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The Sanchezes of Old Manila

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welcome addition to the as yet meager library of Philippine drama. As the saying goes, *Ang hindi marunong lumingon sa pinanggalingan, hindi makakarating sa paroroonan*. A portion of *ang pinanggalingan*, our theatrical past, has been partially treated by Dr. Mendoza's book. It makes a contribution to the total picture that the Filipino scholar is striving to complete which will link the past to present and future (*ang paroroonan*) Philippine theater.

Doreen G. Fernández

THE SANCHEZES OF OLD MANILA. By Melanie V. Talag. Manila: National Book Store, Inc., 1978. 410 pages.

The Sanchezes of Old Manila is a historical romance of Manila in the 1890s, focusing on the opium smuggling trade as the festering sore at the heart of colonial ills. Set against a realistic backdrop which reveals political, social, and economic forces inexorably moving toward 1896, the story revolves around Dadong Sanchez, the do-gooder scion of a wealthy *ilustrado* family, and his beautiful, headstrong sister, Isabel.

The book opens with the archetypal scene of the young man arriving home fresh from his studies abroad, and from here the plot quickly becomes complicated. Dadong is willy-nilly drawn into an underground campaign to flush out the opium smugglers and becomes secretly involved with some restive Tondo folk and their mounting grievances against the colonial system. Isabel drifts from a passionate, if unlikely, liaison with the family boatman, Carlos, to a loveless marriage to a dashing French doctor. In her determination to bail her brother out of prison, she is compelled to capitalize on her ample feminine charms, and very narrowly escapes the clutches of the lusty governor-general. Corruption, intrigue, conspiracy, human frailty, degradation, and heroism are the threads which the author weaves into her always lively tale.

It is apparent that Talag undertook considerable scholarly research for this, her first novel. Her keenest instinct is for authenticity of detail in setting, and the overwhelming characteristic of her work is its thorough historical texture. The port city of Manila, as it throbbed with the myriad concerns of its cosmopolitan population, and at the same time exuded the ominous spirit of the mysterious East, comes alive in the book. Scheming Spanish officials, worldly churchmen, abusive *guardia civil*, and greedy local businessmen, figure against a militant newspaper editor, a wily Chinese merchant, a spunky pastryshop-keeper, and a band of *indio* subversives in an explosive chain of events which evokes the tense pre-Revolution atmosphere. Above all, Old Manila as native city of the *ilustrado* and as quintessence of his pre-turn-of-the-century lifestyle is faithfully and vividly recreated. Not a single detail

rings false in the descriptions of the elegant homes and extravagant social gatherings of the new-rich in San Miguel; the daily tête-a-têtes of merchants and bankers in the teashops of Escolta; the motley evening crowds at the Zorilla and Binondo theaters; and the great events of the Manilan's year, the Holy Week rituals, and the La Naval procession in Intramuros.

Melanie Talag's fascination with her setting clearly results in the novel's strong sense of place; however, her meticulous attention to its details degenerates at many points into the obtrusive recitation of information for its own sake. The reader is supplied with acute descriptions of period furnishings ("he climbed into the mat-covered mosquito-net shrouded four-poster"; "picking up a silver spoon monogrammed by a Binondo silversmith with his initials"); of the composition of the most inconsequential daily fare of the characters; and even of some heirloom housecleaning techniques which include a recipe for floorwax. Consequently, the flow of the narrative becomes uneven, its point-of-view confusing, and its prose style tedious.

Indeed, one cannot but regret that the author did not subject her characters to the same perceptive scrutiny with which she viewed their physical surroundings. Among the various stock figures of the novel, only Tiburcio Sanchez, and, to a certain extent, Isabel, are convincingly characterized through the accumulation of details which vivify their inner lives. The motivations of Dadong, the novel's hero, are particularly indeterminate and his character remains inchoate until the end of the novel. Outside of his family ties he has neither a significant past nor coherent direction. Two or three vague allusions to the squalor and misery he saw in London hint that his sympathy for the radicals is prompted by a budding social conscience and a quest for self-purpose, but his puerile actuations negate this. He aids the rebels, fights a duel, languishes in prison, and flirts with an English girl, all with a school-boy's lack of introspection.

The author's failure to provide her hero with the framework of personal ideals, a private code or a social and political cause which will underlie his commitments, sets her work in a minor key. "The young man in search of purpose or meaning," a theme which hovers over the novel on the verge of endowing it with an encompassing artistic vision, dissipates in the wake of Dadong's unsharpened self-awareness.

Likewise, the facile denouement, which glosses over the tragic overtones of the abortive rebellion, deprives the book of the deeply meaningful view of life essential to an imposing artifact. This is, perhaps, where Talag's touch is most unsure. The story has been moving at a good pace, through a locale drawn with evident familiarity and affection, but with the unravelling of the plot the stage machinery begins to creak a bit, so to speak. Only a mindless pulp adventure warrants the various turns of events via *deus ex machina* which swiftly bring the novel to a romantically happy ending after the opium smugglers have been disposed of, one by Chinese assassins in Hong-

kong, and the other by a fatal liver disease. Isabel's husband inexplicably contracts leprosy and dies. Carlos, the real father of her daughter, is transformed into an urbane, influential figure after he inherits a vast fortune, and marries her. Pipay, a colorless character, is suddenly found worthy of engagement to Lt. Alfonso Moreno, Isabel's jilted suitor. Cornejo, the hated governor-general, is knifed to death by a mysterious assassin, who turns out to be the former manservant of the exiled newspaper editor (it is revealed that he has been assiduously practicing knife-throwing in their mountain hideout). On the other hand, Leandro, Dadong's soldier-brother, is miraculously spared by the insurgents who massacred his whole company. The Tondo outlaws go back to peaceful lives with the money they stole from Spanish soldiers. Even Isagani, the rigdriver-turned-bandit, forgets his resentments, comes down from the hills of Taytay and docilely acknowledges his tender feelings for Viuda Gomez's daughter. The novel has successfully linked literature and history, but, clearly, not literature and life.

Besides the internal weaknesses of the novel, the author's prose style also demands critical attention. The problems which arise in this area are complex, pointing to the limitations of the writer as well as to the limitations of her chosen medium.

Filipino writers have tried various ways of coping with the inadequacy of English in recreating the experience of the non-English-speaking Filipino. NVM Gonzales and Manuel Arguilla, writing of folkways, simply transposed from the vernacular those terms which they felt could not be translated without serious loss of meaning (such as interjections and modes of address). Nick Joaquin employed an ornate style replete with quaint usages to suggest the Spanish past.

Talag's attempt to evoke the authentic flavor of her novel's period and locale (the extent of her commitment to realism) has led her toward a rather unwieldy trilingualism in both narration and direct discourse. She liberally sprinkles her English with Spanish and Tagalog words and phrases, and, in fact, renders some folk dialogue purely in Tagalog. This not only results in a disconcerting pidgin effect ("he went to the *medico*"; "a dirt road branching off to the main *calzada*"), it burdens the novel with two features relatively unusual in a fictional work: footnotes and a glossary.

A similar laxity in the author's artistic sensibilities is revealed in the fact that the book is written in three or four different styles, ranging from academic hauteur through journalistic wit to colloquial American. This results in the novel's aimlessly fluctuating tone and point-of-view, so that the author seems to be sympathetic toward her characters one minute, then mocking, patronizing, or disinterested the next minute. Furthermore, the lack of definite prose stylization destroys the novel's verisimilitude. It is difficult to imagine nineteenth century Spanish mestizos using such expressions as "I saw stars" and "fat chance."

Finally, the author's narrative and descriptive talents are often hamstrung by annoying mannerisms ("in a trice"; "a richly sum"; "a goodly distance"), clichés ("the founts of love"), and various verbal oddities ("she passed the chance"; "he loosed his cravat"; "she occasioned to stand beside him"), not to mention the tautologies, dangling modifiers, vague or missing antecedents, and subject-verb disagreements which give her writing an amateurish quality. Philippine literature which displays such awkward and ineffective handling of English raises with even more urgency the very basic issue of choice of language which the contemporary Filipino writer must grapple with.

Ma. Eloisa N. Francisco

THE HUMAN AND THE HOLY: ASIAN PERSPECTIVES IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY. Edited by Emerito P. Nakpil and Douglas J. Elwood, Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1978. x, 367 pages.

The present volume contains the papers, workshop reports, and addresses of the Consultation on Theological Education for Christian Ministry in Asia held in Makati, Metro Manila, in March 1977. The purpose of the Consultation was to find some answers to three major questions: (a) is there an emergence in the Asian scene of some consensus on the nature and agenda of the theological task in Asia?; (b) what forms of Christian ministry must be developed to carry out this task?; and (c) what kind of theological formation is needed to do it?

To answer these questions, the organizers of the Consultation brought together some 100 participants, speakers, and consultants from 14 Asian countries. While the majority of the participants were from theological schools, the various ministries of the Churches were also represented. The problems raised in the Consultation were therefore considered from the different perspectives of Church ministries – a fact that definitely contributed to the copious and rich insights brought out in the Consultation.

The central focus of the Consultation was on the human and the holy; what it means to be authentically human, and to discern the "sacredness" or the "holiness" of the human. This is an important and urgent question for man today, but perhaps especially for Asians. The participants addressed themselves to the question, not so much as an academic exercise as a wrestling, as it were, with the Asian historical realities today on the one hand, and with the reality of God in Christ encountered in the Scriptures and in the living faith of Christian communities on the other.

The participants – who were theological educators, Church leaders, frontier-ministries workers, and theological students – were determined to find and confront specifically Asian issues and to consider how these issues may be illumined by the rich insights of the Christian traditions. But they