advocacies (for example, on behalf of prostitutes, women workers, or indigenous women), and in fashioning women (in imbuing feminist consciousness, or in introducing new role models and feminist epistemologies, and in the feminist practices designed to transforming "survivors" into "advocates"). Given the very vibrant nature of the women's movements, it is not surprising that activists produced many discourses (some of them contradictory) about the Filipino woman as part of their overall agendas of deconstructing Filipino womanhood or improving women's status. There was never one single consistent narrative produced on this controversial topic; instead, each narrative was linked to a specific advocacy or activist agenda. Some of these narratives will be discussed in this book.

Despite the myriad types of discourses, women activists were united in the overall project of women's empowerment. At face value, this larger aim often conflicted with some of the representations of women as victims or modern-day slaves. I argue that feminists often adopted what I will call a double narrative, or the deployment of two contrasting discourses—a narrative of victimization and a narrative of activism. I suggest that a double narrative of victim/survivor and advocate was used by activists in their discourses about the Filipino woman. I prefer the term "double narrative" because these representations of women reflect two sides of the same coin; although they are contradictory, women's movements have tapped on both opposing discourses for feminist ends. I also imply that the lines between both narratives are fluid and not fixed, because it is acknowledged that victims could become advocates or that the label "victim" was not totally devoid of agency (which is why the women's movements often prefer the term "survivor" to "victim"). For example, women activists deployed the victim narrative to argue for the passage of the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act of 2003 that decriminalized prostitutes (whether or not there was consent), but preferred to use the narrative of advocacy, agency, and empowerment when fashioning former prostitutes and survivors of trafficking into feminist activists. The latter was part of the overall feminist project of dismantling cultural constructions of the feminine as "suffering

martyr" and rejecting the cultural capital associated with this ideal. In feminist herstories published by women's organizations, the colonial period is blamed for taking away women's religious power and replacing it with the ideology of domesticity emerging from the colonizer's patriarchal ideology. But juxtaposed in this narrative are stories of women's resistance and activism throughout history. Whereas women workers were represented as the most oppressed and exploited of women or as modern-day slaves, they also were imagined to be the most militant of advocates who had the potential not just of being the mass followers, but also of being the leaders of the women's movements. In presenting these contradictory discourses as a double narrative, I do not see contradictory discourses as necessarily "bad" or "good," or even problematic. Indeed, the contradictions merely stress the complexities faced by activists while acknowledging their adroit skills and political savvy in representing and fashioning women to fulfill their agendas.

The word "victim" here refers to the experience of violation—a material reality. The term "victim narrative" refers to the discourse in which women's experiences were constructed in a history of continuing oppression and violation. Its opposite—the story of resistance and activism—describes the narrative of advocacy.[6] In this book, I adopt the view of hybrid agency to refer to the manner in which women activists adopt and adapt transnational notions of consent, and exercise choice both within and against cultural and political structures.[7]

In this book, the term "women's movements" referred to women's activism initiated by women's organizations for the purposes of improving women's status. Here I refer to the various agendas of a plethora of women's organizations collectively. This study is confined only to those who are feminist, and does not include organizations formed and led by women for purposes of philanthropy or civic organizations formed by wives or female kin of politicians that act as a support group for male politicians. Although some of these groups aimed to provide a livelihood for impoverished women (with some even claiming NGO status), they fall within the more traditional types of units not explicitly feminist in orientation.[8]

The term "feminist organization" refers to those organizations whose main aims are to critique women's inequality and whose activism centers on altering or changing structures in society in order to remove gender discrimination. Many of these organizations might address only issues of particular or specific (or even narrow) groups of women, but in doing so they challenge patriarchy from small to significant ways.

Certainly, not all women and not all sectors are represented by these organizations, but the reality is that only those women who organized themselves can demand to be heard. I am deliberately using a very broad definition of "feminism": many women activists are uncomfortable with the term because it has long been associated with bra-burning, man-hating, or with manly or unfeminine women.[9] These activists' qualms can be explained by their perception that feminism is a Western term. Even though they might quibble with whether they considered themselves to be feminists (with feminism still carrying negative connotations) however, they see themselves as part of the women's movements. Although a number of women activists and women's organizations are happy to carry the badge of "feminist," I have noticed that even those who are anxious about the term, by the end of my interview with them, would concede that, given a general definition of the term, yes, they could be classified as a feminist. All the organizations included in this study are at least feminist in orientation.

The labels of socialist feminists, liberal feminists, Marxist feminists, national-democratic feminists, and radical feminists and ecofeminists do not apply to Filipino women's organizations whose ideologies often straddle these categories. My interviews with leading feminists in the Philippines confirmed that it is not helpful to categorize women's organizations according to these classifications.[10] The women's movement is much divided, and hence it is more accurate to use the term "women's movements" (plural) than the term "women's movement" (singular) to describe feminist activism since the 1980s. Feminists remain divided over all the major issues and consequently any writing about women's activism in the contemporary era (including this book) will be controversial. Ideological differences, though present, have not usually been the major reason for organizations splitting up; conflict is usually over political tactics and strategies, and the politics of critical collaboration with the state.[11] Personality clashes were often cited as responsible for triggering the tendency to leave one organization and form a new one, and activists seem very comfortable with this regular splintering, although discussing it is still very much taboo.[12] Activists, if they were willing to elaborate on differences, preferred to keep the information "off the record": personal intrigues and disagreements over tactics often occur even within the same organization. Intergenerational challenges are beginning to enter the picture as the young generation—women who are no longer directly affected by the national-democratic struggle—begin to question the dominant feminist discourses and reject the victim/agency dichotomy.[13]

I will not be focusing on the disunity here (and it was difficult to find activists willing to talk about it) but will call attention to some of the major differences when they are pertinent to my arguments.

This book includes a discussion of how the mainstream nationwide lowland Christian women's movements represented the indigenous women of the highlands. Cordillera women's political activism during the Marcos dictatorship (1972–1986) has been mythologized by women's movements. Since the Spaniards were unable to colonize the Cordillera, indigenous women were spared from Spanish Catholicism, identified by the women's movements as the most profound and enduring ideology that has shaped Filipino womanhood from the sixteenth century to the present. Chapter 4 focuses on indigenous women to illustrate how women's movements have interacted with indigenous women as the "other Filipina." Finally, the absence of a section on the Filipino Muslim women's movements points to an important gap not covered in this study. Muslim women's issues are different from the dominant Christian majority (for example, a fatwa, or Islamic ruling, exists on the issue of reproductive health). There is a vibrant group of Muslim feminists, including a number of Muslim feminist lawyers; they merit an entire study on their own.

Short History of the Women's Movements

The history of feminism in the Philippines begins with the suffrage movement that was led by the National Federation of Women's Clubs in the 1920s. The vote was won largely due to the organizational skills of the first generation of feminists who campaigned hard to win the franchise from a constitutional convention that was largely against women's suffrage.[14] But once suffrage was won in 1937 and women entered political office, feminists became practically inactive until the 1960s, at which time student activism injected new life into the dormant women's movement. In the early 1970s, the Free Movement of New Women (MAKIBAKA; Malayang Kilusan ng Bagong Kababaihan) was organized as an offshoot of the Nationalist Youth (Kabataan Makabayan), founded initially to mobilize women as part of the student activism of the late 1960s and early 1970s. These activists protested social injustices, the Vietnam War, U.S. influence on domestic affairs, oil prices, inflation, the Marcos government's fascist tendencies, and the wide disparity between the rich and the poor. Under the leadership of Lorena Barros, MAKIBAKA developed a feminist consciousness. But when martial law was declared in

September 1972 and the students were forced underground (and Lorena Barros was killed by the military), MAKIBAKA was prevented from mutating into a feminist movement with a nationalist orientation, or, alternatively, a nationalist movement with a feminist orientation. With the premature silencing of MAKIBAKA, the development of the women's movement experienced a second hiatus.

There were, however, some women in the Communist underground whose common experience of gender discrimination in the Communist Party brought them together. The bonding of this small group who began to question the left's treatment of women cadres resulted in the formation of the Organization of Women for Freedom (KALAYAAN; Katipunan ng Kababaihan Para sa Kalayaan) in 1983.[15] This clearly feminist organization tackled issues of rape, domestic violence, pornography, and abortion. Reminiscing on the rationale behind the formation of KALAYAAN, Aida Santos, Fe Mangahas, and Ana Maria "Princess" Nemenzo admitted that they were determined to have a feminist group that was autonomous but committed to two revolutions—one for national liberation and one for women's liberation.[16] Together with another organization, PILIPINA (formed in 1981 and composed of left-leaning activists, including a feminist Benedictine nun), these two groups revived feminist activism, insisting that women's issues be given equal priority in the struggle against the dictatorship. Scholar Leonora Angeles, who has written an excellent master's thesis on the history of the woman question in the Philippines, identified both KALAYAAN and PILIPINA as among the first to apply feminism to their analytical framework at a time when the word "feminist" was shunned due to its association with Western feminism and women's liberation.[17] This cohort of women members of KALAYAAN and PILIPINA became the first group of feminist leaders that inspired the newly revitalized women's movement in the first decade of the 1980s. They pioneered activism with a feminist perspective tackling issues such as sexism in the media, reproductive rights, prostitution, and violence against women.[18]

But just at the time when political activists against the Marcos regime were developing a feminist consciousness, Marcos' chief political opponent, Benigno Aquino Jr. was assassinated on August 21, 1983. This one political act launched a tidal wave of protests that culminated in the People Power 1 revolution, which ousted President Ferdinand Marcos in 1986. The urgent need to devote their energy on the antidictatorship struggle in 1983 meant that once again women's liberation had to be temporarily shelved in order to focus on the movement to oust the dictator.

From 1983 until the ouster of Marcos, a number of activist women's groups mushroomed. These women's organizations were dedicated to the mobilization of women as a gendered force to politicize them against the Marcos regime. In March 1984, a group of women's organizations coalesced to form GABRIELA (General Assembly Binding Women for Reforms, Integrity, Equality, Leadership and Action). At that time, there were about fifty organizations in Manila and thirty-eight in Mindanao affiliated with GABRIELA.[19] By 1992, 120 organizations were affiliated with GABRIELA.[20] At its inception, GABRIELA was interested in harnessing women's power for the anti-Marcos dictatorship movement rather than in advocating specific feminist or women's issues.

But it was only after democratic institutions were restored in 1986 that women's activism gained momentum, resulting in what Carolyn Sobritchea has labeled "a critical mass of highly motivated feminist advocates" and what interviewees referred to as the era of a "blossoming" of the women's movements.[21] There were organizations of women of various sectors (such as peasants, urban poor, Muslim women, Cordillera women, migrant women, women workers, and women in media, to name a few) and issue-oriented organizations (such as those specializing on women's health, domestic violence, prostitution, women's legal advocacy and services, and "comfort women," or victims of sexual slavery during the Japanese Occupation, for example).[22] The Women's Media Circle Foundation Inc. (WMC) used the potential of tri-media (radio, television, and print media) for the women's movements, whereas women's health advocates and feminist lawyers explored the possibilities of alliance building for advocacy. The spectacular growth and effectiveness of NGOs could be partially explained by the impacts of the international conferences on women and the United Nations conferences in particular, as well as the funding made available for NGOs in the developing world.[23] Although GABRIELA tended to receive the lion's share of media and international attention because of its visible presence at demonstrations and the formation of its own women's party in 2003 (see subsequent section in this introduction, Women and Formal Politics), by the 1990s the myriad group of women's organizations including hundreds of grassroots organizations, women NGOs, coalitions, and professional groups, underscored the point that one could no longer speak of a single women's movement.[24] Delia Aguilar was careful to point out that GABRIELA was no longer as central to the women's movement as it had been in the 1980s because of the many groups flourishing outside its alliance.[25] A direct consequence of the plural nature of women's

activism was disunity, but it could be argued that its very plurality legitimated its claim to speak for the Filipina. Carolyn Sobritchea claims that differences, instead of being counterproductive "served as a catalyst for all to work harder and cover all fronts, so to speak in the struggle to advance women's rights in the Philippines."[26] Although disagreement is not unusual for activist groups and may in fact enrich the women's projects, we need to note its negative consequences (most evident in the failure of women's parties to get politicians elected; see subsequent section in this introduction, Women and Formal Politics).

The issues raised by women's movements covered almost the entire gamut of women's experiences: health and reproductive rights, domestic violence, sexual harassment, globalization and its effects, the plight of women workers and peasant women, indigenous women, Muslim women, rape, incest, class, unemployment and the contractualization of the labor force, "comfort women," militarization, prostitution, the impact of Christianity on shaping feminine ideal role models, the media, and education as socializing factors, sexuality including lesbianism, poverty, environmental factors, foreign debt, and other national issues.[27] Divorce and abortion have been much more controversial and thus public discussion on these issues has been muted (see Chapter 9). This book will examine the discourses on the Filipino woman that emerged in the advocacy of some of these issues.

Women and Formal Politics

Women were still marginalized in formal politics, with a general average of a mere 11 percent (from 1986 to 2006) elected to local and national office.[28] Because of these grim statistics, the most common tactic used by activists to ensure that pro-women legislative acts were proposed, discussed, and passed in the legislature was to draft legislation and then convince their allies in the legislature to sponsor them. But women activists also were interested in claiming power themselves. The first women's party, Women for the Mother Country (KAIBA; Kababaihan Para sa Inang Bayan) was established in 1987; KAIBA won only one congressional seat (Dominique Anna "Nikki" Coseteng) in the 1987 election. This congresswoman eventually joined a traditional party.[29] Angeles explains KAIBA's failure in terms of women's relative isolation from patronage politics.[30] Eventually KAIBA became moribund.

But in 1995 the passage of the Party-List System Act that classified women as a sector enabled women's parties to compete on a more level

playing field. This legislation provided that 20 percent (at least fifty) of the House of Representatives (250) be reserved for representatives of labor, peasants, urban poor, indigenous peoples, youth, fisherfolk, elderly, veterans, women, and other marginalized sectors elected through a party list system.[31] A new system allowing sectors to compete for "reserved seats" meant that those parties who were deprived of the traditional patronage networks like women's groups would have a chance at making it in the lower house. A total of six women's parties offered candidates under the women sector although only one party Abanse! Pinay (made up of PILIPINA members) was able to get a congresswoman (Patricia Sarenas) elected. The other women's parties who fielded candidates but were unsuccessful in gaining a seat were The New Filipina (Ang Bagong Pilipina), Women (Babayi), the National Council of Women in the Philippines, Gloria's League of Women (GLOW), and Womenpower.[32] One must also include the rare number of feminists who were elected as members of other sectoral parties such as the Akbayan (Citizen's Action Party; this party has an affirmative action platform stipulating that one of the three candidates fielded must be a woman) and Country First (Bayan Muna). For example, Liza Largoza Maza, then secretary general of GABRIELA, ran under Bayan Muna and Etta Rosales with Akbayan. Both women were elected to Congress and were credited for proposing pro-women legislation during their term. Congresswoman Maza was responsible for filing fifteen out of the thirty-eight pro-women bills and resolutions filed under the thirteenth congress.[33] In July 2003, GABRIELA launched its own women's party. Liza Maza became the first GABRIELA women's party member to enter Congress when she won a seat in the 2004 elections. In 2007, Luzviminda Calolot "Luz" Ilagan became the second, and in 2010 Emerciana "Emmi" de Jesus became the third.

The poignant history of Abanse! Pinay could serve as a case study for the challenges faced by the feminists in formal politics. In a peculiar example of déjà vu, Abanse! Pinay shared the same fate as KAIBA and became moribund; PILIPINA is still active, however. The party failed to get a seat in 2004 and 2007, making it ineligible to run again in the party list unless it registered under a new name. Like KAIBA, Abanse! Pinay had a short life span. A candid interview with Patricia Sarenas provided some insights into the reasons for the party's decline. According to Sarenas, PILIPINA had always been divided over what strategies to use to increase the membership of the party.[34] These debates within the party itself were never resolved.[35] If one added to this potent mix the personal disputes between members resulting in some members leaving