

# The Filipino Identity in Gumercindo Rafanan's Poetry:

## A Postcolonial Analysis

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**Abstract.** The Philippines has been colonized for more than three centuries. There have been studies done to define Filipino identity but relatively few have investigated that the colonization has made the Filipino identity hybrid. Homi K. Bhabha (1990) argues that cultural identities, especially to the colonized, cannot be ascribed to pre-given, irreducible, scripted, historical cultural traits that define the conventions of ethnicity. This paper aims to search for the manifestation of the Filipino identity in the poems of Gumercindo Rafanan using Postcolonialism theories of Bhabha and Fanon for analysis and interpretation. Specifically, it shows the reaction to and resistance against hybridity found in the poems and the depictions of hybridity reflecting the Filipino identity. The result of the study shows three depictions of hybridity found in Rafanan's poems: the Filipinos prefer and choose foreign practices; the Filipinos embrace, appreciate and value other cultures rather than their own; the Filipinos, because of accepting and resisting cultures from colonizers, tend to forget what is their own. The paper then illustrates that these depictions of Filipino hybridity are an amalgam of the colonizing cultures resulting in hybridity. On the basis of the results of the study, it is recommended to do a follow-up study on Rafanan's short stories, plays, and essays in the Postcolonial context to see further and confirm depictions and implications of hybridity.

**Keywords:** Postcolonialism, Filipino identity, Literary criticism

### 1. Introduction

“Who would think that the storm blows harder the farther it leaves the paradise? (Benedict Anderson, 1991.)” The aim of Spanish colonization in the Philippines was the conversion of the Filipinos to Christianity. This aim was realized, for the missionaries, who came with the colonizers, won over the pagan Filipinos to the fold of Catholicism. It is said that about 12,000 Spanish missionaries had preached Christianity in the Philippines from the days of Magellan to the end of Spanish rule. In 1898, when Spanish rule ended, there were 6,559,998 Filipino Christians, representing more than 90% of the total population of the Philippines.

In the Philippines, the bases for American victory had been laid with the defeat of the Japanese Navy on October 23-26, 1944. Until late December, the Americans were deeply involved in Leyte where the Japanese, despite heavy losses, had succeeded in bringing in reinforcements. Three hundred thirty-three years by Spaniards, thirty years by Americans, and three years by Japanese, the Philippines had been colonized, conquered, exploited, devastated and abused.

In response to the history of colonization in the Philippines, this paper aims to investigate how colonization has affected the Filipino identity. The sole objective of this paper is to study Gumercindo Rafanan's poetry and describe the persona's reaction to and resistance against hybridity that reflect Filipino identity using Postcolonialism as both theory and method of analysis. With this paper, it is hoped to promote Mindanaoan literature to be fully recognized as part of Philippine literature, worthy of appreciation and value.

### 2. Postcolonialism

Postcolonialism concerns itself with literature in formerly colonized countries. This theory looks at the canon and rejects the universal Western canon, points out colonization, deals with hybridity, depicts ethnic differences and perspectives, and exposes “the other”. The term post-colonial suggests a concern with the national culture after the departure of the imperial power. It has occasionally been employed in some earlier work in the area to distinguish between the periods before and after independence (‘colonial period’ and

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‘post-colonial period’). The term ‘post-colonial’ is used to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression (Ashcroft, et.al. 1989).

Frantz Fanon (1961), in *The Wretched of the Earth*, believes that colonial domination is an enemy to the nation. Culture is the first expression of the nation, yet this culture “falls and dies away” under colonization. Culture brings along nationalism and if these two are gone, the nation will lose its consciousness. If national consciousness is killed, then the nation will eventually lose its national identity, which will bring the nation to a place in the globe. This is how serious colonial domination is to a nation. To resolve the problem or to bring back national identity, Fanon suggests a basic philosophical, psychological concept: national culture, nationalism, national consciousness, and national identity. This shows how important nationalism and national culture are against national domination for national identity.

Homi K. Bhabha (1990) argues that cultural identities, especially to the colonized, cannot be ascribed to pre-given, irreducible, scripted, historical traits that define the conventions of ethnicity. He suggests that the negotiation of cultural identity involves the continual interface and exchange of cultural performances that in turn produce a mutual and mutable recognitions (or representation) of cultural difference. His *Nation and Narration* (1990) is primarily an intervention into “existentialist” readings of nationality that attempt to define and naturalize Third World “nations” by means of the supposedly homogeneous, innate and historically continuous traditions that falsely define and ensure their subordinate status. Nations, in other words, are “narrative” constructions that arise from the “hybrid” interaction of contending cultural constituencies. It can then be implied that the Filipino identity cannot be defined as 100% Filipino culture for it is already hybrid.

### 3. “Unsay Tua Didto?” (*What’s there?*)

The poem has three stanzas, each being a division of the three main points of the persona: the Filipino society, the query of the persona, and the response of the Filipinos to his queries. The first stanza opens with the line “You’ve tried to climb up the mountain of life” (*Misulay kang tungas sa bukid sa kinabuhì*) that can directly give the readers a hint of the activity of the Philippine society—that the Filipinos metaphorically try to climb up from poverty since the Philippines is one of the Third World countries. Following the opening line, the said stanza can be subdivided into the reasons of the Filipinos’ activity. First, the Filipinos climb up from poverty as a result of “failures” (*mga kapakyas*). While climbing up, the Filipinos should realize that the only way to overcome poverty is through “endeavor” (*pagpaningkamot*). Finally, the Filipinos need such endeavor to “gain back” (*mabawi*) their glory.

The activity of the Philippines apparently has no problem for it is inevitable for people to try to escape from sufferings, in this case, poverty. But the persona, in the second stanza, notices an oddity in the activity, and he expresses this in a form of query, composed of series of questions. His query basically centers on the purpose (which is to get rich) and the means (which is cultural immersion) of the activity. Because of his query, one can infer that he disagrees to the idea. If one does not know the context of the poem, he can easily judge the persona; but if one has the knowledge on the Philippine context, he will understand. For the persona, the purpose of climbing up the mountain should only be to gain back their glory, not to get rich. As regards the means, because of cultural immersion, as a result of working abroad or even using foreign languages in the Philippines, the Filipinos have become hybrid—Filipino in blood but foreigner in conduct. In the Philippines, if one looks like and speaks like a foreigner, he is superior. It has then become a trend. This can be explained by Homi Bhabha’s theory on negotiation between cultures (the Filipino and the foreign culture). Such occurrence is not abnormal since the Philippines has been colonized for more than three hundred years.

To reply to the query of the persona, the Filipinos say “IT IS ONLY THERE!” (*TUA RA DIDTO!*). The persona may be against hybridity as implied in the second stanza, but the Filipinos continue to believe that the only way for success by climbing up from poverty is THERE, which is the opposite of HERE. This clearly shows the ideology of Filipinos: the answer to their problems is not HERE but THERE [outside the Philippines]. This ideology of the Filipinos can be explained by Frantz Fanon (1961), in *The Wretched of the*

*Earth*. He claims that people in colonized countries suffer from losing their identity as they lose their culture, language, and even entertainment, which results in appreciating whatever is of the colonizers.

In this poem, Rafanan, through the persona, is trying to open the eyes of the Filipinos of their present condition: the means of achieving goals in life is cultural immersion. The purpose of the activity is not wrong at all but the means of doing it results into losing their identity. Through his presentation of series of questions, it is seen that Rafanan is somehow saying “Do not go there; stay here because nothing can really be found there except losing our identity.” In other words, Rafanan is resisting foreign influence on Filipinos. However, what he is demanding from his people is impossible for trying to stop people from embracing foreign cultures is not the way to define identity. To Bhabha, colonized countries’ identity is hybrid and there is no way for to neutralize such identity no matter one does. Rafanan may be in a state of what Bhabha calls ambivalence, he is confused of the result of the negotiation between cultures. This poem depicts hybridity of the Filipinos by showing the real situation of the members of the Philippine society, who are achieving their goals through embracing foreign culture and tradition. The more the Filipinos use a foreign language, the more they embrace the culture of such language; the more they embrace the culture, the more their identity becomes hybrid. Thus, Rafanan’s depiction reflects Filipino identity as the inevitable result of a constant cultural immersion that eventually results to hybridity.

#### 4. “**Diin Ka Man sa Pagpanglunhaw sa mga Balili?**” (*Where were You in the Greening of the Grass?*)

The poem is another subtle way of showing resistance against foreign influence. The first three stanzas portray of an addressee who looks at unpleasant things, such as falling leaves, dark clouds, and frowning faces. In response to this, the persona invites the addressee to look at the blooming flowers, the sunlight in the morning, and the smiling faces.

In the fourth stanza, the persona tells the addressee what he misses as he gazes at the unpleasant things: the greening of the grass (*pagpanglunhaw sa mga balili*), songs of the birds (*honi sa mga langgam*), fragrance of the flowers (*kahumot sa mga bulak*), and caress of the wind (*hapuhap sa huyuhoy*). The four unpleasant things are symbols for the Filipino culture and tradition that was missed by the addressee: the greening of the grass stands for the rich culture of Filipinos; the songs of the birds, for the abundance of the Philippine arts; the fragrance of the flowers, for the fatness of the Philippine territory that attracted foreigners; and the caress of the wind, for the practices that the Filipinos are known for, like close family ties and hospitality.

In the fifth stanza, the resistance to foreign influence is finally revealed as the persona asks: “What is in the computer that you spend so much time for watching?” (*Unsay naa sa kompyuter nga giutasan mo man og lili?*). It is then clear that the persona resists foreign influences as represented by the computer, a technology introduced to the Philippines from the West.

The last stanza is a picture of what Bhabha (1990) describes of hybridity—that it is irreversible. Here, the persona declares: “...just when you realized you forgot,...you cannot look back, nor can go back...” (*...sa pagkaamgo mo pa imong hitaligam-an,...ug di na makalingi, din a makabalik...*). The declaration uses metaphor to show that once the addressee is fully occupied by negative things, he cannot go back to appreciate beauty. Such picture implies that once an identity is mixed with others through influence, then there is no turning back; the identity becomes permanently hybrid.

The poem implies that once Filipinos allow other cultures to merge with their own (through being gradually influenced), they might forever lose the richness, wonder and abundance of their own. As a result, they lose their identity. To Bhabha, hybridity is an interaction of contending cultural constituencies, which results to ambivalence in a post-colonial setting where the constituents are adapting (as represented by the addressee) and, at the same time, resisting cultures (as seen in the perspective of the persona). Because of this adapting and resisting, what comes out or what is produced is a hybrid identity that cannot be purified. Bhabha and the persona of the poem in this sense have the same idea. However, the persona still hopes to bring the people back to keep their identity before they lose it by reestablishment. Rafanan’s concept can be explained by Fanon (1961). To Fanon, such resistance is normal since colonization has killed the identity of

the colonized people which has in turn resulted to change in language, education, and culture (as cited in Bressler, 1999). Bressler agrees with Fanon as he states that Western colonialism is still controlling the hegemony of the people even in the present day. Hence, the poem depicts hybridity of the Filipino identity by showing a number of Filipinos who value and appreciate other cultures but neglect their own.

## 5. “Hoy, Pinoy, Bangon Na!” (*Hey, Filipino, Rise Up!*)

Of the three poems, this is the most obvious in resisting and also reacting to hybridity. In the poem, the persona tries to awaken his fellowmen to look back and regain the five inheritances as he declares “Awaken the yesterday that has fallen into deep sleep...inheritance of Grandpa and Grandma” (*Pukawa nahinanok mong kagahapon...kabilin ni Uyong...og iyang*). These inheritances are the entertainment, courtship, good virtues, family practices, and nationalism.

The first inheritance that Filipinos should “awaken” is their means of entertainment. In the olden times, Filipinos read “verses accompanied by a guitar” (*balitawng dinuyogan sa sista*), while drinking “coconut wine” (*kisom tuba*) and carrying “a dying light of a lamp” (*nagpid-ok nga lamparilya*) at night. In the morning, Filipinos do the *Kuratsa*, a courtship dance where a man, carrying or tying a piece of cloth, follows a woman as both dance during a courtship-chasing affair. These are just a few of the means for Filipinos to be entertained before which are no longer present today since Filipinos find pleasure in singing Justin Bieber and Adele songs, and in dancing to J Lo’s music.

The second inheritance is courtship that needs awakening. Filipino men used to have their means of showing love towards women. Filipino men court women with a “serenade of fervent love tongue-tied of naivety” (*harana sa nag-uross nga gugmang naamang sa kaulaw*) and render “service...to test his kindness, while the woman is veiled, ankles unseen, hairs unfastened” (*pangagad...aron himbisan iyang kabuotan, samtang si Inday tinabilan, kiting di masil-ip, buhok pinadunghay*). This way of courtship is no longer observed today since Filipino men court through text messages or through Facebook, while women barely cover themselves as they are also influenced by Western fashion.

The third inheritance is on good virtues. Filipinos used to express: “may we pass by, Sir...excuse me, Miss...” (*moagi mi, Noy,...tabi, Insi...*) to show recognition, respect, and politeness. However, as observed nowadays, young people just pass by without acknowledging the elderly.

The fourth inheritance is that of family practices in sixth and seventh stanzas. In these stanzas, the persona tries to awaken the family practices, such as “running home the little feet to kneel down for prayer” (*paulig panagan gagmayng tiil aron tuhod pik-on sa panalangin*). The line refers to a family practice of praying together at six o’clock when the Church bell rings for Angelus prayer. The persona also wants to awaken “the spank of mother and father to straighten the curve path” (*dagpi ni Nanay og latus ni Tatay nga matul-id sa liko nga dalan*). Parents before used to physically punish their children to correct their mistakes. However, with the coming of the practices of the Americans, Filipinos adopt their way of disciplining children through a dialogue.

The fifth inheritance is on nationalism in second to the last stanza. Here the persona, to awaken Filipinos’ sense of nationalism, mentions four historical places in the Philippines: Mactan, Luneta, Bataan and EDSA. In Mactan, Lapu-Lapu and his men fought against the Spaniards; for it, the Philippines was recorded in history for the first time. In Luneta, the Philippine national hero, Jose P. Rizal, because of fighting for Filipinos through his writings, was executed by the Spaniards. In Bataan, Filipino prisoners of Japanese invaders were punished through Death March—Filipino prisoners marched 80 miles from Mariveles to San Francisco for six day and the 56,000 of 76,000 soldiers who made it to the camp were buried alive in the graves they themselves dug. Finally, in EDSA, the Filipinos were united to oust President Ferdinand E. Marcos, after 20 years of dictatorship. However, Filipinos, instead of resisting against enslaving forces, openly welcomes albeit soft but colonizing powers of foreign countries, such as media, technology, fashion, entertainment, among others.

Although the word hybrid cannot be found in the poem, the depiction of loss of culture, nonetheless, is very clear. The fact that the persona repeated “where” (*hain na*) and “awaken your past” (*pukawa imong kagahapon*) indicate that the Filipinos are becoming oblivious of their own culture and tradition. As Filipinos

continue to resist and adopt cultures from colonizers, they gradually become hybrid. As a result, their identity “has fallen into deep sleep.” By seeking for and showing how glorious Filipino’s past was, the persona gives a picture of their own identity that is waning. In response, he challenges them to resurrect the past. By resurrecting the past, they can be able to reestablish their own glorious identity. This idea of the poet can be explained by Frantz Fanon (1961) who theorizes that in order for people to gain identity, they need to be aware of their national culture through arts and practices. These depictions reflect the poet’s resistance against foreign influences which cause the Filipino identity to be hybrid.

## 6. Conclusion

In the three poems of Gomerindo Rafanan, hybridity in the Filipino identity is the result of Filipinos’ valuing and appreciating other cultures. It is also the effect of Filipinos’ preference on foreign lifestyle over their own. Foreign influence grows stronger as many of the Filipinos pursue education in other countries, bearing the hegemony on the inferiority of Philippine colleges and universities. Moreover, millions of Filipinos work abroad, with the ideology on the superiority of foreign companies and establishments. Furthermore, countless Filipinos migrated, believing on the greener pastures anywhere but the Philippines. In reaction to and resistance against such occurrence, Gumerindo Rafanan as a poet encourages his fellowman to look back to the Philippines before colonization with the hopes of salvaging what has been buried for centuries. To Fanon, the idea is the first step to national identity. To Bhabha, however, the idea is impossible. Filipino identity as seen in its culture may not be purified anymore; but culture, like language, is dynamic—it changes, adapts, but is never degraded.

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