Sajira Awang

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**JOSÉ RIZAL**

# **I. Intro**

When I was a child I remember my grandmother telling me stories about the Philippine National Hero, Jose Rizal. I looked forward to her story telling about Filipino Folklore and Filipino history. Time passed and eventually her vivid stories faded into my memory to a hushed voice about glory of the Philippines. By choosing my MATUL I had to face many tensions and questions of identity that I had about myself as a Filipino-American- never fitting completely within the context of Filipinos and never fitting completely within the context of Americans. What beauty I discovered within the biography about Rizal that he often felt the same way, a Filipino among the Spanish. In his novel Noli Me Tángere one of the main characters state “I was not brought up among the people, and perhaps I do not know what they need. I spent my childhood in the Jesuit school and grew up in Europe. My opinions were formed by books, and I know only what has been exposed; I know nothing of the things that remain hidden, that have not been written about” (Rizal, 1887). Perhaps this echoed Rizal’s own feelings. His status as national hero remains controversial but regardless, he remains a legacy in Filipino history.

# **II. Ateneo**

Rizal’s family was very wealthy, even for the time period, and could afford to send him to school at Ateneo. It was here that he began his studies, and although he excelled he was not considered an exceptional student. He was well rounded, and did well in almost all of his subjects as well as his extracurricular activities. He was actually adored by many of his professors, and they would visit him before his execution. But more important than his academics were his observations these first few years at school. This time was significant because of the observations that he made of the interactions between the friars and the students. The result was what Guerrero refers to as “race jealousy”.

“[Rizal’s] ‘race jealousy’ appears to have been outraged by professors who played favorites and treated their Filipino pupils with contempt, addressing them ‘like good friars’ in the familiar *tu* and even in pidgin Spanish” (pp.59)

Even in his early writings there are undertones of his future nationalism. He observed the mistreatment and took it upon his shoulders to excel and reach far beyond his European classmates. This in mind, Rizal found it best to continue his proposed studies as a doctor in Spain. Initially his parents were not aware of this decision and Rizal did he best to keep it a secret until the day that he left. In a letter addressed to Rizal from his brother, Paciano, it states:

“Here it is said that you will finish your medical course in Barcelona, not in Madrid; to my way of thinking, the main purpose of your going is not to improve yourself in that profession but in other more useful things, or what comes to the same thing, that to which you have the greater inclination.” (pp. 87-88)

# **III. Europe**

It was during his time in Europe when Rizal’s public life began to emerge first through his writings. Writing is what Guerrero believes Paciano meant by “that to which you have the greater inclination.” His art would end as a political program and ultimately a death sentence. While he was in Europe he became acquainted with other expatriates of the Philippines that had moved to Madrid- some writers, some ex-politicians, and artists as well. Over the years he was exposed to a completely different type of culture. One of his good friends, Blumentritt reflected on this in a short passage.

“[Rizal’s] sojourn in Spain opened up to him a new world… He came from a country where bigotry came naturally, where the Spanish friar, the Spanish bureaucrat and the Spanish officer ruled with unlimited power over body and soul. In Madrid he found the exact opposite… A feeling of bitterness seized [Rizal] as he perceived the difference between the unchecked freedom of the Mother Country and the theocratic absolutism in his nativeland.” (pp. 119-120)

These sentiments began to reveal themselves in Rizal’s writing and speech. He had stopped writing for a short while to respect a request from his mother. She was greatly distressed by the direction in which his words were going and she urged him to stop. There finally came an occasion where Rizal decided to put his promise aside for a night. Two expatriate artists from the Philippines had been recognized for their talent and he was to give a speech at their gala. The speech he delivered that night was “his first open challenge to the regime” and the beginning of his walk towards death (pp. 122). The following novels that he would publish based on his experience in both Europe and the Philippines, titled Noli Me Tángere and El Filibusterismo, would serve as inspiration for an organization called Katipunan to begin a revolution.

# **IV. Revolution**

I was shocked to believe that despite Rizal’s developing theories about the relationship between Spain and the Philippines he still did not believe that the Filipinos were ready for revolution.

“In Rizal’s mind the Filipinos of his generation were not yet ready for revolution because they were not yet ready for independence, and they were not ready for independence because they were still unworthy of it. When the individual had learned to value social good above personal advantage, and when these individuals had become a nation, then ‘God would provide the weapon,’ whatever it might be, whether revolution or otherwise, and independence would be won.” (pp. 300)

Despite what he expressed he still had very clear ideas of what specifically he wanted changed. Guerrero cites the dialogue between Rizal and a politico-military governor. Within the conversation Rizal expresses his desire for change within all branches of administration, primary instruction, equal division of government jobs between natives and colonizers, a moral administration, and schools of arts and trades in provincial capitals. He was incredibly specific in targeting the areas where he saw the prevalence of inequality between the native and the Spaniards. In this targeting it also directly confronted the friars that were part of the system of injustice within the Philippines. He did, however, disagree with violence within a revolution which eventually caused him to drift from the organization I mentioned earlier, Katipunan.

# **V. Execution**

His mere association with this group is what eventually spurred his death. He had upset the government and readers of his work for years and finally they had leverage to have Rizal executed. Katipunan had spurred an outright revolution that soon grew to national levels, and although Rizal did not participate with them, they had adopted his name.

“[If] Katipunan’s Revolution broke out, it was sure as death that he would be suspected of desiring to remain in the Philippines in order to lead it; just as it was almost equally sure that in fact the Revolution would be made in his name.” (pp. 407)

And this indeed is what happened. En route to Cuba he was arrested and sent back to the Philippines for his trial and execution. He had been charged with an offence that called for extreme penalty- “rebellion against the Mother Country” (pp. 506). Although his mother tried pleading with the authorities, and even Rizal himself tried explaining his situation, his death was already set in place. On the morning of December 30, 1896 Rizal was executed by firing squad facing the bay. It was Rizal who first brought to light in such a public manner the worth of the Filipino nation, and claimed that title for himself. This is why many refer to him as “The First Filipino” and this book is titled as such.

# **VI. Conclusion**

“It was Rizal who lifted up the hearts of his generation, and who is enshrined by the Nation and the Republic he made” (pp. 530. He became a symbol of “peace, freedom, justice, and virtue” and this is the reason that his legacy lives on in the Philippines to this day.

# **VII. Citation**

Guerrero, L. M. The First Filipino. Guerrero Publishing Inc.