Forum Kritika: A Closer Look at *Manila by Night*

BERNAL AS AUTEUR: PRIMARY BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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Abstract

The paper discloses selected author-considered details on Ishmael Bernal's family and clan background that can provide further insights on his stature as an auteur, culled from a detailed clan story, which describes the values, problems, conflicts, quirks, and gifts of the clan that nurtured Bernal. It also considers a number of Bernal films and several previously unavailable writings in terms of their content, which indicate confluences in Bernal's thinking with those of other family members. The paper uses the *politique des auteurs*, whose proponents uphold the primacy of the director as the creative force behind the creation of a film, although they also recognize filmmaking as a collaborative project. The paper strives to articulate certain manifestations of the visions which were manifest in Bernal's films as well as his literary output.

Keywords

auteur criticism, Bernal films, Bernal-Santos family history, Philippine cinema

About the Author

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Author's Note

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FRANÇOIS TRUFFAUT, who was arguably the most prominent critic-turned-director during the French New Wave, accepted the reality of film as an industrial or collaborative creation, but asserted the possibility of a director-auteur who could mold such a collective industrial project into a vehicle for artistic and philosophical vision (233–35). It would be advisable, however, to caution against certain possible excesses of auteur criticism. The theory has lionized the director at the expense of the other talents in filmmaking, in the process also distorting values among practitioners who have become enamored of aspiring to director status instead of mastering critical thinking and theorizing.

Ishmael Bernal, this paper will assert, is an auteur according to the originary definition, a conceptual and philosophical director who came of age just as the French New Wave was influencing cinema beyond France and Europe, to the point of challenging and winning over Hollywood practice. Following the prescription of Alexandre Astruc, he molded film as a writer uses a pen (Monaco 5) and, through his *mise en scène*, imprinted his vision on the work. The writerly simile is even more apt in Bernal, as he had displayed the strongest literary potential among Philippine directors and started as critic, essayist, and fictionist. Inasmuch as there could be little doubt in Philippine film scholarship about his stature as auteur, this paper attempts a study of Bernal via his biographical background, the way that auteurs had done with filmmakers they had championed—i.e., Alfred Hitchcock, Howard Hawks, Jean Renoir—with the same approach eventually being applied to the auteurs themselves, starting with Truffaut.

Prior to filmmaking which he formally studied in Poona, India (fig. 1)—possibly the first Filipino to take up formal studies in film)—Bernal was a writer whose first short story at the University of the Philippines impressed even Francisco Arcellana¹ (Arago, “Partying in Horseshoe” 7). Heretofore unknown stories about Bernal and his family and clan background will enhance knowledge and appreciation of his status as film artist, as these stories will also serve to put in sharper perspective the manifestations of his philosophical and directorial visions.

Possible Auteur-Perspective Determinants

When National Artist for Film Ishmael Bernal referred to this author’s² domestic partner as his “brother-in-law” in 1994, he signaled a shift in the way he would like to deal with his closest relative: he preferred to treat the author, not anymore as nephew, but as “brother.” To this new “brother” eight months before his passing in 1996, he would also confide his desire “to go back to family.” He was hurting that friends had deserted him, and a lover had left him with neither word nor curse. This author was the only immediate family member to whom he could relate with comfort his most guarded losses and fears. He feared his mother was dying, and that, as Jorge Arago attested, was the greatest of his dread (“Father and Son” 14).

Figure 1. Bernal in Poona, India. (Bernal-Santos collection, used with permission)

At that time, this author felt Bernal was unsure if people still appreciated him. In 1994, he was feeling a financial crunch. He said he “was tired of being poor,” but despite the penury, he believed he had been honest and true to his convictions. He said he had just turned down a project, a television series that could temporarily offer relief from the poverty that had by then gripped him. But after the author suggested that he could allow some flexibility via a compromised acceptance of the project, the author experienced for the first time becoming the object of his ire. Panting and breathing heavily in anger, Bernal said that the author was dragging him even further down the gutter. He declared that “blood would be flowing on the set” if he would accept the project.

Previously he had wondered if his directorial adventures had seen better days, or whether his career was meant to end in the classroom. He was offered the directorship of the University of the Philippines Film Center (now an institute), but was quite unsure if the offer also meant the end of his career as movie director. In his last two years, he had not directed any film at all. *Waiting* (1992) was his last.

He had confided in various conversations with the author that he was hoping yet to make films on comfort women, victims forced into prostitution by the Japanese

army during their occupation of the country; he had in fact started his research on the subject. He sensed something mysterious about the friendship between two Philippine-Spanish War figures, Generals Gregorio del Pilar (so-called “Boy General” who perished in defending a mountain pass from American invaders) and Emilio Aguinaldo (for whom del Pilar had died—the controversial leader of anti-colonial resistance movements who eventually surrendered to the Americans and became President). He had confided his wish to make a film on the Filipino homosexual, and on one occasion, he said he was planning to put up a theater version of the socialist novel *Banaag at Sikat* [From Early Dawn to Full Light], integrating into the narrative the life and times of its author Lope K. Santos, who was uncle cum grandfather and patriarch to him—his most idolized and revered family figure, after his mother. Those films would never be realized if he would become a full-fledged academic.

Certain friends like Jorge Arago and Marilou Diaz-Abaya knew that personal side of Ishmael: he loved his mother, whose values he deeply revered. “The thought of his mother Elena preceding him unto death scared him most,” Jorge Arago accurately attested.³ Ishmael would cut short any warnings from his mother about her mortality when she would scold him about his occasional financial excesses. He would display a genuine expression of horror at the mere thought of its inevitability: “*Deje de hablar de ello, por favor, Mamá*” (“Stop this discussion, please, Mother”), he would say. In the clan story, the present author had written that it could have been a fateful recognition of that fear that permitted him to accept the eventuality of dying ahead of his mother (see also Arago, “Father and Son” 14).

Bernal can be described as free-spirited, like everyone in the family; but unknown to the public, he also appreciated the conservative values of his own family, and both his own clan and immediate family were (and still are) essentially conservative. When friends came to visit him at home, and their conversation would verge on the risqué, he would advise them that his elders kept conversations within the parameters of decency, and not because family members were hesitant on such issues as sex and morals, of which the family had its share of transgressions. The family simply wished to keep bedroom matters in the bedroom. This non-judgmental attitude would be familiar to anyone who had studied the characters of his films: Bernal always insisted on presenting his characters’ saving grace, even as he was depicting their vices.

On love, Ishmael’s mother would tell her grandchildren that “it is the strongest emotion of life, and one who falls in love would swim simmering seas for its sake.” She had explained it in those terms to the young Ishmael who had once timorously asked her about his biological father. That was also her advice to two grandnieces who were then undergoing unwanted pregnancies. It was the author’s privilege to have been a part of Ishmael’s family, and in the belief that these and other familial insights could make Bernal better understood, the author wrote a clan story that could shed light on the people who had surrounded him and who could have thereby

helped shape his political, moral, and artistic values. In the course of reviewing selected Bernal films for a thesis, a realization came to the author that Bernal's sensibilities were identical or related to those of family elders whose opinions and ideas Ishmael shared. Many of those views—apparent in his films, his philosophy, his satirical insights—were strikingly similar to those held by family members.⁴

In pursuit of this depiction of the subject, this paper will posit two interrelated phenomena: first and primarily, the description of the family circumstances where Bernal grew up and flourished, to account for the exceptional talent and ambition that he had exhibited in his career as filmmaker; and secondarily, the manifestation of these circumstances whenever relevant in the movies that he had become known for. The near-literal though inadequate regard for Bernal as primarily a literary innovator in film (his first award was for the screenplay of his first film, and he also won the same award, not direction, for his most highly acclaimed film, *Manila by Night*) was further reinforced by his reputation for writing or co-writing his films—13 credits in the Internet Movie Database (as of June 2012), the most of any prominent Filipino director—plus the admission (sometimes resentful) of his credited scriptwriters that he had extensively revised their material.

Quarrels and Mean Bones, Heroes and Heels

Bernal's mother Elena often used the Spanish word *noble* to describe her eldest nephew named Bayani (Senior, father of the present author) because she thought he was a fair man who stood by her when her elder sister, Manang Patrocinio, treated her with less tact. Bayani's mother Patrocinio was not above scolding the much younger mother of Ishmael, who had her own share of *locuras* ("eccentricities," "personality quirks") that drove her elder sister to censure her. For one thing, Elena was stubborn: she would surreptitiously add water to the rice her elder sister was cooking, as she preferred to have the rice soft and sticky, rather than the usual dry and loose preparation appropriate to the tropical variety. ("She could have simply cooked her own rice," Patrocinio complained.) The elder Bernals, particularly the father Ventura, provincial treasurer of Nueva Vizcaya's Bagabag town during Lope K. Santos' tenure there as Governor, were so extremely tolerant that they were branded by Bernal's own grandparents as *consentidores* ("indulgent").

Family conflicts, however, never lasted: in minutes matters would return to normal as if nothing had happened. However, it was also expected that conflicts could arise after an extended togetherness. As Ishmael himself had once put it in his characteristic hyperbole: "Don't make me stay with Nena [the endearment he used for his mother], we will kill each other." In the few times that Ishmael went against Nena's wishes, she would end the impasse with a firm resolution: "*Estoy mandando solamente en esta casa*" ("I alone make decisions in this house; literally, I am only ordering in this house, implying that no one else may do so"). Noel Vera,

in an essay on *Manila by Night*, wondered if the scene where a mother erupted into cataclysmic violence against a son whom she discovered was into drugs could be biographical, something Bernal himself had experienced first-hand. The answer, from close first-hand observation, is a categorical no. Ishmael's mother would never raise her voice beyond hearing distance. The worst thing she had ever done was to tie a rooster string around a foot of the young, pet-loving Ishmael when he kept setting a rooster free in their Sta. Mesa residence in the late 1940s. The animal was creating havoc in the garden of her Tita Patrocinio, who was herself unaccustomed, like anyone else in the household, to meting out physical punishment.

It was an uncusomary fact that the Bernal-Santos family, whose dinner conversations were about solving the problems of Filipino existence and of the world in general, could make big deals of such minor matters as how much water to use in cooking rice. Among the dinner topics the author could remember were: the *nobleza* ("nobility") of then-President Sergio Osmeña (favorite proof: the Cebuano statesman's frank admission he could not promise war veterans their back-pay), Recto's anti-American nationalism, or the impossibility of Rizal's retraction—among the many topics on which each member had practically the same opinion. Mean bones sometimes took the better of their legendary tempers, and practically everyone shared that common weakness. Ishmael's mother herself had wondered aloud to this author what could be behind those moments when perfectly intelligent and reasonable people could turn unreasonable.

But on fundamentals the Bernal-Santos family displayed a more recognizably typical unanimity (fig. 2). Dinner conversations among elders defined for the younger family members who their heroes and anti-heroes should be. Names familiar to students of Philippine history belonged in their Pantheon: Jose Rizal, Andres Bonifacio, Apolinario Mabini, Claro M. Recto, Marcelo del Pilar; Antonio Luna, Sergio Osmeña, and Manuel Quezon; the religious reformer Gregorio Aglipay and the ill-fated *bandolero* Macario Sacay. As to who the anti-heroes were: Emilio S. Aguinaldo, who stole the leadership of the Revolution against Spain from Andres Bonifacio; President Ramon Magsaysay, who was allegedly an American puppet and creation; the Iglesia ni Cristo ("Church of Christ"), which was admired for its discipline but criticized for its exploitation of religion in politics. Catholicism as a faith was respected, but this was always qualified with a historical reminder of its political and economic crimes against the nation. Liberal Spain and its culture were respected and admired. Everyone looked up to France and the French, and to Europe and Europeans in general. (Note that Bernal toward the end was a confirmed and esteemed "secret" member of the Communist underground movement, a subject that is tackled in detail in the clan biography.)

Figure 2. The Bernals in their younger years. Standing: Felipe; seated (left to right): an unidentified cousin, Patrocinio, and Elena. (Bernal-Santos collection, used with permission)

Manila Roots

Bernal's clan and family were rooted in Manila, and were thereby expressively proud of its lore. Even when everyone had moved out to the “suburbs” (now part of the National Capital Region known as Metro Manila), everyone trooped back to Manila to vote, and remained Manila voters even after their having settled elsewhere. “Everyone was leaving Manila, everyone is coming back to Manila,” Bernal wrote down in one of several scribbled notes kept in the family memorabilia, which he could have intended to expand into an essay. No wonder his affection for Manila would someday show in one of his masterpieces, *Manila by Night* (1980), which exposed the rot that was slowly creeping into the city of his affections—even as he asserted the eventual return of the next morning to the city. Inevitably, it would be *banaag at sikat* (“dawn and sunrise,” alluding to Lope K. Santos’s ground-breaking novel, *Banaag at Sikat*). His very first film project was in fact titled *Ah Ewan, Basta sa Maynila Pa rin Ako!* [I Don’t Care, I Am for Manila All the Way!], a comedy that he himself had conceptualized but from which he was replaced as director.

In *Himala* [Miracle], a character named Nimia, failing to find life and opportunity in her town, looked forward to heading back to Manila; in *Hinugot sa Langit*

[Snatched from Heaven], a provincial from Davao refused to go back there because she believed in life in Manila and preferred its challenges; in *Manila by Night*, the city was depicted as a synecdoche of urban duality, the light of its night inviting Filipinos from all walks of life into a free self-made world. Many of those leanings traceable to his family orientation would reveal themselves in Bernal's films, in his philosophy, principles, and affections, in ways that family members viewing his films would sense a "fuller" familiarity than non-family members who might have understood them from another perspective.

In *Relasyon* [The Affair], for example, Marilou, the *querida* ("common-law wife") was the conceptual opposite of the stereotype in Philippine movies. She was a home-builder rather than a wrecker, a victim and not a victimizer. Such characterization may be subversive to the Catholicized society outside Bernal's home, but most family members had always shared those views anyway, and what was queer to them was that "others" failed to see the issues as the family had seen them. Again, in many of his films, Bernal had comically depicted hypocritical religious piety. In *Waiting*, an extremely pious "philanthropist" suddenly slaps a maid, and in *Manila by Night*, a couple who routinely cheated on each other makes love as religious icons peer over them. The views Ishmael shared in these films are strikingly similar to those that family elders articulated in sundry conversations. Bernal's mother Elena had a term for religious zealots who brandished their religiosity with scapulars and other trappings: she called them *manangs* or old-fashioned matrons.

Among family elders the "superiority" and "logic" of family perceptions—such as Ishmael's view of skin-deep Catholicism among Filipinos—were facts of Philippine life. In contrast, non-family members (including film critics) had perceived Bernal's subtle jibes against superficial religiosity as primarily satire. What this author is keen to explain is that the satire is merely the manifestation of an honest attempt at Bernal's documentation of Filipino sensibilities. It was likely that Bernal, as did most of the elders of the family, would have seen these portrayals as accurate descriptions, as synecdochical of Philippine reality, but the satirical impact arrives after a realization by the audience that, indeed, the descriptions are "us."

The Bernal-Santos elders were not prudish but, as mentioned earlier, they did not openly discuss sexual matters among themselves. They looked the other way regarding the misdemeanor of adult members, and the younger set who asked about sex would normally be told that the "right time would come" when they would be mature enough to understand. This indulgent and non-invasive liberality, however, seemed to reverse itself when it came to the certainty with which their elders defined for the younger what they considered vulgar. For example, practically everyone could not stand vulgarities in Philippine television, even during the 1960s and 1970s when Philippine TV was still better than in succeeding decades. Patrocinio would turn off the television whenever an otherwise wholesome actress would appear in her backless gown. The author could recall one instance when elders switched off the television, and that was when the featured Tagalog movie

involved some rural characters peeking at the silhouette of a woman undressing behind a *capiz* window. They also turned it off during scenes that involved violence and slapstick jokes.

Reacting to a neighbor's suggestion that the clan matriarch would do better if she did handicraft rather than crocheting, Bernal's Kuya Bayani sharply rebuffed the unsolicited adviser: "*Magpaturo na lamang po kayo sa Inay ng literatura*" ("It would be better if you learned literature from Mother"), in effect telling the neighbor that crocheting was his mother's diversion from other intellectually stimulating tasks. Ishmael's mother could be even less forgiving on infractions on social decorum. Ishmael had to put his foot down when she scolded his assistant for lack of refinement at the dinner table, scratching his legs and eating without the use of cutlery. In Castilian, Ishmael argued that his assistant, with his rural coarseness, did not sense the failure in manners, a limitation of social background. She rejected that excuse and frankly asked the man to do as she had instructed.⁵ (In *Waiting*, this scene was replicated when the female head of the syndicate group sneered at the table manners of one of the recruits.)

The author could remember a neighbor who dropped by to share the latest gossip in the community, and got cold-shouldered by her prospective listeners. "We have enough problems with ourselves to bother about what is happening in our neighbors' houses" was the curt remark of Ishmael's elder cousin Ligaya. (In *Manila by Night*, the gossip session of gay character Manay Sharon [Bernardo Bernardo] with Evita Vasquez [Maya Valdes] depicts Bernal's sympathy for the subject of their exchanges: the former prostitute Virgie [Charito Solis], who had barged into the scene as a concerned mother in search of her son.)

When the Patriarch Met His Match

The grand patriarch of the Bernal-Santos clan was Lope K. Santos (fig. 3), considered the spiritual father of Tagalog as the Philippines' national language, the person that Jorge Arago described as the man who dominated Tagalog literature after Balagtas ("Partying in Horseshoe" 11). He sired two sons and six daughters with wife Patrocinio (Inyong) Bernal. Ishmael was as much a part of this brood—he was their only maternal cousin, and the youngest among them. Lope had two daughters, Lualhati and Lakambini, and a son, Makaaraw, with first wife, Lola Simeona (Salazar), who died in 1953. The present author knew and had met at least another son and daughter: Vito Santos, and the linguist-educator Paraluman Santos Aspillera, Lope's daughter by Gregoria Anunciacion.

It was Lope's plan to formally marry Patrocinio in 1954, a year after his first wife Simeona's death, but she refused to accede to his plan. Ishmael's mother said Lope had begged her to talk to her Manang Patrocinio about the ceremony, but the lady refused to listen. "*El amor es más fuerte*" ("Love is what really binds"; literally, love

Figure 3. Lope K. Santos in his earlier years. (Public domain)

is something stronger), she had so explained her disposition to this author, which Ishmael's mother had in turn described as *loca* ("crazy"). Once decided on an issue, it was difficult to convince her to change her mind. Even in financial matters, she did not allow Lope to share expenses to the point where she would have become totally dependent on him. On the first family piano, she had asked Lope to shoulder only the downpayment. She paid for the monthly amortizations from her own income, supplemented with voluntary contributions from other family members.

When she lectured her grandchildren on good manners, she defined her ultimate expectation. She did not want them to be "just good," she demanded "nobility." Several granddaughters got a scolding from her when she overheard them talking about a well-heeled suitor. "A poor but good man is infinitely better than a rich cad," she lectured them. "*No eres noble!*" ("You are not being noble!") was the worst criticism her husband could ever get from her, to which he would then immediately reply, in remorseful Tagalog, "*Nahihiya ako sa iyo, Inyong*" ("I apologize in shame, Inyong").

A pre-war teacher of English, Patrocinio had learned the language from pioneering American teachers; she read the English-language newspapers but said her prayers in Spanish. Lope and Inyong normally talked to each other in Spanish, as it leveled the language field for them. Patrocinio often rebuked Lope, but when she would already describe him as lacking in *nobleza*, he would stop cracking naughty jokes, knowing that she had reached her limits. The old man was, bluntly put, an inveterate ladies' man, whose stories were probably meant to make Patrocinio jealous, but the lady was not biting. Patrocinio was a wife in control: she simply loved and accepted Lope for what he was. After all, she had long before decided to leave Nueva Vizcaya for Manila with him in the mid-1920s when his term as governor ended. When the present author asked her why she loved a man

known as a *babaero*, when she could have her pick of numerous suitors, her answer was curt: “*Mahal ko si Lope*” (“I just love Lope”).

Soon Patrocinio would get tired of Lope’s inability to rein in his affairs. She decided firmly to stop Lope from seeing her. He pleaded with their eldest daughter Ligaya to ask her mother to reconsider, but the reconciliation was doomed: the devoted “mama’s girl” sided, uncharacteristically and openly, with her mother. They would see each other on Lope’s deathbed a full decade hence, in 1963, when he was confined at the University of the East Ramon Magsaysay Memorial Medical Center in Sta. Mesa. Ishmael’s Ate Ligaya, however, had so firmly distanced herself from her father that she did not even present her groom to Lope when she married in 1961. Lola Patrocinio would warn her that the hard-headed stance did not augur well for a successful and happy marriage. She was prophetic: the marriage of Ligaya ended bitterly, the husband absent from her deathbed when she died of cancer in 1972.

The impact of this family reality could have caused agony for Bernal’s idolized Ate Ligaya, who was “a very handsome woman, and a lady of impeccable dignity and manners,” as Ishmael described her in his lost autobiography. Ligaya resented even the smallest slight on her mother, as she was closest to her. She begrudged her father’s handling of the plurality of his families, though not necessarily the plurality of his wives. Essentially, the problem was in just one of the branches of the family that lived on the other side of the Pasig River—it seemed, from this side of the story, that that family was too jealous of his other family, that the lady virtually kept Lope imprisoned so that he had to escape from her each time he would leave for other family branches. When Lope managed to escape, in a Hollywood-like suspense narrative, to finally settle in the legitimate household in San Juan, the family talked about the story with a mix of good humor and measured laughter. The question however is: could Ishmael have felt something akin to how his idolized Ate Ligaya felt?

In one of his articles on Bernal, bosom buddy Jorge Arago related that he had once asked Ishmael how he coped with the fact that the clan patriarch had several wives (“Father and Son” 14). Bernal’s answer was that he chose not to know. When the author asked Pangarap, the youngest son of Lope, how he could have reconciled Lope’s principles with the multiplicity of his families, the son answered: “He simply did not believe in the Catholic position on monogamy.” (Apparently, neither did Bernal agree with the universal applicability of that value. In *Manila by Night*, the two major straight male characters, Alex [William Martinez] and Febrero [Orestes Ojeda], are sexually opportunistic to the extent that both even knowingly shared a gay lover.) Nevertheless, like everyone in the younger group, Ishmael looked the other way when it came to such matters. The family ethos was clear: it was *usapan ng matanda*, the concern of the elders. Lope K. Santos’s infidelities, as well as the fact that Ishmael himself was a love child, certainly must have had an impact on the young man. They might disagree and express concern, but they would never dare

disrespect an adult's decision. After all, practically everyone would have their way, like the character played by Vilma Santos in *Relasyon*: "*Hayaan mo siya sa desisyon niya*" ("Leave her to live with her decision").

On the family's history of patriarchal promiscuity, there seems to be enough indication that the sensibility had crept into several Bernal films that tackled and dissected the male's innate polygamous tendencies and the female response to this nature: *Huwag Tularan: Pito ang Asawa Ko* [Bad Example: I Have Seven Spouses, 1974], *Mister Mo, Lover Boy Ko* [Your Husband, My Lover, 1974], *Nunal sa Tubig* [Speck in the Lake, 1976], *Lagi na Lamang Ba Akong Babae?* [Will I Be a Woman Forever? 1978], *Isang Gabi sa Iyo, Isang Gabi sa Akin* [One Night for You, One Night for Me, 1978], *Ikaw Ay Akin* [You Are Mine, 1978], *Bakit May Pag-ibig Pa?* [Why Is There Love? 1979], *Salawahan* [Unfaithful, 1979], *Relasyon* [The Affair, 1982], *Broken Marriage* [1983], *Pahiram ng Isang Umaga* [Lend Me One Morning, 1989]. These would be among the relevant titles in his 50-entry filmography.

In the Sta. Mesa house, Patrocinio and Elena were not the only women of strong character. All the other four women of Ishmael's family were just as headstrong as the existentialist characters in Ishmael's works, who knew what they want, and who made decisions on their own. Undoubtedly, they left a strong impression on the young Ishmael, who had described his mother as a "remarkable woman." He worshipped his Ate Ligaya and Patrocinio inspired him, as he knew by heart that only she could level off with Lope in the way that she loved and censured him. Not surprisingly, in practically all of Ishmael's films, women were the assertive equals of men. It had always been on them that Ishmael focused his compassion and sympathy. Even in the philosophical and religious epic *Himala*, a world-renowned scholar had noted that the film was primarily "about women" (Panisnick 23). In Ishmael's world, women dominate, and the world revolves around their wishes, whims, and caprices. They shape values, families, and nations.

Patrocinio and Bernal's own mother, Elena, could very well have been Ishmael's inspiration for several classics of Philippine movies. In *Relasyon*, Vilma Santos played the *querida* who lived up to her name as the beloved, a lady of intellect and fine sensibility; the virtually separated Emil truly loved and preferred her to his legal wife. In *Dalawang Pugad, Isang Ibon* [Two Nests, One Bird], Bernal explored the male's polygamous nature, and pitted him against gritty female characters. In these films, Bernal recast the *querida* different from the stereotype of a family wrecker toward a clear-headed case-by-case realist delineation of the common-law wife. In *Relasyon*, Bernal can arguably be shown as a champion of the *querida* as a Filipino director, in depicting Marilou as a principled martyr in a society that wrongfully extols man's false claim to moral ascendancy. As would be evident in the film, Ishmael saw the injustice done to women in male-dominated society, as he also saw and questioned the morality and rationality of institutionalized but falsely monogamist families.

Eccentric and Remarkable Mother

“She must be as nutty as her fruitcake to have given me my name” was how Ishmael had described to Jorge Arago his mother’s choice of name. In fact, “Ishmael” as a name suggests her level of literary culture and keen understanding of Biblical and Quranic scripture: Ishmael was the son of Arab-Jewish patriarch Abraham with his second wife Hagar, and it was clear the choice reflected Nena’s assertion of the spiritual legitimacy of her son. She in fact called him *dulce fruta del amor* (“the sweet fruit of love”). In the family, the men would often be quoted as saying: there is no such thing as an illegitimate child, but rather there are illegitimate parents. *Dulce fruta del amor* is a confident and firm rejection of Philippine society’s standard descriptions of the love child: *anak sa pagkakasala* (“child of perfidy”), *putok sa buho* (“spurious offspring”), illegitimate.

Ishmael’s mother Elena, Nena, or Lena (fig. 4) was a stickler for discipline. Although she had imposed her strict views on financial readiness on grandnephews and grandnieces, she was at her most insistent in imbuing the culture of frugality and integrity in her only son. She had her own ways of challenging him to behave according to her standards. For example, Ishmael learned to swim in a few days, but the first day was a mess. Lena saw him splashing pool water all around him, but she deferred dishing out her criticism at the right time. That night she suggested to Ishmael that he should observe those swimmers who swam without splashing water all over the pool. He got the message quickly enough so that on day two, he could say, “Look ma, no splashing.”

Ishmael’s mother had told the author that parental lectures should be clearly and constructively formulated. When Ishmael was to leave for Paris to pursue his studies on French language and literature, Nena lectured him on behaving during cocktails and parties. “You could never be ahead of the ladies and the senior personalities around you,” she would remind him. “And no topics that are controversial like politics or religion should be touched on.” She would tell this author proudly that she was sure of her son’s breeding, so that he “could mix even with the members of the diplomatic corps.” That conversation cropped up when family friend Lino Brocka went overboard in the critics’ awards ceremony in 1980 by returning the trophy given by the sponsors, publicly humiliating his hosts. It was a no-no, Ishmael’s mom would tell Ishmael, who quietly took her word. The lady would intervene each time she feared that Ishmael might embroil himself in potential controversy, to advise him that silence sometimes is the best answer to somebody else’s lack of scruple.

Ishmael was apprehensive of his mother, but the basis of fear was moral censure rather than verbal or physical violence, inasmuch as his mother always spoke with moral assurance. This lady, who had never been known to raise her voice, could be so packed with authority that she could make the infamously overbearing Ishmael Bernal defer to her. That was the power she displayed against the thieves who

Figure 4. Elena (also Lena and Nena) Bernal Toledo, Ishmael's mother. (Bernal-Santos collection, used with permission)

barged into the Grey November Café in Malate in the mid-1960s. “Why are you doing this?” she asked the robbers. “You can surely get all this money, but of course you know that we don’t keep everything here but in the bank. And what we have here is not enough for the risk you are taking.” Ishmael could not believe his mother could so calmly reprimand the robbers, under such circumstances, complete with knitted eyebrows—the customary indication of her disappointment.

On the day of the burial of her son, her stoic reserve surprised a family friend—the late National Artist Rolando Tinio—who stood beside the seated lady, and inquired if she was all right. When she looked up to acknowledge the

well-wisher, she realized it was the famous poet-friend and one-time scriptwriter and performer of Ishmael. (Distantly related to the Santos, Tinio was proclaimed National Artist for Theater, also after his death, in 1997.) Elena recited an entire stanza from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, as her way of telling him she was in control of her heartbreak. When she was learning French in the 1960s and 1970s, she made sure her letters to Ishmael were in French; Ishmael gamely wrote back to her also in French. At one point when she was close to mastering conversational French, she kidded Ishmael that she could one day overtake an Aix-en-Provence licentiate. To which Ishmael riposted: "*Ce n'est pas possible, maman*" ("It's not possible, Mom").⁶

Jorge Arago wrote that when Ishmael introduced himself to his biological father before he left for Paris in the 1960s, Ishmael was armed with the certainty that he would be recognized. It was impossible that Antonio Ledesma would not recognize him if he presented himself, Ishmael believed. His reason: "My mother was such a remarkable woman he certainly could not have forgotten her." With Elena Bernal as mother, and Lope K. Santos's wife Patrocinio as his surrogate mom, and a circle of strong women like his idolized Ate Ligaya in Ishmael's life, it becomes possible to account for Bernal's strong feminist orientation. In *Manila by Night* as with most of his films, Bernal's women characters fight for decisions and navigate their way against or out of social, economic, and spatial limits. That women command and rule the world in Ishmael's worldview could easily be seen in the stark contrast between the strong-willed women in *Manila by Night* vis-à-vis the resigned, helpless main female character in Lino Brocka's interpretation of *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag*.

Ishmael Bernal came from a clan many of whose members' idea of financial stability was through employment in the professions. Practically everyone died with just enough to pay for hospital and funeral expenses, and it was a tradition for those with resources to help those with less. Ishmael was not an exception: he died with just enough to get by. In his last years, it seemed fated that Bernal would also be beset by financial woes. Some two years before his passing, Ishmael was frantically trying to raise funds, and had asked the present author to sell two titled lots. There was an interested buyer, but he had misplaced the title to one of the lots, and the deal fizzled out as the buyer had wanted to purchase the two together.

Practically everyone had experienced poverty and penury in the clan, and Lope K. Santos was most prone to this as a writer. He lost the few properties he had when he self-published *Banaag at Sikat*, his most important novel. Such clan value would achieve national focus in the 1960s when the impoverished and sick Santos would refuse a congressional pension of one thousand pesos monthly, proposed in a bill written in Tagalog and sponsored by Congressman Rogaciano Mercado, which House Speaker Cornelio Villareal had rejected because it was not written in either English or Spanish.

Santos turned down the pension. Daughter Paraluman Santos Aspillera⁷ wrote Congress: "Not until Tagalog is given its rightful place in Congress, and is respected

as a constitutional mandate ... would he like his name dragged in its deliberations” (Aspillera 97). Santos, it must be said, had been critical of the dishonesty in calling the national language Pilipino or Filipino, arguing that the name was linguistically dishonest, akin to renaming English “American” or “Australian.” The attitude, not the name of the language, should be changed, he argued. He also did not believe that Filipinos would reject Tagalog as national language simply because it is Tagalog (Aspillera 294–303). He believed that the unresolvable debates on whether Tagalog and Filipino are the same or two different languages would have been non-issues, if politicians had been as honest as he was. In the clan that nurtured Bernal, honesty was the right foot to start a trek, whether in finance or in linguistics. Ishmael Bernal would echo the same clan value in his film philosophy: his films had to be, for better or worse, honest depictions of life.

House as Root of Pride

The Sta. Mesa household where Ishmael Bernal spent his youth had five bedrooms, *capiz* and decorated glass windows, a *sala* with a piano (a mark of the Manila middle class then), and a narra dinner table for twelve. In several corners were antique cases with glass panels lined with books on philosophy, languages, and literature. Crocheted linen decked the piano, the dinner table, and the hi-fi, as the home music system then was called; a 21-inch black-and-white Zenith television set was added, a prized appliance in the 1960s. Only austere drapes and curtains were used. Ligaya and Ishmael’s second mother Inyong disdained any furnishing that betrayed a preference for opulence. The home interior had the atmosphere similar to the old houses in Bernal’s films, with *Hinugot sa Langit*, *Relasyon*, and *Bakit May Pag-ibig Pa?* [Why is There Love?] as exemplary samples.

It may be of childhood nostalgia for the Bernal-Santos ancestral house in Sta. Mesa that Ishmael’s choice of setting in many of his films was typically an old house. Bernal’s films are replete with a lot of metaphorical and allegorical meanings for residences. In *Relasyon*, for example, and in *Bakit May Pag-ibig Pa?*, the act of closing doors or windows seems to signify an end as well as a new beginning. In *Hinugot sa Langit*, the demolition of shanties is a strong indictment of Catholic insensitivity, and in *Manila by Night*, the ongoing night-time repair of Virgie’s house portends the sense of a city and its people about to be overcome by decadence.

Ishmael’s surrogate mother Patrocinio had described her “son,” Ishmael, and daughters as paragons of courtesy whenever they faced Lope. She said everyone in the family revered the patriarch. And even when they disagreed with him, the siblings quietly accepted his lectures with restrained politeness. Inasmuch as they were widely read, family members knew that they lived with someone who had contributed immensely to Filipino language, literature, and culture. Santos’s dignity and poise, his patrician Old World personality, overwhelmed them. They

appreciated his family lectures during which they were made aware of their roots, language, and culture. They were guided toward an early appreciation of his views on the importance of using Tagalog or Filipino names for their children.

This was the family whose patriarch Bienvenido Lumbera, during a symposium on the centennial of Lope K. Santos, had aptly described as the “man behind the preeminence of Tagalog among our local languages”—because only Tagalog had someone like him, who had taken care to cultivate and defend it in the epical manner he struggled in order to ensure its literary and political eminence. The English language may have had Shakespeare, its greatest bard and dramatist, but Santos did more: he codified Tagalog grammar, providing it with original vocabulary. He simplified its orthography, and gave the world its nearly perfect spelling system. He was a grammarian, novelist, writer, essayist, editor-journalist, philosopher, language and labor activist, and nationalist.

Ishmael’s reverence for his cultural father was not just about those achievements, it was also about the magnetic and strong personality of the clan patriarch. Lope could have been short at a height of five feet, but his was a persona that immediately commanded respect. Despite his having already been a national figure, he did not mind taking the jeepney or bus, to the consternation of his grandsons who were embarrassed by the public attention he elicited in those conveyances. Worse, he seemed totally oblivious to the attention. Bernal’s awe of Santos would show in his warnings to his nephews against some perceived wrongs or failed judgments, when he would ask them to drop the “Santos” from their name.

One significant Santos impact on Bernal was the elder’s pro-poor politics, which would be enhanced with Ishmael’s stint at the University of the Philippines as an undergraduate student of English. His college days coincided with the 1950s-60s nationalist ferment when the various nationalist ideologies were competing for adherents among the country’s younger intellectuals. Those were the years when Ishmael’s collegiate confreres were debating nationalism, US interference in and domination of Philippine politics, and the relevance of Catholicism. It was also the time when socialist (now-orthodox) Marxism was starting to attract the core of its would-be adherents. Bernal would be among the closest friends of Philippine Communist Party founder Jose Ma. Sison, to whom he even gamely served as courier of love letters to Julia, who eventually became Sison’s wife.

As a literary mind concerned with his craft, and who belonged to that generation of writers who guarded against the dangers of one’s politics overwhelming his art, Bernal was wary of being drowned in the ideological excesses of orthodox Marxism in his works. In 1979, the present author was chastised by Bernal when he had asked about political elements in his movies. “I understand what you want to elicit from me, but you will not get it,” he warned. “If we are discussing my art, we must discuss [only that] and not my politics.” He would not be tempted to digress on that line. After a second, more subtle question was advanced, he was stern: “The problem is your question is political and I am talking from the point of view of an artist.”

Bernal's politics are deeply buried in many of his works. In *Manila by Night*, the corruption of martial-law governance and police-judiciary collusion is quietly manifested in a dinner conversation, and the police's ineptitude is seen in their subsequent difficulty in apprehending a minor drug pusher. The police *tong* ("extortion") system is revealed in a detail when an aging prostitute appeals for help from a "retired" comrade, by then already married to an implicitly influential lawyer. In two other films, *Sugat sa Ugat* [Wound in the Root], and *Hinugot sa Langit*, Bernal showed the desperate situation of the poor, in a script that scrupulously avoided overt political commentary. In *Himala*, Bernal posited a Marxist view of religion as an opiate, within the framework of a post-Marxist script written by Ricardo Lee, but he rejected any notion of ramming down such commentary on his audience and adhered instead to the classic humanist complexion of the story. The Marxist bent comes to the fore in the final plot twist, when Elsa's death becomes a dismaying reversion to mass hysteria and fanaticism.

Cultural Powerhouse

Even the recently deceased Jorge Arago may not have fully known that Ishmael's family and clan had more members whose contributions to Philippine culture are well worth noting, and that some of these members did have a hand in the formation of his character and gifts. In the Sta. Mesa residence, the renowned composer Constancio Canseco de Guzman—Lope's favorite cousin (Lope's middle initial was his Filipinization of the Spanish name "Canseco")—was a regular visitor who relished conversations with Patrocinio, who in turn ardently admired his musical talents. In the 1980s, his famous *kundiman* "Bayan Ko" [My Country] would become the signature anti-dictatorship protest song, virtually an alternative national anthem. De Guzman often played the piano in Sta. Mesa to the delight of everyone, particularly Ishmael and his mother, whose affinity to music was inherent. Lena's father, Ventura Bernal, the provincial treasurer of Bagabag town in his time, was a versatile musician who played not just the piano but also the guitar and violin. It may have been in Sta. Mesa where Ishmael nurtured his partiality to opera and classical music. It was also there where he began his interest in film, as he always watched double features in the nearby Embassy Theater on Pureza Street, as he had written in his now-lost autobiography.

In addition to de Guzman, the late George Canseco, another famous composer and relative on the Canseco side, was a grandnephew of Lope. He composed Basil Valdez's biggest hit "Ngayon at Kailanman" [Now and Evermore] and Pilita Corrales's signature song "Kapantay ay Langit" [As High as Heaven]. In literature, Mang Binong, known to posterity as Severino Reyes, gave the nation the beloved children's stories of Lola Basyang—in fact a fictitious character inspired by a real Lola Pashang of the clan, who had actually related all those tales, according to

Ishmael's cousin Pangarap. Ishmael Bernal as well was not the first movie director in the clan. That distinction belonged to the first woman film director of the country, Susana Canseco de Guzman, herself a noted writer and novelist in Tagalog, a cousin of the Santoses. Servando de los Angeles, or Bandong, known for a major Tagalog novel, *Ang Huling Timawa* [The Last Freeman], was almost family, and his friendship with Lope extended to providing several of his daughters with stable employment as office secretaries and staff, and who delivered the family response to eulogies for Lope K. Santos's memorial in May 1963.

In lexicography, language experts maintain that the best thesaurus-dictionary of the Tagalog language was the work of Vito C. Santos. In the philology of the Tagalog language, among the pioneers were the clan's Paraluman Santos Aspillera of the Philippine Women's University and Ligaya Santos Tuazon of the University of the East who learned Tagalog grammar and linguistics directly from Lope himself.

It was a household and clan where Filipino and Western musical classics defined the tastes of the Bernal-Santos brood, as could be suggested by the pieces everyone was playing on the piano. Everyone displayed varying levels of expertise, and Ishmael, whose off-key voice provoked smiles from his cousins, envied their skill at the instrument. To illustrate how music sometimes became a language in Bernal's family: Ishmael's mother Elena had criticized some of his films by comparing them to music. "The tendency is always *forte* or *fortissimo*," Elena would tell him, using technical terms. After *Nunal sa Tubig*, Bernal proudly reported to his mother, "Watch this film, Nena, this time you will have a lot of *pianissimo*." Both Ishmael and Elena also loved the opera, and both went to the extent of studying Italian just to make sure they understood the original language. To be able to participate in the activities of the musical family, Ishmael took to the guitar. When his Ate Ligaya played Antonio Molina's "Hatinggabi" [Midnight], the young appreciative Ishmael Bernal would hearten her with his enthusiastic clapping and bravos.

There was a strong consciousness in the clan of pride in being Filipino, rooted in shared decencies, values, and loyalty to the nation. This explains the insistence among the older members of the clan to use Tagalog names. (Lope K. Santos had told them that the Japanese, the Thais, and the Chinese kept to their own language in their names so why, he asked, should we not?) In the clan mindset, Filipinos were the equals, if not the better, of other nationalities. On this topic, Ishmael's mother liked to retell two family anecdotes to her grandnephews and nieces as a lesson on Filipino pride. One of these anecdotes occurred at the set of *Pagdating sa Dulo* [Reaching the Top] in 1971, Ishmael's debut film. The director hurled a chair at an American soldier after the latter insulted a Filipina. The American called for the police, but when an officer came to investigate, the new director shot back: "Take that American away from this place, he called a Filipina a bitch!" Ishmael's mother Nena had her own story about an American engineer who once gave her

equivocal praise in his description of her as a “rarity among [Filipinos].” Nena told the offending engineer that, as in his country, the more intelligent Filipinos were in business firms and universities. That person since then became her friend.

The Attribution of Genius

“There can be no definitive criticism of genius or talent which does not take into consideration the social determinism, the historical combination of circumstances, and the technical background which to a large extent determine it.” André Bazin’s summarization of the attribution of genius (251) presents a reasoned justification of how to treat fairly not just the gift but the social institutions and other considerations that allow a talent to grow and develop.

In Bernal’s case, as suggested in several cited instances in the referenced and primary biographical essay, the supreme reality of being a love child could and would have been a bitter experience had he been born in a family that had not provided him with both pride in himself as well as those values and resources that were shared with him in his childhood. In a culture that stigmatizes the love child, Bernal on the contrary rose as a proud and confident person, an exponent not only of his family values, but even of feminist and gay rights, a proud film poet of the city and the country which he held in affection.

While this paper dealt mainly with the family influence on Bernal that helped shape his talent, much more needs to be understood in other social aspects. The salient historical developments from the year of his birth in 1938, to his childhood experience of World War II in the early 1940s, to the political and philosophical developments in the country from his age of maturity—1955 to the mid-1960s—are important areas of scholarly consideration in the discipline of Bernalia, the study of his philosophy and art.

Another important area which should not be missed is the literary Ishmael Bernal, as he was a writer before he studied film in India in 1966. Up to the early 1970s when he directed his first film *Pagdating sa Dulo*, Bernal was a writer of note in several national publications and magazines. An earlier study of his works reveals a precise literary orientation, much of which is traceable to Kenneth Burke’s theory on symbolic action. A deeper study of his Marxist orientation presents a formidable opportunity to unearth many of those hidden progressive insights that were buried in his output. Crucial to this project would be a more intensive consideration of the political economy that he had operationalized in his films, as a way of further understanding and contextualizing the instability of his social standing and class position—and possibly a way as well of looking at the artist as Filipino.

Notes

1. Ishmael wrote his first short story, "That House," in his third year at the University of the Philippines, which subsequent National Artist for Literature Francisco Arcellana praised and discussed in class in lieu of the day's planned short story of Jose Garcia Villa. The young Bernal was so elated at Arcellana's recognition of his writing talent that he rushed home to report the feat proudly to his mother, announcing "I am now celebrity!"
2. In his last will and testament, Ishmael Bernal assigned two trustees: director Marilou Diaz-Abaya on the professional side, and the present author on the family side.
3. Bernal wrote the draft of his biography and gave the task of improving what he had written to Jorge Arago. The present author found the manuscript with written instructions for Arago, so the author turned over the Bernal-typed biography to Arago some time in 2000. However, it got burned when fire razed the house of Jorge's family, along with several of Arago's Bernal memorabilia. See Arago, "Pro-Bernal Anti-Bio."
4. The study includes selected writings published in national newspapers and magazines, as well as some extant Bernal-written manuscripts.
5. As a result of this incident, Ishmael left Grace Park to settle in his own place, to avoid further confrontations with his mother. He was keenly aware that her word held sway at home, and that she would not give up that maternal right. After the issue cooled down, he asked leave, with the excuse that he had to be close to the area where he worked.
6. One of the officials of the French Embassy had then said of Ishmael's fluency that he spoke and wrote like a Frenchman.
7. Paraluman Santos Aspillera, an educator, linguist, and Tagalog expert, was the offspring of Lope K. Santos with Gregoria Anunciación, who lived in Pandacan, Manila, just south across the Pasig River from where the Bernal-Santoses lived in the northern side of the river, in Sta. Mesa district.

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