

bell hooks' Postfeminism and Indigenous Women in the Philippines

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Abstract

While much has been written about indigenous women in the Philippines, there is a lacuna in terms of feminist analysis. Indigenous women have not been much of a subject of discussion in feminist academic and non-academic circles. Even worldwide, the situation of indigenous women has only been given attention by feminist scholars only recently. This paper contributes to filling-in the aforementioned gap by examining the plight of indigenous women in the Philippines in light of bell hooks' postfeminism. It shows that while women throughout Philippine history have experienced oppression and discrimination, those who are at – what bell hooks calls – the “margins” experienced greater degrees of oppression and discrimination than those who are at the “center.” In the contemporary era, indigenous Filipina women are at the margins. These women experience multiple layers or intersections of oppression and discrimination not only based on gender and sex. Fortunately, efforts from various sectors of Philippine society that address multiple layers and intersections of oppression and discrimination that women experience, in general, abound. What is needed today, however, are these efforts to address the plight of marginalized indigenous women in the country.

Keywords: Postfeminism, gender-race-class intersectionality, bell hooks, indigenous women

Introduction

While much has been written about indigenous women in the Philippines, there is a lacuna in terms of a feminist analysis. Indigenous women have not been much of a subject of discussion in feminist academic and non-academic circles. Even worldwide, the situation of indigenous women has only been given attention by feminist scholars only recently. This paper contributes to filling-in the aforementioned gap by examining the plight of indigenous women in the Philippines in light of bell hooks' postfeminism. I shall show that while women throughout Philippine history have experienced oppression and discrimination, those who are at – what bell hooks calls – the “margins” experienced greater degrees of oppression and discrimination than those who are at the “center”. In the contemporary era, indigenous Filipina women are at the margins. These women experience multiple layers or intersections of oppression and discrimination not only based on gender and sex. Fortunately, efforts from various sectors of Philippine society that address multiple layers or intersections of oppression and discrimination that women experience, in general, abound. What is needed today, however, is to channel these efforts to address the plight of marginalized indigenous women in the country.

Aside from the lacuna in feminist analysis of the plight of indigenous women,¹ there are other reasons why this paper aims to focus on indigenous women in the Philippines. First, in response to the call for further studies on indigenous knowledge/wisdom and experiences amid the dangers of globalization and the homogenization of culture, our discussion hopefully may contribute to such noble task. Second, if indeed it is true that most cultures are rooted in the indigenous peoples' culture, then I find it appropriate for feminism, specifically in the Philippines, to turn its senses to the situation of indigenous women. Considering too that feminism today – especially

¹ A number of feminist writings/discourse in the Philippines already dealt with the women in urban or developed areas (including those in metropolitan cities and commercialized provinces), it is now an opportune time to look into the more marginalized and multiply burdened sector of our society. These are the women who experience various struggles in terms of being a woman, a Filipino, a less privileged, an indigenous, among others.

the postfeminist strand – turns to culture as its object of analysis. If statistics reflect reality, it is an urgent endeavor to delve into indigenous research taking into consideration that they comprise 14% of the whole Philippine population (an estimated 12 million of 100 million Filipinos) and that there are more or less 110 indigenous groups; otherwise we would be neglecting a big portion of our Filipino identity.² Third, it is interesting to note that a number of the definitions of “indigenous peoples” emphasize its difference and separation from mainstream dominant societies. Such characteristics, therefore, make it very appropriate and congruent to the insights advocated by hooks – as we shall see later.

Meanwhile, choosing bell hooks’ postfeminism as the framework for this paper also needs some justification. hooks, after all, is more concerned with the experiences of black women and not so much the experiences of indigenous women. My justification is mainly rooted in the similarities or congruence of black and indigenous women’s experiences. I argue that if there is a similarity between these two experiences, then there is good reason to use the insights and thoughts that can be gathered from the (“hooksian” postfeminist) analysis of one experience in analyzing another similar experience. To illustrate, hooks, as we shall see later, demonstrates that black women are multiply burdened, meaning they experience multiple layers of oppression and discrimination. Accordingly, hooks proposes an intersectional feminist approach – one that unpacks layers of (and entangles intersections of) oppression and discrimination based on gender, race, and class. Indigenous women in the Philippines also experience multiple layers of oppression and discrimination. As such, it would be interesting to see how an intersectional feminist approach could help unpack said layers of oppression and discrimination experienced by indigenous women in the country. hooks’ *margin-center* analysis is also helpful here. hooks contends that Black women are marginalized in society and academic discourse. Feminism, according to hooks, should strive to bring black women from the margins to the center. The same is true, I argue, with indigenous women. They are at the margins of society and are often neglected by those at the center. Hooks’ insights may help provide a framework for

² Hazel Biana, Melvin Jabar, Homer Yabut, and Crisanto Regadio, *Teaching Philippine Indigenous Cultures: Modules for Higher Education Institutions* (Manila: DLSU Social Development Research Center, 2016), 4.

policies and efforts to bring indigenous women to the center. Finally, being overlooked by feminist scholars, which is also something that both black women and indigenous women share. As such, hooks pointing out this oversight may inform (even challenge) feminist scholars in the country to turn more attention to indigenous women.³

This paper shall be divided into two main parts. The first part shall delve into the postfeminist ideas of bell hooks, focusing on her work entitled *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. It will consist of subsections dealing with the rationale/motivations behind her work, the white privileged feminism, misconceptions and significance of feminism, and gender-race-class intersectionality. The second part shall deal with my examination of the plight of Filipino indigenous women in the light of hooks' insights. It will consist of defining "indigenous people",⁴ identifying women in the margins and at the center throughout history, the situation of the indigenous women, and the attempts to address such situation or problem.⁵

³ It is noteworthy to mention that an attempt to connect bell hooks' postfeminism, especially her intersectional approach, with the experience of indigenous women is not totally novel. Recently, Adus Palalavi found in bell hooks' postfeminism a framework that articulates and makes her personal experience as a Bunun indigenous woman more meaningful. See Adus Palalavi, "Observations of knowledge and landscape from the margins: An indigenous Bunun woman-centered perspective," in *Women, Gender, and Families of Color* (13 January 2023), <<https://womensgenderandfamilies.ku.edu/online-essays-honoring-bell-hooks-legacy/1247/>>.

⁴ The definition of "indigenous people" will be brought to the fore only to point out a feature that indigenous people share with black people (specifically black women). This paper argues that such shared feature can be a reason for conducting a postfeminist analysis of the hooksian strand, so to speak, of indigenous women. There is no intention of separating "indigenous women" from "indigenous people." Indigenous women being a part of (or a subset) of indigenous people remains. There is also no intention of separating "indigenous women" from "Filipino women." Indigenous women being a part of (or a subset) of Filipino women also remains. The author wishes to thank the reviewer for pointing this out. What has to be noted, however, is that despite indigenous women being a part of Filipino women, indigenous women are still being marginalized and neglected by those at the center of society.

⁵ It is an additional hope of this paper that the discussion and insights that will arise would somehow show the applicability of hooks' claims in various contexts, in our case the Philippines. In turn, encourage Filipino scholars to explore the ideas of bell hooks further. In the Philippines, only Hazel Biana does extensive studies on bell hooks. Recently, her efforts are focused on systematizing the ideas of bell hooks to render bell hooks' feminism as a robust framework. See Hazel Biana, "Extending bell hooks' Feminist Theory," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 21 (2020); Hazel

The Postfeminism of bell hooks

Background, Motivations, Rationale

The postfeminist thinker bell hooks argues that the feminist movement that she advocates is not one that only fights for the equal social rights of women with men, one that does not simply assert the so-called uniqueness and individuality of women; but one which is a struggle for social justice.⁶ Feminism should be a movement that transforms society as a whole. Such assertion is motivated by her observation that the contemporary feminist literature/discourse was written as if there is already a definite set of principles and beliefs that could serve as the foundation of feminism. According to hooks, there were no such foundations. In addition, she observed that those written works were dominated by white middle-class or upper-class privileged women who may have taken for granted a larger group of women who also have their respective experiences and struggles. There are diverse groups of women, hooks claims, who do not only experience discrimination, oppression, and exploitation in relation to gender but also include that of her race and class. With this in mind, hooks was determined to pursue a kind of feminism that not only sees the complexity of a woman's life in relation to her gender; but also her race and class. Such an approach will now examine the *intersectionality of gender, race, and class*. This intersectionality is the rationale behind her feminism which sees the need for a theory that understands the non-hierarchical but equal relationships of the three. She hopes that by looking into gender-race-class, a sound foundation

Biana, "The Philosophical Heritage of bell hooks' Radical Feminism and Cultural Criticism," in *Scientia: The International Journal on the Liberal Arts*, 9 (2020); Hazel Biana, "Organizing bell hooks' Frameworks for Interrogating Representations," *Plaridel: Journal of Communication, Media, and Society* 19 (2022); Hazel Biana, "bell hooks and Online Feminism," *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 25 (2023). On one hand, this paper follows the lead of Biana by continuing the exploration of bell hooks' ideas and organizing them. On the other hand, this paper departs from Biana by actually applying and testing the ideas of bell hooks in particular Philippine contexts, in this case, the indigenous women.

⁶ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (New York: Routledge, 2015), xi.

for a mass-based feminist movement could emerge that can address a wide range of feminist concerns.⁷

In relation to the earlier observation of hooks wherein white women dominate the feminist discourse and movement, she situates such observation in the current set-up of her society.⁸ According to her, in society, some are at the *center* and the *margins*. Those at the center have economic, political, and socio-cultural privileges, while those at the margins are most deprived of such privileges. Those at the margin developed a different way of seeing reality. They approach reality considering themselves in the margin and those at the center. In survival, they have to consider if their decisions and actions may harm the center and the margin. They are double burdened by being pressured to be cautious and considerate of those privileged. On the other hand, those at the center do not have to worry if their decisions and actions affect those in the margins. They have the power to determine both their realities and the realities of the margins. Now, applying this dichotomy to the feminist discourse, hooks argues that the feminist movement and literature emerged from those who are at the center, from those women who have privileges while neglecting those who are in the margins; hence, according to her, such theorizing lacks wholeness and broadness in analysis.⁹

A Closer Look into the White Privileged Feminism

bell hooks commences her in-depth analysis of the contemporary feminist discourse with Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*.¹⁰ According to her, this work is widely acclaimed to have paved the way for the contemporary feminist movement. But despite such reputation, hooks argues that the book only dealt with the plight of college-educated, middle or upper-class married white women. Friedan's work ignored those women whose primary concern is not to find an escape to a routinary lifestyle; but struggling to survive economically, as well as fighting ethnic and racial discrimination.¹¹ These are the nonwhite and the poor white women who are engaged

⁷ *Ibid.*, xiv.

⁸ *Ibid.*, xvii.

⁹ *Ibid.*, xviii.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

in work such as being a maid, a babysitter, a factory worker, a clerk, and a prostitute, among others. Friedan committed hasty generalizations that her experiences as a white privileged woman apply to all women as well, hence, confining her horizons only to her limited privileged experiences.

On the more academic side, hooks notes that these white privileged women believe in themselves that they are providing “the” analysis and “the” program for the so-called liberation of women to the nonwhite women.¹² In a sense, they intend to impose their frameworks of understanding and analysis on the unique experiences of black women, experiences that are lived and not simply reducible to mere theories. In relation to this, hooks explicitly goes against the practice of white privileged women of making black women as simply objects and materials for the publication of books and research on “unlearning racism.”¹³ According to her, such endeavors are only a cover-up for the reality that white privileged women see the feminist movement as theirs and theirs alone.¹⁴ They do not see them as equals but as “providers of first-hand accounts.”

On Feminism: Definitions, Misconceptions, and Significance

Although feminism is generally equated with the struggle to attain the woman’s right to freedom and self-determination, according to hooks, such liberally inclined definition is apolitical in tone. It does not suggest something that will push one into action that will address a much larger problem.¹⁵ It equates feminism with “living in a counter-cultural, women-centered world.”¹⁶ This definition may shut women into a solipsistic and isolated life world devoid of meaningful yet challenging relationships. It is in this regard that hooks claims that the kind of feminism that she advocates is a struggle to end sexist, racist, and classist oppression. It is a feminism that does not simply focus on women as autonomous beings as well as attaining equal opportunity with men; but one that leaves behind apolitical stances and penetrates

¹² *Ibid.*, 11.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

the deeper aspects of women's political reality.¹⁷ Feminism, according to her, should not only benefit a specific group of women. It should not only benefit women but both men and women. It is not a ready-made lifestyle but one that transforms lifestyles into a meaningful and transformative one that can address various issues confronting gender, race, and class.¹⁸ The significance of feminism, therefore, is to end war between the sexes and to transform relationships into one that is characterized by intimacy, mutuality, and camaraderie.¹⁹

On Sexism, Racism, and Classism

After establishing her major observations and frustrations on the feminism of her time, bell hooks now delves into the very issues of gender, race, and class. According to her, sexism between men and women is common, but sexism between women is not so often dealt with in the discourse. Suspicious, defensive, and competitive behaviors together with feelings of contempt and superiority to other women, and women-hating are just some forms of sexism.²⁰ The feminist movement, according to hooks, have not transformed such relationships into better and healthier ones.²¹ On the issue of racism, bell hooks claims that what makes it difficult for both white women and black women to reconcile with each other is that the former does not acknowledge at all that they are participants of racist discrimination, exploitation, and oppression of multi-ethnic women. Black women's experience with white privileged women is much worse than with racist white men.²² When it comes to classism, bell hooks noticed that the careerism and affirmative action programs of the white privileged women did not change the situation of the masses of women.²³ Many women remained poor and continuously experienced class oppression. hooks even added that nonwhite poor women experience layers of pain and dehumanization.²⁴ On one level, one is oppressed because one is a woman. On another level, one

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

²² *Ibid.*, 51.

²³ *Ibid.*, 61.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

suffers because one is poor. One may even be ill, homeless, and starving. And on another level, one is exploited because one is black, for instance. All of these overlapping complexities, hooks notes, were not addressed by the contemporary feminist movement.

A Postfeminist Examination of Indigenous Women in the Philippines

The "Indigenous Peoples"

There is no one unified definition of what "indigenous peoples" (IPs) mean. There are various attempts to make a clear definition from various organizations such as the Asian Development Bank, International Labor Organization, United Nations, and World Health Organization, as well as by various scholars. However, since a single clear and distinct definition is not possible, for our purposes we shall adopt the synthesis of the definitions made in *Teaching Philippine Indigenous Cultures*. According to such synthesis, the following elements are consistent in the various attempts at a definition: (1) self-identification, (2) ancestral roots and descent, (3) historical continuity of way of life, (4) ancestral language sustained, (5) ancestral land claim, (6) distinct way of life and non-dominance, (7) aspirations of self-preservation and self-determination.²⁵

Given such synthesis, one can notice that a very important element for indigenous people is having a distinct way of living characterized by self-preservation and self-determination that makes them different from the more dominant and mainstream portions of society. If one looks closely, bell hooks herself is a member of such a society. Although black men and women in general are not collectively labeled as indigenous, their distinct and different mode of thinking and living in contrast to the white privileged people makes the blacks appropriate for such characteristics. This congruence in characteristics between the indigenous peoples and the black people, makes an examination of the plight of the former specifically on women interesting. One may ask: in what ways are they similar especially in how hooks made the "margins" and the "center" of society explicit? But before such examination can be done, we have to

²⁵ Biana, Jabar, Yabut, and Regadio, *Teaching Philippine Indigenous Cultures*, 18-19.

address a concern regarding which indigenous people we are referring to: are we referring to the contemporary indigenous people or those of other historical periods? Many people have this misconception that when we say "indigenous people," these are the people who only lived before the Philippines was colonized; but as we have established earlier, as long as a group of people embodies the aforementioned elements, they can be considered as indigenous people; hence there is a need for some taxonomy or periodization.²⁶

Women throughout Philippine History: The "Margins" and the "Center"

To aid us in an attempt at taxonomy or periodization, let us adopt Zeus Salazar's taxonomy in his distinction of the *babaylan ng elite* and the *babaylan ng tunay na Pilipino*.²⁷ According to Salazar, in each period of Philippine history, there are what we call *babaylans*. They are *babaylan* not in the ceremonial sense, rather they are Filipinas who can stand on their own and embody the characteristics of an empowered self-sustaining traditional *babaylan*.²⁸ In short, his

²⁶ Note that the taxonomy/periodization is by no means exhaustive and comprehensive. The taxonomy/periodization is mainly to demonstrate hooks' *margin-center analysis* in the Philippine context.

²⁷ Zeus Salazar, "Ang Babaylan sa Kasaysayan ng Pilipinas," in *Kababaihan sa Kalinangan at Kasaysayang Pilipino*, eds., Mary Dorothy Jose and Atoy Navarro (Quezon City: C&E Publishing, 2010), 24-29.

²⁸ Although the *babaylan* being referred to here is the woman *babaylan*, it is important to note that there are also *babaylans* who are not women such as queer *babaylans*. Pagulayan notes that "While the *babaylan* was typically a woman – well-respected in her community for her ability to bridge material and spiritual worlds – historical accounts showed that there were also male *babaylan* who crossed genders, making them symbolic icons for the Philippine LGBTQIA+ movement today." See Cheng Pagulayan, "How the queer history of the Philippines inspires our struggle today," in *OXFAM* (21 June 2022), <<https://views-voices.oxfam.org.uk/2022/06/how-the-queer-history-of-the-philippines-inspires-our-struggle-today/>>. Historian Ambeth Ocampo also writes, "If we look back at 16th-century friar accounts of the Philippines and Filipinos, you will find references to the *babaylan*, an indigenous (or, as Kidlat Tahimik says, "Indio Genius") religious leader who provided healing and divination to a community. The *babaylan* was often a woman, but there were male *babaylan*, too." See Ambeth Ocampo, "Bringing LGBT out of the closet of history," in *INQUIRER.NET* (13 April 2016), <<https://opinion.inquirer.net/94272/bringing-lgbt-closet-history>>. The author would like to thank the reviewer for pointing out that *babaylans* are not limited to women only.

use of *babaylan* in his taxonomy simply referred to empowered Filipinas. However, he noticed that there are Filipino women in each period of history who were influenced and engulfed by a classist or even a patriarchal way of thinking. These he termed as the *babaylan ng elite*. On the other hand, there are those Filipinas who did not veer away from noble Filipina characteristics of the traditional *babaylan* who, despite being empowered and self-determined, remained true to the spirit of the Filipino identity and culture. Despite being professionals, for example, in this day and age, their way of thinking and living was not compromised by foreign or colonial mentality. I shall not expound further on his taxonomy. Nevertheless, we shall adopt his taxonomy in identifying which women were at the margins and which were at the center in each period of history: pre-colonial, colonial, and contemporary. In a way, we will expound what Salazar has started by inserting hooks' distinction.

During the pre-colonial era, some women may be considered to be at the center, meaning they played significant roles in society that specifically influenced the religious, political, and cultural aspects. One of the most obvious examples is the *babaylans*. Salazar considers them as the central personality in pre-colonial society, especially in the fields of culture, religion, medicine, and all practical and theoretical knowledge.²⁹ She is a proto-scientist. She initiates rituals. She determines when is the right time to plant and harvest with the help of her knowledge of indigenous astronomy. This, in turn, will determine the economic activities of the people. The myths and legends of the people are also protected and enhanced by her. She safeguards all their literature and arts. Healing is also attributed to her, for she has the power and expertise in medicine. Lastly, she shall transfer to the next generation the heritage and treasures of her group. When it comes to politics, Mananzan identifies specific women who have established themselves as leaders during their time.³⁰ Queen Maniwantian and Queen Sima of Mindanao prove that women have decisive societal roles. The prominent Princess Urduja of Pangasinan had an army of women who could fight in battles.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 12-14.

³⁰ Sr. Mary John Mananzan, *Challenges to the Inner Room: Selected Essays and Speeches on Women* (Manila: The Institute of Women's Studies, 1998), 154-155.

However, despite the prominence of women in various aspects and the egalitarian nature of society during that time,³¹ there were still often forgotten and neglected groups of women, those in the margins. They are the women (of course there are also men) who are the *alipins* or the slaves of higher-ranking people in society.³² An *alipin* can either be *namamahay* or *sagigilid*. The former has his or her properties and serves his or her master only when called, while the latter has no properties at all and is totally under the master. One can just imagine the burden of a female *alipin sagigilid*. On the aspect of marriage, there are cultures wherein women have more burdens in divorce than men, especially women who were forced to marry.³³ She has to prove more things than men to avail it. In marital infidelity, she has more punishment than men. Being a widow has more restrictions than being a widower. Hence, one can see the disparity between women at the center and women at the margins among our indigenous people even before the so-called peak of the patriarchal thinking brought about by the arrival of the Spaniards.

When the Spaniards arrived in the country, the Iberian culture and philosophy were still so much ingrained in their minds.³⁴ When it comes to their views on women, they are still heavily influenced by what Saints Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Ambrose, and the like have written about women being incomplete, tempting, animalistic, etc. These views were likewise imposed on Filipino indigenous women, hence, the beginning of numerous restrictions for women. Unfortunately, some women were indoctrinated to accept such restrictions and were made to believe that embodying them is virtuous. These are the women who became the center during this period. These are the middle-class women, who benefitted from abiding and massaging the ego of male Spanish colonizers. Foremost of them is the character of Maria Clara, the obedient, meek, selfless lover whom Mananzan considers the greatest misfortune for

³¹ *Ibid.*, 149-153.

³² Teodoro Agoncillo, *History of the Filipino People* (Quezon City: Garotech Publishing, 1990), 36.

³³ Teresita Infante, "The Woman in Early Philippines and among the Cultural Minorities Re-visited," in *Herstories: A Global Movement - Proceedings of the International Congress on Women's Role in History and Nation Building* (Manila: National Centennial Commission, 1998), 143.

³⁴ Mananzan, *Challenges to the Inner Room*, 159-162.

Filipinas.³⁵ To abide by her ways is to usher the demise of what truly is a woman. Maria Clara's characteristics are also embodied by women who highly regard themselves as they enter convents and *beaterios* (schools for girls). They are made to think that by ascending to the heights of Church hierarchy and the academia, they become powerful and superior to lower-class women. Not knowing that they are only being used as instruments for propagating religion and hegemony of power.³⁶ Salazar specifically mentioned those *donyas* and *senyoritas* of the home and *manangs* of the Church who at first sight seemed to hold power over institutions, but are the ones victimized by their ignorant servitude to the Church and political activities.³⁷

What is worse is the situation of those women at the margins during this time. The peasant women had to deal with feudal oppression brought about by the landlords.³⁸ Daughters were made objects of debt in some instances. The character of Sisa embodies this burdened woman who, aside from being colonized, is also oppressed due to poverty. In our words, she is described as "*binaliw ng kahirapan*". Despite their situation, both Salazar³⁹ and Mananzan⁴⁰ agree that it is from these groups of women that rebellions and resistance against the colonizers began. They are the true embodiment of the feminist resistance struggle. The likes of Gabriela Silang, Gregoria de Jesus, Maria Dizon, the peasant women of Kalamba, and the young women of Malolos are whom bell hooks would admire for resisting class, race, and gender oppression imposed on them. They were not like the middle-class reformist women who only called for reforms from the Spaniards, which at the end of the day, would only benefit their circle.

From the above discussion we are now seeing the complexity of the situation of women. On the one hand, some indigenous women remained uncolonized by the Spaniards but had in their societies a dichotomy of margin and center. On the other hand, while such an

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 166-167.

³⁶ Juliet de Lima, "A Historical Approach to Women's Emancipation in the Philippines," in *Selected Readings about the Women's Movement in the Philippines* (Quezon City: Center for Women's Resources, 1998), 28.

³⁷ Salazar, "Ang Babaylan sa Kasaysayan ng Pilipinas," 18-20.

³⁸ Infante, "The Woman in Early Philippines and among the Cultural Minorities Re-visited," 28.

³⁹ Salazar, "Ang Babaylan sa Kasaysayan ng Pilipinas," 19-20.

⁴⁰ Mananzan, *Challenges to the Inner Room*, 168-169.

internal dichotomy exists, there is a further external dichotomy between indigenous women and colonized women which, in turn, has its internal dichotomies of margin and center. All are happening simultaneously. Upon the arrival of the imperialist Americans, things became more complex. Juliet de Lima argues that "the overwhelming majority of Filipino women, therefore, suffer three layers of oppression: U.S. imperialist domination or national oppression; comprador-landlord class oppression and exploitation; and male domination that is a shared fate with women of the exploiting classes."⁴¹ These are the women in the margins during that time. Here we can clearly and distinctly see the intersectionality of gender, race, and class. This can be seen further in Juliet de Lima's arguing about the intersectionality of the three:

Because the subjection of women is an outgrowth of foreign and feudal domination, the struggle for women's rights is interconnected with the struggle for national freedom and democracy. Women liberate themselves from oppression and rise to a level of equality with men, by participating actively in the struggle to overthrow foreign and feudal domination. Through their participation they develop the distinct strength and ability to undo the most deeply rooted prejudices against women, not only among the men but also among their own ranks. It is in the struggle that the women acquire a sense of their own power and develop their potential.⁴²

As we usher into the contemporary period, Filipina feminists made such intersectionality the main framework for their analysis. This time it is now really obvious who are at the center and who are in the margin. Nolasco treats former first lady Imelda Marcos as the epitome of what bell hooks refers to as the white supremacist

⁴¹ de Lima, "A Historical Approach to Women's Emancipation in the Philippines," 30-34.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 33-34.

privileged woman.⁴³ The First Lady embodies a woman who sees herself as genuinely empowered and that all Filipino women should see her as an example to emulate. The former first lady, however, Nolasco argues, is ignorant that not all women have the capability and the willingness at all to be like her. Nolasco continues that the First Lady and most of her fellow elite women are the stumbling blocks in addressing issues on race, gender, and class confronting the Filipina in our time.

Nolasco further identifies the oppression experienced by women. In terms of gender, there are still provisions in certain laws that would compromise the rights of women especially those on conjugal property, legal separation, and labor, among others.⁴⁴ Culturally, there are still women who are treated as sex objects and people who still believe that women should be confined at home doing childbearing, childrearing, and housekeeping.⁴⁵ In the professions, there are still workplaces that hinder women from their promotion and use the “lay-down or lay-off” system. A woman must sleep with her male boss to retain her job; otherwise, one is fired.⁴⁶ When it comes to class, women workers and peasants are still struggling against their landlords and the capitalist classes.⁴⁷ Multinational corporations take advantage of women who are desperate for employment.⁴⁸ Lastly, when it comes to nationality, as women from a developing country, interactions with foreign people, especially by overseas women, tend to be problematic due to racial discrimination.⁴⁹

One can notice in Nolasco’s discussion above that she focused on women who are at the center, those who have in one sense the advantage of being in the urban areas and metropolitan cities, whose conditions, safe to say, are better than those in the rural, non-commercialized, non-industrialized portions of the country – those in the margins. And one of the neglected sectors is the indigenous people,

⁴³ Cynthia Nolasco, “The Woman Problem: Gender, Class & State Oppression,” in *Essays on Women*, ed. by Sr. Mary John Mananzan (Manila: St. Scholastica’s College, 1987), 77.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 82-83.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 85.

specifically indigenous women. What is their situation now? Lucman claims that Filipino indigenous women are “multi-burdened”; specifically, they are faced with the following issues:

- a. Loss of control over and access to ancestral land...
- b. Environmental degradation...
- c. Women's multiple burden and the seemingly feminization of poverty, i.e., despite being “multi-burdened” in the home and in the family, the women still engage in multiple jobs to augment the family income;
- d. Inadequate infrastructure facilities and poor delivery of basic services...
- e. Lack of access to resources and benefits – Most indigenous social structures are manned by men. Due to their longer working hours, women have less time to attend meetings and activities on development.⁵⁰

A concrete example, to illustrate some problems mentioned above, is the case of Cordillera women. In the 1970's Cordillera women actively participated in resistance activities against capitalist incursion, government-imposed development, and militarization.⁵¹ Women and children are paid less than men in vegetable industries. Women are sexually harassed, deprived of the security of tenure and good working conditions, as well as prevented from forming unions in the Export Processing Zone in Baguio.⁵² With the onset of militarization during that time, indigenous women were raped and sexually harassed by soldiers.⁵³ Fiagoy describes indigenous women as “victims of development” due to forced government developmental projects of extracting natural resources at the expense of the well-

⁵⁰ Bai Omera Lucman, “Women in Indigenous Communities,” in *Herstories: A Global Movement – Proceedings of the International Congress on Women's Role in History and Nation Building* (Manila: National Centennial Commission, 1999), 722.

⁵¹ Carol Gamiao, “Women in the Cordilleras,” in *She Said No! Human Rights, Women's Identities, and Struggles*, eds. Liberato Bautista and Elizabeth Rifarael (Quezon City: National Council of Churches in the Philippines, 1990), 54.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 56.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 58.

being of indigenous inhabitants.⁵⁴ Women have to struggle for their human rights amid forced evacuations, detention, torture, and extra-judicial executions.⁵⁵ In relation to the “feminization of poverty,” some indigenous women in the Cordilleras even resorted to marijuana businesses to provide the basic needs of their families. Balmaceda-Gutierrez in her article entitled “Marijuana Mothers” shares some stories of Cordillera women who were imprisoned in Manila because of multiple cases of production and distribution of marijuana in the Cordillera region.⁵⁶ One of their reasons is that the vegetable industry is not enough to provide for their needs. Another reason is a broken marriage, which affects the family’s financial status. Yet another reason is the displacement of people and loss of jobs due to the prevalence of mining corporations in the area. What is worse is that being imprisoned in Manila as an indigenous woman makes one more vulnerable to various factors that are foreign to oneself. Note that all of these women were not users of marijuana. They were just doing it for financial reasons.

In more recent years, the oppression that indigenous women experience come in the form of attacks against indigenous women human rights defenders and indigenous women organizations.⁵⁷ While there is an ongoing struggle to defend human rights from attacks by the State at a national level, the indigenous people especially indigenous women are also active in defending human rights. But whereas those at the national level can defend themselves better, indigenous women’s rights activists are more vulnerable to attacks. These attacks come in the form of arrests, forced or faked surrenders, and anti-human rights policies. For instance, Renalyn Tejero, a

⁵⁴ Geraldine Fiagoy, “Indigenous Women Struggle for Human Rights in the Cordilleras,” in *She Said No! Human Rights, Women’s Identities, and Struggles*, eds. Liberato Bautista and Elizabeth Rifarael (Quezon City: National Council of Churches in the Philippines, 1990), 159.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁵⁶ Chit Balmaceda-Gutierrez, “Marijuana Mothers,” in *Her Stories: Investigative Reports on Filipino Women in the 1990s*, ed. by Cecile Balgos (Quezon City: Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, 1999), 105-109.

⁵⁷ Abigail Bengwayan-Anongos, “Region and Country Reports: Philippines,” in *The Indigenous World 2022*, ed. by Dwayne Mamo (Copenhagen: The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2022), 281.

Prince Turtogo, “Indigenous women and their stories: The Cariño family,” in *Rappler* (22 April 2023), <<https://www.rappler.com/nation/luzon/philippines-indigenous-women-stories-carino-family/>>.

Manobo women's rights defender was arrested for allegedly supporting the New People's Army communist rebels.⁵⁸ However, what she was actually doing was nothing related to rebellion. She is actually a paralegal for *Karapatan*, "an alliance of individuals, groups and organizations working for the promotion and protection of human rights in the Philippines."⁵⁹ At the same time, she is a student of the *Alternative Learning Center for Agricultural and Livelihood Development* (ALCADEV), a Lumad school in Surigao del Sur which is also under constant attack by the State for the similar reason that it is falsely accused as being a breeding ground for communist rebels. Meanwhile, some resolutions, such as those promulgated by the Regional Law Enforcement Coordinating Committee in Cordillera, violated human rights by forcing indigenous women activists to explain themselves to the police.⁶⁰ These indigenous women include Aisah Mariano, Sarah Dekdeken, and Beatrice Belen. On top of the oppression they experienced, these arrested women were often in a vulnerable situation especially in provincial jails where male and female detainees are not separated from one another. In addition, the repercussions of these arrests spill over to their families and communities. Bengwayan-Anongos notes that "Many indigenous women are not only breadwinners alongside their husbands but also perform a major role in the education of their children and in community leadership. Their absence from the community due to State VAW [Violence Against Women] thus deprives not only their families but also their organizations and the communities they serve."⁶¹ Indigenous women such as Marivic Aguirre and Aileen Catamin who serve as barangay captains and barangay counselors in the community, respectively, are some examples.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic provided an additional layer of burden for indigenous women in terms of access to (maternal) healthcare and access to correct information about COVID-19.⁶² Before the pandemic, access to adequate and quality healthcare had always

⁵⁸ Bengwayan-Anongos, "Region and Country Reports: Philippines," 283.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 284.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 285.

⁶² *Ibid.* Mary Mijares, "Indigenous women in the Philippines fight for their rights," in *The Organization for World Peace* (25 August 2021), <<https://theowp.org/indigenous-women-in-the-philippines-fight-for-their-rights/>>.

been a problem. Add to that are health policies that are burdensome for women. Of particular interest is the government's ban on home-birthing practices. The government required women to give birth at health centers and hospitals and penalized those who would still avail of traditional birthing practices. While there is good reason for said policy (such as safer and sanitary birthing procedures), many indigenous women found it impractical and culturally inappropriate.⁶³ Giving birth in hospitals and health centers can be more expensive. Traditional rituals related to birth are also suppressed. All these became more difficult during the COVID-19 pandemic. The government did not lift the ban. Indigenous women were forced to go to hospitals and health centers with greater difficulty because of restrictions related to lockdowns and mobility. Add to that are the anxiety and stress experienced by these women because of fear of acquiring COVID-19 on the way to and from hospitals.⁶⁴ Finally, when the pandemic forced people to migrate face-to-face communications and activities to the online set-up, many indigenous women who were active in various organizations could not participate in their regular activities. The reason is that these indigenous women do not have digital devices and are not able to navigate through online platforms.⁶⁵ Indeed, the indigenous women in the Philippines experience intersections and layers of oppression and marginalization.

The Ideals of bell hooks and Addressing the Problems of Indigenous Women

Now that we have unraveled a number of the problems confronting indigenous Filipina women today, let us examine some ways in which they were addressed vis-a-vis bell hooks' ideals. I shall divide our discussion into three areas: first, are the various ways in which the gender, race, and class issues were addressed by Filipino women and for Filipino women in general; second, some action research done to address indigenous women's problems; and third, present-day resistance efforts that have been accomplished and are still being accomplished by the indigenous women themselves.

⁶³ Bengwayan-Anongos, "Region and Country Reports: Philippines," 285.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 286.

If we look closely into the various ways women in the country addressed the concerns of their fellow women, it did not veer away from the postfeminism of hooks. Their solutions from the very start considered the intersectionality of gender, race, and class. Perhaps, it owes to the fact that our country being a developing one is always intertwined with issues pertaining to race and class. We never had the opportunity (although there are still some who belong to the elite) to benefit from class privileges in as much as the white people during hooks' time did. Also, a supremacist ideology is not innate in the way Filipinos think about themselves, again since we were colonized for centuries. Nevertheless, Juliet de Lima sees the importance of middle-class women's role in the alleviation of the problems brought about by gender, race, and, class in our country:

Women from the middle classes constitute some nine percent of total women population but they are a very significant part of the national democratic movement and the women's liberation movement. They are highly literate and articulate and they have played a very important role in setting up a nationwide network of women's organizations. They have linked themselves with the women who belong to the tolling masses to add their strength to them.⁶⁶

Precisely, this is what hooks aims at. Women from various backgrounds can come in solidarity and cooperation to work against forms of oppression. And fortunately, there are many Filipinas who have done their part. Foremost of which is the *Gabriela* movement whose founding principle is "the understanding of itself as an essential aspect of societal transformation, not a separate, isolated woman-against-man struggle. There can be no total human liberation without women's liberation because then half of society would still be oppressed."⁶⁷ We can see hooks' goal being achieved here, that feminism is not a battle against men, but a movement that aims to transform society. Further, if one looks at the time frame when hooks wrote her book in 1985 and the time when St. Scholastica's College in

⁶⁶ de Lima, "A Historical Approach to Women's Emancipation in the Philippines," 37.

⁶⁷ Mananzan, *Challenges to the Inner Room*, 189-190.

collaboration with *Gabriela* started introducing women's studies in 1985-1986, the goal of the latter which is to contextualize women's issues in the light of economic, political, and socio-cultural conditions⁶⁸ coincides very well with what the former is asserting. bell hooks would surely agree with the historico-critical and analytical skills⁶⁹ that these institutions want to develop in women. The training programs of the *Institute of Women's Studies Foundation* for grassroots women which includes factory workers, peasant women, and those living in slum areas aim to connect the personal experiences of those women to the wider problems of Philippine society echo hooks' call to unravel the experiences of those in the margins and to make women in the middle-class status realize that their experiences alone are not enough to understand the broader problem of women's situation.

Another similar organization is the *Katipunan ng Kababaihan* which involves the "collective process of Filipino women purposefully coming together in a movement for a change...reclaiming our heritage, re-reading history, analyzing and re-interpreting our reality and generating deeper bonds for transformation as a distinctive way of living-out the challenges of feminism."⁷⁰ This inward-looking approach to form a more genuine foundation and bond between women parallels hooks' aim of making feminism more reflective and more grounded on how they see each other in the movement and not just on the shallow level of "shared victimization." It is because the "*Katipunan* no longer means simply coming together. It is that and much more. Through this collectivity, we continue the revolutionary tradition which resisted all forms of...aggression and oppression and neo-colonization...in sisterhood...and...in active partnership with our Filipino brothers, for the strengthening of our nation."⁷¹

On the other hand, in Mindanao, there also various organizations that collaborate to actualize the aims of the *United Nations Development Fund for Women-Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (UNIFEM-CEDAW) working on the premise that Yasmin Busran-Lao of the *Al-Mujadilah*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁷⁰ Sr. Mary Rosario Battung, "Spinning and Weaving Herstory: Reclaiming our Indigenous, Katipunan, Filipino Spirituality," in *Herstories: A Global Movement - Proceedings of the International Congress on Women's Role in History and Nation Building* (Manila: National Centennial Commission, 1998), 88.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

Development Foundation said: "Muslim Moro women...face multi-layered sources of discrimination including but not limited to their gender, ethnicity, and religion."⁷² This once again affirms hooks' assertion of the multi-layered burdens that marginalized women experience, but this time it extends to ethnicity and religion. Further, one of the Moro women even echoed once again the importance of discourse among Muslim women themselves in saying "we Muslims should not shy away from CEDAW...as it also speaks to us as women. We as Muslims, should bring in our perspectives to the discourse of women's rights and not just leave it to Western, middle class or first-world women."⁷³ Again, we are encountering hooks' emphasis that the real understanding of one's situation as a marginalized woman must come from inside and not the ones imposed by frameworks of women who may not fully grasp what it is to be in one's place.

Now when it comes to research, there are already numerous ethnographic studies done on various facets of indigenous life including women, in this portion I shall focus on only two, just to emphasize some points. One of those researches is Casambre, Enkiwe, Florendo, and Florendo's "Indigenous Women and Health: Reflections on Participatory Feminist Methodologies." The *Cordillera Women's Education and Resource Center* (CWERC) remarkably realized that for their endeavor to succeed, they must make men realize that by making women conscious and organized, they are not making women enemies of men or teaching them to fight and dominate men.⁷⁴ This underlines hooks' point that feminist endeavors must not perpetuate further the so-called "battle between the sexes" but aim for harmonious co-existence.

Another research is that of Narciso-Apuan's "Intensifying the Gender Discourse among the Aytas of Floridablanca, Pampanga." She has several notable insights in the process of her research. First, she realized that immediately jumping into gender issues would make the

⁷² United Nations Development Fund for Women, *Going CEDAW in the Philippines: The UNIFEM Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women South East Asia Programme 2005-2008* (Bangkok: UNIFEM CEDAW, 2009), 75.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁷⁴ Athena Lydia Casambre, Leah Enkiwe, Ma. Nancy Florendo, and Maria Nela Florendo, "Indigenous Women and Health: Reflections on Participatory Feminist Methodologies," in *Feminist Research Experiences: A Casebook*, ed. by Sylvia Guerrero (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1997), 37.

process more difficult. She has to confront various problems regarding ethnicity for there are lowland men and women who refuse to acknowledge the Aytas. For instance, some refuse to give a ride on public transportation and raise eyebrows at Aytas. Once again, we are seeing the factor of ethnicity and race coming in. Second, she realized how important it is for women researchers to truly realize in themselves that indigenous women are not simply objects or materials for research. They are human beings. One of the Aytas said to her, "*Alam mo, ikaw lang ang kauna-unahang unat na tumingin sa amin nang mata sa mata. Yung iba diyen, ayun dumadalaw, nakikitawa, pero ang mata ay nakapako sa itaas ng ulo namin.*"⁷⁵ Narciso-Apuan herself experienced what hooks warns against white women who write about black women's experiences,

In some occasions (never in my presence), I have been accused of bringing lowland, middle-class construct to the uplands and imposing it on the Aytas. These were usually done by male social scientists who felt that it was an indication of lack of respect for indigenous cultures.⁷⁶

Indirectly, heeding to hooks' admonition to feminists to not impose frameworks that may not be appropriate to some groups, Narciso-Apuan ends by saying,

I would admit that the benefits to me have been enormous: the richness of my experiences not only clarified what feminist research is and could be, I learned the dynamics of indigenous communities, and how disaster management could be gender-sensitive; and I now cherish the friendships forged among us. Both the women and I were transformed.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Victoria Narciso-Apuan, "Intensifying the Gender Discourse among the Aytas in Floridablanca, Pampanga," in *Selected Readings on Health and Feminist Research: A Sourcebook*, ed. by Sylvia Guerrero (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1994), 349.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 351.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 353.

Now, efforts to address the plight of indigenous women in the Philippines do not only come from groups, organizations, or researchers that are non-indigenous people. Indigenous women themselves actively mobilize and organize to address their difficult situation. Accordingly, the efforts of groups and organizations accomplished by non-indigenous women in the Philippines should also be channeled to indigenous women, thereby empowering and supporting the already present efforts at mobilization and organization done by indigenous women themselves. This calls to mind the call of bell hooks to a genuine sisterhood based on an idea of common oppression, but one which does not end in seeing oneself as a victim. It is characterized by solidarity, which strengthens resistance struggles and unifies everyone. It is a solidarity which requires an unwavering commitment.

One example of an effort and resistance done by indigenous women is the *Lapat Apayao Movement* against the Apayao Dam and Gened Dam. Together with their elders, young Isnag indigenous women endeavor to fight against the destruction of their natural resources and ancestral domains brought about by dams.⁷⁸ The same is true with the Cuyunon and Tagbanua women in Palawan who continue to strive to preserve their mangrove forests.⁷⁹ On the other hand, despite the initial challenges brought about by the pandemic in terms of the difficulty in migrating activities to the online set-up, the *BAI National Network of Indigenous Women in the Philippines* was able to organize a series of webinars where local leaders were guest speakers.⁸⁰ This provided an opportunity for distant indigenous women all over the country to come together in an online platform that would have been impossible before the pandemic.

Further, “BAI leaders were also able to participate in the Second World Conference of Indigenous Women (2WCIW). International redress mechanisms were continually optimized, with some Indigenous women leaders participating in UN mechanisms such as the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII), the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of

⁷⁸ Bengwayan-Anongos, “Region and Country Reports: Philippines,” 287.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 288.

Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).”⁸¹ Finally, while the State is steadfast in labeling activist indigenous women as “terrorists” and “communists”, the *JaPNet* or *Women Working for Justice and Peace Network* in Cordillera recently organized a tribute to honor the indigenous women activists especially women elders and pioneers.⁸² Indeed, “It is remarkable that, while experiencing further marginalization during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as State attacks, Indigenous women and their organizations have mobilized together with NGOs and church-based institutions in the distribution of relief, in community pantries and community education on COVID-19.”⁸³

Conclusion

Our preceding discussions have shown that while women throughout Philippine history have experienced oppression and discrimination, those who are at – what bell hooks calls – the “margins” experienced greater degrees of oppression and discrimination than those who are at the “center”. In the contemporary era, indigenous Filipina women are at the margins. These women experience multiple layers/intersections of oppression and discrimination not only based on gender and sex. Various efforts by groups, organizations, and academia aimed to address the multiple layers/intersections of oppression and discrimination that women in the Philippines generally experience. We have shown that much of these efforts are actually attuned to the framework and proposals of hooks on how to address the oppression and discrimination of women especially those women who are at the margins of society. We have emphasized, though, that these efforts should also focus on empowering and strengthening existing efforts by indigenous women themselves to address their marginalization. While the indigenous women have done much to alleviate themselves from marginalization, much also has to be done to strengthen and empower their efforts more.

One way, that future scholars might want to explore to strengthen and empower the efforts of indigenous women, is by

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 289.

looking into how bell hooks' postfeminism can influence and shape policies that will bring indigenous women from the margins to the center of society. A specific way to proceed is by fleshing out the characteristics or features that policies should have in light of bell hooks' postfeminism. While scholars need not make the policy themselves, they can flesh out what it should look like. For instance, policies should take shape in an intersectional manner. This means that policies should consider the problem of indigenous women as not merely an economic or cultural problem but also as ecological, gendered, religious, and legal, among others. Layers of oppression and discrimination should always inform policies. Another example would be: that policies should provide opportunities for indigenous women to move from margin to center. Policy-makers ought to ensure that indigenous women are actively involved in crafting policies, especially policies that concern them. The outputs of conferences, webinars, and workshops organized by the indigenous women are rich resources for policy-making in this regard. Finally, in crafting policies related to artificial intelligence and digital technologies, the concern of indigenous women who cannot access the Internet and navigate through online platforms should be looked into. Any discussions about the so-called "digital divide" should involve indigenous women and all indigenous people.

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