Ava Sarreal Robertson

Cody Harris

20th Century History

February 19, 2025

The Voices We Don't Hear

Feminism is defined as a 'foreign' concept in the Philippines. It is doted on by *"strident middle-class women whose behaviour and ways of thinking are those of aggressive western feminists and therefore has no place in national life and culture"* (Santiago). This may come to a surprise due to the Philippines' seemingly progressive history, having two elected female presidents within its short democratic existence. However, when asked to define the role of feminism in her Filipino upbringing, my 'Lola' (grandmother in Tagalog) did not know how to respond. Her uncertainty reflects a broader sentiment that persists among many. The term 'feminism' often remains stigmatized or misunderstood, conjuring images of colonist Western ideologies that are disconnected from the lived experiences of women like my Lola. Immigrant, brown, and female, she carried the weight of 'intersectionality' long before the term even existed. Her struggle for gender equality is layered, intersecting with issues of race, class, and oppression. Feminism is not defined by a single narrative or experience. It is empowering, because of the diversity it should encompass.

My Lola was born in the city of Montalban in 1959, which was during a period of great societal change. In 1946, after over 300 years of Spanish colonial rule, the Filipinos had finally gained their independence. However, this 'freedom' was only discovered through the aftermath of World War II. After the brutal Japanese occupation, this once 'Pearl of the Orient' was reduced to ruins. *"As the war ended over a million Filipinos had died or were killed, out of a population of 18 million. Manila and most of the major cities were in ruins. Severe inflation had set in… and farms were fallow… Industries, transportation, and communication facilities were destroyed"* (Malloryk). Despite this, through the 50s, the Philippines quickly became one of the fastest growing and industrialized economies in Southeast Asia. The country saw high education levels, parliamentary democracy, and a growing middle class (Pinches). These changes ultimately led to growing reformation from traditional, colonialist views.

Pre-colonial Philippines was not a patricentric society. Robert Fox, an anthropologist, notes from Spanish accounts that lineage in many Indigenous societies were determined both patrilineally and matrilineally. In fact, it seemed likely that there was little to no division between gender roles at all. "*A clear indication of this is the lack of sexual bifurcation in language, particularly in the case of nouns and pronouns. If the Indigenous language is seen as a bearer of Indigenous culture, it appears that it does not particularly matter whether a particular object or a particular labor is specific to men or women"* (Santiago). However, Domingo de Salazar, first Bishop of Manila, theorizes in his account that the role of the 'woman' was celebrated only in the realm of culture and religion. Women were perceived as being an embodiment of nature, because of their ability to reproduce life. The Filipina *babaylan,* or female shaman, in particular special-

ized in the spiritual responsibilities of a community and was "*privy to special knowledge not within the reach of man*" (Santiago). In the early years of colonization, much of this pre-colonial culture was lost when patriarchal ideals were introduced by the Spanish conquerors. The subjugation of Indigenous peoples under the Catholic Church and the invading Spanish culture, led to the normalization of oppression over women in the Philippines; a legacy that still lives on until today.

My Lola was the first born child of her 16 year old mother. Her grandfather had been the mayor of Montalban, and upon discovering his daughter's relationship to a poorer man, her mother had 'fallen' out of her grandparents' graces. She grew up relatively poor, but this didn't stop her from getting an education. In the past, under the influence of the Spanish occupation, the female role was to get married and take care of domestic tasks. However, in my Lola's generation, this older value became a luxury, because with the generally unstable economy, dual incomes became required regardless of gender. Everyone was expected to work to support the family, and thus, everyone had to go to school. Despite this, a woman's 'femininity' was still highly regarded, and although women were expected to be in the workplace, they could not 'act as a man.' A woman could be a doctor, a lawyer, a business owner, but not anything to do with 'masculine traits' like 'dirtiness' or 'strength' (Sarreal).

Purity culture is highly prevalent in the Philippines due to a combination of imposed Christian values and traditional beliefs. Women were expected to be gentle, to cover up, and to act with grace. By the 1930s, the Philippine women's suffrage movement had become more

prevalent in everyday society, but the visibility came with backlash. In his book, *Our Modern Woman: A National Problem* (1932), lawyer, Perfecto E. Laguio, would become an outspoken voice against the feminist movement. He detailed in a letter to the Philippine Legislative Assembly that, "*the Filipina woman has ever been considered by Filipino man as having a high position and eminently worthy of respect,*" and by giving into suffragists' demands, "*the Filipino woman will no longer experience the same high regard that Filipino men have for her. She will be lowering herself from the shrine where she is 'lord of all she surveys' only to be placed on the level of men among whom the spirit of honour and valour are no longer to be found*" (Laguio). This ideal could be argued to have been stemmed from pre-colonial values, with the perception of women as powerful religious figures. Nevertheless, this perspective ultimately objectifies the role of the woman as a 'goddess,' who is merely allowed to maintain her status through adherence to the male gaze as a silent observer (Santiago). In 1937, Filipinas would become the first women in Asia to win the right to vote. However, the legacy of these beliefs would continue in societal expectations.

Even with the responsibility of being a breadwinner, women were still expected to care for the same domestic duties they were endowed in the past. In 1978, my Lola would marry my Lolo, and in the following year, she had my mom at age 19. Two years later, they left their home country and immigrated to the United States with only $5 dollars in their pocket. My Lolo was invited by the University of Florida to continue his education, and by extension, my Lola and mom were allowed to come with him. Life in America wasn't easy. As my Lolo was unable to work while he completed his degree, my Lola would become the single breadwinner for the fam-

ily. With three nursing jobs and a freelance hairdressing gig on the side, she was still able to take care of her two year old daughter, 9225 miles away from home.

My Lola sought to live her life as womanhood was defined to her, and she succeeded. She embraced her roles as provider and caretaker, seemingly impossible standards made real by the hardships of immigration. She was able to take the unattainable expectations placed upon her as a Filipina immigrant, and twisted them into a narrative of resilience and strength. Even though my Lola wouldn't define her story as a 'feminist' one, I believe her life embodies the spirit of the moment — a struggle for survival and agency in a world that often sought to limit her.

Works Cited

Fong, Lina Y.S. *Asian-American Women: An Understudied Minority.* Western Michigan University: The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare, Mar. 1997, https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.2399. Accessed 19 Feb. 2025.

Li, J. *A History of Feminism and Gender Equality in the Modern Philippines.* EDUCATUM Journal of Social Sciences, 2022, https://doi.org/10.37134/ejoss.vol8.1.4.2022. Accessed 19 Feb. 2025.

Malloryk. *July 4, 1946: The Philippines Granted Independence From the United States.* The National WWII Museum: New Orleans, 1 July 2021, www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/july-4-1946-philippines-independence. Accessed 19 Feb. 2025.

Obama, Michelle. *Becoming.* First edition. New York, Crown, and imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, 2018.

Pinches, M. *The Philippines: The Regional Exception.* The Pacific Review, 1992. https://doi.org/10.1080/09512749208719007. Accessed 19 Feb. 2025

Perfecto E. Laguio. *Our Modern Woman: A National Problem.* Pilaw Book Supply, 1931.

Robertson, Anna. Interview. Conducted by Ava Sarreal Robertson, 9 Feb. 2025.

Santiago, Lilia Quindoza. *Roots of Feminist Thought in the Philippines.* 1996, journals.upd.edu.ph/index.php/rws/article/view/3112. Accessed 19 Feb. 2025.

Sarreal, Jocelyn. Interview. Conducted by Ava Sarreal Robertson, 16 Feb. 2025.