

A BOOK REVIEW OF VICENTE L. RAFAEL'S *THE PROMISE OF THE FOREIGN*

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Abstract

The book *The Promise of the Foreign* is without doubt well-written and contributes to our understanding of the fundamental assumptions informing nationalist discourse, as well as the contradictions and complex realities at work in Philippine society. However, the book is arguably silent on how such translation can also be radicalized into an ethical technology or strategic pedagogy such that the foreign within various socio-political sites of analysis like the natives, masses, the Chinese are not just regarded as contaminations between the Philippines and the outside but rather as ambiguities that create the conditions of possibility of the nation-state and its efficacy as a symbolic and political force in everyday life.

About the Author

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Vicente Rafael argues that translation was a key to the emergence of Filipino nationalism in the nineteenth century and such techniques can be gleaned from various texts such as Rizal's novels, Balagtas's *Florante at Laura*, rumors, and speeches.

At the onset, one can see the intimate but fraught connection of literature to nationalist discourse and the ensuing function of translation, a project that Rafael started with his earlier book, *Contracting Colonialism*, where he maintains that the limits of translation opened up the convergence of linguistic and historical negotiations for the Philippine nation to be articulated as a possibility and imperative.

Here again in this book Rafael treads on a similar framework, demonstrating amply its efficacy, as the "promise of the foreign" is predicated also in language—in this case Castilian—that resulted not in closer union of the colonizers and colonized, but in each other's misconceptions with the effect of estranging both and preserving the foreignness.

Rafael uses the scene in the novel *El Filibusterismo* in which he says the class in Physics becomes an extension of the church and scientific education becomes lamentable since students regurgitate lessons and are never allowed to use the instruments. For Rafael the scene is instructive of how communications between teachers and students are

never smooth, and that they find themselves in the midst of other signs that interrupt the circulation of the language of authority. Rafael points out how *lengua de tendia*, spoken by the Castilian professor, elicited laughter from students, showing how Castilian can be spoken in ways that evade linguistic authority; at the same time, students recognize an authority that comes from the intermittent and interruptive language. This classroom scene is charged with various semantic registers, according to Rafael, that anticipate the crisis built into the economy of colonial communication.

It is this crisis in colonial communication that enables people to appropriate the foreign, as noted by Rafael in comedyas where actors dress up in medieval European fashion. For Rafael, costumes are technics for bringing distances up close the way a photograph conveys the sense of nearness of what is absent. The eccentric costumes in comedyas make the actors as if in contact with someplace else, with foreign kingdoms of an unseen and indeterminate past. Hence, foreign costumes have the same generative power of language in which audience and actors are suspended as though they are in constant dialogue and communion, transcending time and space barriers.

Aside from the crisis that language generates among speakers and listeners, Rafael also discusses the disseminative power of Castilian as demonstrated in Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere*. Rizal himself alludes to the novel as being untimely, as though intimating that the novel would best be understood in the future. In one scene in the *Noli*, the protagonist Ibarra visits Pilosopo Tasio in his study room, busily writing hieroglyphics. Surprised about the old man's writing, Ibarra is told by Pilosopo Tasio that future readers will be more discerning and acute and will be in better position to reckon with his work. Hence, the foreign language allows the work to survive and spread beyond the point of its initial emergence. Even if neglected or suppressed, Rafael writes, the *Noli* written in Castilian can be discovered through its continuous translation and transmission.

Similarly, such continuous transmission has already been at work with Balagtas' *Florante at Laura*, since the author used Castilian words as well as references to Classical Greek mythologies and tragedies. Rafael writes that *Florante at Laura* instigates as much as it dramatizes the possibilities of translation that dwell in the midst of untranslated words. The work mobilizes the vernacular to conjure the foreign and brings it to lodge in the familiar, enabling the promise of the foreign as which is always yet to come, of others who are always yet to hear, and in hearing, respond.

The Promise of the Foreign is without doubt well-written and contributes to our understanding of the fundamental assumptions informing nationalist discourse, as well as the contradictions and complex realities at work in Philippine society. Ernest Renan

wrote that the nation is also, ironically, a product of collective amnesia, that perhaps against nationalist ideologies of purity, one should see the nation as a product of various contentions and misunderstanding that we oftentimes forget or suppress (8-22). By radicalizing our concept of what and who we are collectively, and instead of arguing from essentialist standpoint about what makes us unique, we may begin to see the wisdom in how a community imagines itself based not on who we exclude but rather on who we include. The nation therefore is a complex project and translation is indeed a key to understanding such complexity.

The book unfortunately is silent on how such translation can also be radicalized into an ethical technology such that the reckoning of the foreign within various sociopolitical sites of analysis can be seen as dialectically producing or reproducing the nation. If Rafael believes that the intellectuals and the public have been successful in appropriating the foreign through comedias or novels, Rafael must also tell us whether there is still a need for a revolution. Furthermore, if we can see translation at work from Latino poetry to *Pasyon*, and comedias to novels, then we must be able to situate the revolutionary poetry of Bonifacio and Del Pilar or the essays of Jacinto as culmination of this nascent nationalism. Ultimately, Rafael must also explain the validity and viability of this nationalist project, especially now that the world seems to be endangered by the borderless war on terrorism and that the United States is bent on exterminating all the “foreign” for them.

The book should also articulate how we, who have been muted or oppressed by the foreigners, are able to learn from our miseducation, since Rizal himself had to reckon with foreigners’ misconceptions about Filipinos as well. In other words, the nationalist project must also be transformed into a strategic pedagogy to avoid the mistake of being indebted to the colonizers for the formation of the nation. The foreigners need not be colonizers and since we have been dealing with foreigners even before the colonization of Spain, our precolonial experience up to the present must inform us of how we are constantly reconstituting ourselves and being reconstituted in the process.

After reading this book, we must ask, how do we argue from the translational to the transnational, knowing that a lot of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) today suffer from maltreatment, harassment, rape, and discrimination? In what way translation devices can be used to advocate for social change, better pay, and recognition? Caroline Hau hints at the necessity of social transformation in her book *Necessary Fictions*, arguing that the study of literature should also lead to a reassessment of nationalist goals and programs “precisely because this Filipino community takes shape through the violence of exclusion and struggle, this community must always be made and unmade and remade” (282). However,

here, the book fails to account for the political viability of translation in nationalism. Vicente Rafael's *The Promise of the Foreign* may offer a vision of the future of our nation and that we shall always be haunted by it, but the main question still remains—how are we going to arrive there?

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