

Severino Montano's "Sabina": A Review of a Philippine Tragedy in English

Sabina, the main character of the play, is not of noble birth in the first place. In other words, the requirement that a tragic hero should be of noble birth was disregarded. She is the only daughter of a poor family in Kawakan. However, there is a replacement for that shortcoming, and that is Sabina's disposition in the beginning of the play-she is very happy! The essence of nobility requirement of the play is to show that the tragic hero is "happy" with nothing to worry about money and other vanities. In the play, Sabina may not be of noble birth but she compensates for that in her happiness. This is important for us to see the fall of the tragic hero, not from nobility to poverty but from happiness to despair. Her great esteem and faith for her love were very important to consider as a replacement for her lack of nobility. In the end, we see a sudden change of heart. She almost became insane when she discovered that Mr. George Price is a married man. Therefore, the downfall of Sabina is not her death, but her sudden change from her ultimate happiness to her ultimate grief.

Sabina has a tragic flaw indeed that caused her downfall-she was so naive and gullible. A tragic flaw, or hamartia, is needed for a tragedy to be tragic. The tragic hero should not be killed nor made suffer by others without his flaw being the reason. If that happens, that would make the play dull if not stupid. The action in the play should happen due to the hero and his tragic flaw. And that what happened to Sabina. She was so innocent, believing in true love. She even chose Mr. George Price over her family and relatives. She believed that they would be happy and nothing should matter. She even gave herself up to Mr. Price because of her love, her naivety, her stupidity. When she reached the stage of anagnorisis, realizing that she could never be married with Mr. Price because he was already married, making the situation worse by her pregnancy, she killed herself. Was she consistent to her character? To her tragic flaw? Yes. She killed herself after realizing that she could never be married with her love, realizing that she disgraced her family, realizing that she has no one to turn to and realizing that she had a bastard for a son. For a naive tragic heroine like Sabina, killing herself was indeed properly motivated. She was doomed to make an error in judgment in killing herself, foreshadowed by everything she did prior to her anagnorisis.

When Sabina realized her irreversible mistake, she was quick to deny it, yet suddenly she accepted it (or so we were made to think before she shot herself). But, as Aristotle described it, Sabina never accepted her death with honor: one reason, her death is sudden, although it is plausible and properly motivated; second; in the Philippine setting, there is nothing honorable in death. So, we see that this play does not agree with that part of Aristotle's concept of tragedy.

Before and at the end of the play, we feel pity and fear. There is indeed a Catharsis at the end of the play. We pity Sabina for what she experienced, and we fear, at the same time, that we may experience that same grief someday. There is a great probability in the play: a probability that one may fall in love and be blinded by that love; and, after all has been said and done, after one has fought for that love and sacrificed everything, the only thing one gets is pain. Nobody wants to get hurt, especially if the pain is from the one you truly love. Sabina was disillusioned indeed. She was like the moths flying around the lamp given by Mr. George Price. "They never knew they were moths until their wings get burned," as Arturo Rotor puts it in "Zita." Purgation of emotions can indeed be seen in the play.

The tragic vision in the play seems so difficult to find. It may be the remorse of Sabina. When she tried to talk to her brother about her problem, it may seem to be the "hope" that the play shows. Yet, she killed herself so there is nothing "hopeful" and triumphant in that scene. Then, when she killed herself everyone wept. We also discovered that Mr. George Price did not really leave her, and he really loved her. We discovered that her family and her relatives did not really hate her, but were only worried for her. They loved Sabina. They just did not know how to say or show it properly to a naive girl whose dream is only to find happiness. The lament of her relatives at her death and their exhibition of their love when she died, despite her having fought and shouted at them, is the tragic vision in the play. That is the light that the audience see after the tragic heroine's death. They were not really mad at her; they were only concerned for her well-being and her honor-the one thing that she was not able to see.

Tragedy has evolved through the years since Aristotle wrote his Poetics. Many writers have followed his concepts, but we see now that many writers too have deviate from the traditional concept of tragedy, especially with the sprouting of new approaches in the study of literature. However, one cannot deny the fact that Aristotle was the one who first thought of common criteria in the study of the drama, especially tragedy, which made him very important in the study of literature.

In Sabina, one sees that a play can be tragic without having to follow strictly the rules Aristotle conceptualized. However, the play seems so abrupt. Though the dilemma is plausible and the death of Sabina is properly motivated, the dialogue between Sabina and Mr. Price seemed to be far-fetched from reality, i.e. his confession of his true civil status. It could have been more dramatic, more emotional on the part of the man. But, possibly, Montano was giving way for actors' and directors' interpretation of the dialogue. Generally speaking, the play is one of the best representatives of Philippine play in English.

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