

Filipino Notion of Motherhood: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Analysis

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ABSTRACT: This paper is a hermeneutic phenomenological analysis of the traditional Filipino notion of motherhood (stay-at-home mother) vis-a-vis to the present notion of motherhood (working mother). The evident influx of mothers into the labor force challenges the traditional Filipino maternal role and the Filipino adage “*Ang ina ang ilaw ng tahanan*”, thus proving the dynamic development of the Filipino philosophy of motherhood. Demographics and philosophical bases of motherhood, including those working overseas (absentee mothers) and those who entrust their child/children to someone else while they are at work are considered in this paper.

Keywords: stay-at-home mother, working mother, Filipino motherhood, absentee mother, hermeneutic phenomenological

1. INTRODUCTION

The transitory absence of a mother in a family creates anxiety and fear among family members, especially among children, more so if the absence is permanent. Some may say it is heart-breaking for a family member to lose the mother of the home; this is the reason why we sympathize with them because we know the function of a mother at home and in the lives of children. Undoubtedly, mothers are very essential to each Filipino child because truly *ang ina ang ilaw ng tahanan*. This means that for the house to remain orderly, for the children to see their direction in life, they need a lighting torch that is carried by a *nanay, inay, inang, mamang, mama*, or a mommy. Filipino children or I may say children across nations have this natural tendency to love their parents, especially their mothers, maybe because mothers are the ones who sustained their lives inside the womb and the first ones who gave them the love and care they needed. Although children have a different form of relationship with their mothers, it does not erase the fact that mothers are immortal to the heart and mind of every child.

The Filipino notion of motherhood is the central theme of this study. The hermeneutic phenomenological paradigm of Hans-Georg Gadamer is used to decipher the dynamic and revolutionary development of the Filipino notion of motherhood. This study will delve into the logic behind mothers, decision to join the labor force in the Philippines or overseas, instead of being a mere housewife, a stay-at-home mother. Moreover, this study wants to shed light to why the maternal or parental role is not simply confined to the four corners of the house as a result of the Filipino notion of parental accountability. As stated by Florentino Timbreza, “parental responsibility refers to parents’s accountability for the proper upbringing, rearing up, nurturing, training,

discipline, and education of their children”¹ This study emphasizes that the parental role does not identify the sexes of parents, thus implying gender equity and equality between the parents. Parental responsibility thus connotes maternal and/or paternal responsibility.

Hans-Georg Gadamer developed the hermeneutical tradition that provides a proper ground for understanding, therefore not a procedure for understanding. He states that the “understanding of the text must start from the position that a person seeking to understand something has a bond to the subject matter that comes into language through the traditional text and has, or acquires, a connection with the tradition from which the text speaks.”² The person seeking to understand and uncover the life world must be situated in a particular stance from which he/she seeks to understand; he or she is thus mediated by tradition as manifested through language, thus, and event which is called hermeneutic phenomenology. In general, the objective of this research is to interpret and understand the lived experience of the Filipinos with the help of the traditional text in order to divulge a clear-cut notion of Filipino motherhood while still using the lens of the empirical method of inquiry which explains the structural aspect of a human “being-in-the-world” (*Dasein*).

2. Traditional Filipino Mother (Working from Home)

Gender roles are culturally defined, and so are parenting styles. Thus, the role and responsibilities of mothers are generally dictated and shared by them in the Filipino society. In the pre-Hispanic time, women enjoyed equal rights with men, that is, women could occupy a position in a society such that a mother could perform functions other than being a wife and mother. This is proven by the existence of *babaylan* (Visayan term) or the *katalonan* (Tagalog term) who were predominantly women.³ A *Babaylan* (shaman), like other women in the community could freely marry and have children. It is interesting to note that most *babaylans* were married and had children,⁴ which shows that women before the coming of Spaniards were working outside the confines of the home. Equality between men and women was evident. *Babaylans* were seen as equal in power with the *datu*, because power and spirituality were interwoven in the ancient indigenous Philippine society.⁵ It was also expected that a *datu* would seek guidance from a *babaylan* for the maintenance of his power because a *babaylan* had power to control nature with the help of spirits. As described by Dr. Zeus Salazar, *babaylan* was “a specialist in the field of culture, religion, medicine and all kinds of theoretical knowledge about the phenomenon of nature.”⁶ She was revered in ancient society even by a *datu* because her function and knowledge were indispensable in the society. The *babaylan* proved that women possessed power; thus, their life did not have to focus on the four corners of the home. They were not seen as weak and vulnerable, so the modern view of women as independent and career oriented is not actually new to the Philippine *psyche* because it existed even long before the Spanish colonization.

¹ Florentino Timbreza, *Filipino Philosophy Today* (Quezon City: National Book Store, 2008), 299.

² Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Truth and Method” in *Hans-Georg Gadamer Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 306

³ Carolyn Brewer, “Baylan, Asog, Transvestism, and Sodomy: Gender, Sexuality and the Sacred in Early Colonial Philippines,” *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context*, 2 (May 1999): <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue2/carolyn2.html>

⁴ Jozef Lamberts, *Liturgy and Inculturation. Introduction* (Leuven: Peeters, 1996), 130.

⁵ Patricio Abinales and Donna Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), 27.

⁶ Zeus Salazar, *Ang Babaylan sa Kasaysayan ng Pilipinas* (Quezon City: Panlimbagan ng Lahi, 1999), 3

The turning of the table happened in the 16th century upon the conquest by Spaniards of the Philippines. The equal rights that were once enjoyed by women vanished; the *babaylans* were then perceived and judged as witches by the conquerors. For three centuries women were trained and educated to submit to men. The former did not enjoy educational and employment opportunities; they were trained to do household chores and eventually serve their husband and children to the best of their ability. Women were regarded as second-class citizens; they could not vote, nor could they hold political positions. A career woman was unimaginable because she was not trained to be a professional. The life of a mother began to be defined by the society as a house-wife because there was no such thing as a career woman during the Spanish colonization. The mother could not work outside the home because of her child bearing and child rearing obligations; meanwhile, the father took charge of providing for the family. In this arrangement, the distinction between gender roles were manifested. And this is what we call the traditional notion of parental responsibilities:

Clear-cut gender role expectations exist for men and women in Filipino culture. For instance, women are essentially perceived as wives, mothers, and homemakers (Baylon, 1975; Asprer, 1980; Gonzales, 1977; Makil 1981; Sobrichea, 1990). Their major responsibilities in life are said to be the following: to keep the house clean and orderly, prepare meals for their children and husband, wash and iron clothes (Zablan, 1977). Women are also expected to be the main source of nurturance and emotional support for their children. Behaving contrary to these expectations is likely to invite criticisms from others.⁷

In the traditional notion of Filipino motherhood, a good and responsible mother is someone who stays at home and manages the household chores which include maintaining order and cleanliness, doing the laundry, preparing meals, and attending to the never-ending chores that always go circular. More importantly, a good mother must give nurture and emotional support to her children since the father is in charge of providing for the material needs of the family. The mother serves as a teacher; indeed, she is the first teacher of her children. In the past, reading and writing were always taught by a mother. It rested on her shoulder to teach children the Filipino values. As the doctor and nurse in the house, she spends sleepless nights every time a member of the family gets sick. She is a confidant, best friend, critic and sometimes enemy, but still children love her dearly. Clearly, the function and responsibility of a traditional mother, a stay-at-home mother, can only be done by someone who has a genuine heart.

The traditional role of mothers is the reference point of women and of the Philippine society when confronted with the question about the notion of an ideal mother. In sum, the traditional role of a mother is to be the "*ilaw ng tahanan*".

3. Modern-day Mother (Working Outside the Home)

The stereotype of women— 'destined for housekeeping and child rearing' was challenged during the early 1900's. Women were able to establish themselves as a political group fighting for women's suffrage, which marked the start of the revolutionary development that enabled women to engage in political decision-making such as the right to vote, and run for a political office. There was a struggle because several arguments against women's suffrage were raised, like it would ruin family unity and lessen the power of the husband. It should be remembered that we came from a culture where women were treated as second-class citizens. Finally, Congressman Filemon Sotto of Cebu filed the first women's suffrage bill at the Philippine Assembly.⁸ It was then only on April 30, 1937 when a plebiscite was held, where women finally voted for or against women's suffrage. This momentous event led to the empowerment of women, then, several legal rights followed. The revision in the educational system after the Spanish-American War in the Philippines contributed to changes which paved the way for gender equality. The right to vote was an offshoot of the revised education system in the Philippines.

⁷ Alma dela Cruz, Ma. Emma Concepcion Liwag and Ma. Elizabeth Macapagal, "How We Raise Our Daughters and Sons: Child-rearing and Gender Socialization in the Philippines," *Philippine Journal of Psychology*, vol 31 , nos. 1-4 (1998): 2.

⁸ Leonard Davis, *Revolutionary Struggle in the Philippines*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1989), 127.

Thus, the culture of women as a house-keeper gradually changed, and the female psyche developed into a human person that could be independent and make individual decisions. Now she could contribute to government affairs and help her husband when it comes to the sustenance of the family. Today, mothers are visible in the labor force, often leaving their children to a relative or a household help.

This development of the Filipino notion of motherhood from being stay-at-home mothers to being career mothers creates a dilemma to the Philippine society itself for the reason that mothers working outside the confines of home are criticized for breaking improved stereotypes, like it can destroy marriage and children. Despite criticisms mothers opt to work outside the home. Here are compelling reasons cited in the study of Sylvia Guerrero:

For almost half of the respondents economic need was the most compelling reason given for working. Responses of both husbands and wives tend to concentrate on the “additional money” theme...

After the economic reason the desire to make use of one’s education and training is most frequently mentioned. Both husbands and wives expressed concern over this...

Other wives said they work because they “enjoy their occupation”. One member of the male population said that the “desire for fuller life” perhaps motivates the woman to work.⁹

These reasons are actually valid and do not destroy the function of a woman as a mother. It is already mentioned that parents’ responsibility connotes accountability; it is part of a mother’s responsibility to provide good education for the children. So, if working outside creates additional income, the members of the family will have an easier access to the basic needs (food, shelter, clothes, education) which are indispensable for a functioning member of the society. Also, the Philippine education system encourages women to be financially independent such that marriage should not hamper this objective. Financial independence empowers and fulfills women, something which I think is very essential for a woman to be functional at home. The fact that career makes a mother happy should not be taken against her because as the old saying goes, “you cannot give what you do not have”; therefore, a mother cannot give happiness to her children if she herself is not happy. Thus, it is essential for a mother to feel happy and empowered in order for her to function well.

This development makes for a different structure in the family. Since the mother is also providing for the sustenance of the family, the father is likewise expected to help the mother in doing the household chores. Thus, men are now expected to share in housework and childcare, while women are expected to pull a double duty by juggling between profession and domestic work.¹⁰ Still, mothers perform the traditional function while providing additional money for the family.

4. Absentee Mothers (Mothers Working Overseas)

There are various definitions of an absentee mother, so to delimit this study an operational definition of it will be adopted. An absentee mother is someone who moves away from her child/children/family to work overseas for financial opportunities, thus compromising temporal and spatial separation from the family. An absentee mother is therefore a transnational mother who migrates for work and leaves her child/children in her native land. Since the Philippines is not a country of opportunities, there is a booming number of Filipino women working overseas.

Based on data of the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), women comprise 53 percent of Filipino workers abroad. With the Philippine Overseas Employment Agency and the PSA processing about two million contracts for the year 2015, and another two million contracts for the year 2016, it is safe to say that we are past the 10 million estimate of a documentary shot in 2011.

⁹ Sylvia Guerrero, “An Analysis of Husband-Wife Roles Among Filipino Professional at U.P. Los Baños Campus,” *Philippine Sociological Review*, vol. 13, no. 4 (1965): 277.

¹⁰ Trinidad Osteria, “Changing Family Structure and Shifting Gender Roles: Impact on Child and Development” In *The Future of Filipino Children: Development Issues and Trends*, edited by F. Rosario-Braid, R. R. Tuazon, and A. L. C. Lopez, 2–23. Philippines: Asian Institute of Journalism and Communication and UNICEF

More than 5 million Filipino women are spread throughout the world, working hard to create a better future for families they left behind.¹¹

Filipino women have risked the competition by working abroad. In fact, the number of mothers who are working outside the home has been surpassed by those who work overseas. The traditional maternal roles and responsibilities are thus challenged since the implication of this is the absence of mothers at the important occasions in the child's life, which include birthdays, graduations, and other momentous events that should normally be witnessed by a mother. Child care, which is important in a child's life, is compromised, which might mean that the present Filipino notion of motherhood is destructive to a child's growth. It is ironic that the main factor in this type of decision-making is the future of the child, who is thereby left confused and oftentimes broken. Mothers who are in this situation know their geographical limitations and they use creative ways to keep the lines of communication open as a means of "being there" and to "achieve a semblance of intimate family life".¹² Mothers perform their duty despite the distance through technology. It is expected in a transnational family that they have a reliable internet connection since it is the medium that bridges the gap between them. Truly, motherhood varies according to culture, time and economic status. No one can clearly define and characterize a good mother because they are placed in different situations and history. Some may criticize mothers who decide to work overseas simply because of a different ground thus a different perspective. As seen in news/social networking sites, migrant mothers leave the country with a heavy heart. Fear, sadness, and uncertainty are visible in their eyes; yet, they manage to step away from their native land in the hope of a better future. It is in the nature of mothers to be selfless and to provide a better future to their children and family. No wonder there are more female than male OFWs.¹³

5. Conclusion

As a mother who rears a child, I always feel like a trainee who is never certain if I am doing things right. Based on the context of the traditional Filipino culture mothers are of great importance since they are in charge of household matters. The responsibility for the children lies mainly with them. The Filipino adage "*Ang ina ang ilaw ng tahanan*", suggests that a good mother should make the house secure, she is the light that functions as a guide which puts everything in order. The absence of light makes the home chaotic so the mother serves as light that maintains the home by serving her with love as a teacher, doctor, nurse, and helper. The Filipino culture requires the mother to stay inside the house to do her function, for they say that it is impossible to show love if you are not seen by your children; their proper upbringing requires her presence. However, mothers who work overseas are not necessarily bad and irresponsible mothers. It is unfair to call them as bad because they work overseas to provide a good future to their children or simply provide their basic needs. Most mothers working overseas are not happy being separated from their family; they sacrifice because they believe in giving their children a better life. The separation is done out of love. Can we then say that this act of sacrifice is something bad? I guess being a good mother does not necessarily mean being in the house and taking care of one's family because, sad to say not all families can sustain their life in the Philippines. Moreover, not all women are fit to be a housewife.

A good mother is someone who will do everything for the betterment of her life and her family. It is not confined to being a good housewife because situations, personalities, opportunities, and abilities vary. If the mother is

¹¹ Aubrey Tan-Zubiri, "There won't be a Mother's Day for many OFWs" *Philippine Daily Inquirer* May 09, 2018. Retrieved from <https://lifestyle.inquirer.net/293760/wont-mothers-day-many-ofws/#ixzz5nOqDZQj4>

¹² Racel Parreñas, "The Gender Paradox in the Transnational Families of Filipino Migrant Women," *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, vol. 14, no. 3 (2005): 256.

¹³ Philippine Statistics Authority (release date: April 30, 2019). www.psa.gov.ph

doing things out of love for her family and for their happiness, she can be a good mother. There are different expressions of love, so one cannot universally define a good mother.

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