

Unpublished Manuscript:

Daughter of a Nation by Rafaelito V. Sy

They reached the Philippine Cultural Center perched atop a swerving driveway. Night had fallen. A fountain in front of the Center jetted brightly lit water. Gamela urged for them to see the Center up close. She had never seen anything like it before. Its windowless, rectangular structure looked to her like some kind of monumental shoe box. Jumbo said no. “We don’t belong there,” he said. “The moment the guards see us, they’ll kick us out” — a statement which made Gamela all the more insistent. As Jumbo walked ahead of her in Wanda’s trail, Gamela snuck away and ran up the driveway, not looking back until she was mid-way at the top.

A motorcade of policemen encircled three black cars ahead of her. Gamela crouched to the level of the railing in an attempt to obscure herself in the night. Security guards and long-gowned women stood in front of the glass entrance. A tall figure stepped out of the middle car. Gamela could vaguely see who it was because of the guards and only caught glimpses of the person’s head. When the motorcade roared down the driveway, she waited for a minute before continuing to the top, hiding behind an arched beam, then peeking into the glass doors with her mouth agape.

The tall woman was the First Lady Imelda dressed in a silver-beaded terno, its short sleeves fashioned in the shape of a butterfly’s wings. She didn’t look at all to Gamela like her grainy black and white newspaper images. While photographs presented her as plump and matronly, in person she was youthful and svelte with a sugar-white complexion. A chandelier of capiz shells sheer as chiffon hung from the ceiling. Its soft light added a sparkle to the pointed tips of the first lady’s silver shoes. As her contingent of kabuki-powdered women and walkie-talkie touting men gathered round her, she seemed oblivious to a quartet of buzzing photographers.

The first lady turned to face the entrance with one graceful swoop of her skirt. She stared point blank into the night. Gamela got the impression that it was right into her eyes. Quickly she hid behind the beam, her heart beat racing. She had never seen eyes so black and large, like onyx petals. The photographers and security men made way for the first lady to ascend a flight of red-carpeted steps. The first lady walked slowly, her back erect. The heels of her shoes were so thin, and her hair coiffed so high, that Gamela wondered how she could move at all.

Gamela stepped closer towards the entrance. As she was about to go in, a security man exiting passed her and said, “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Inside,” she said.

The security man puckered lips the color of red grapes.

“I want to see what’s happening. What is happening?”

“A lady is singing,” he said.

“What lady?”

“Some Spaniard or Italian. I don’t know. She’s white and fat.”

“Could I see?”

The security man had a prune-wrinkled face.

“Just a peek, sir. You know, I’ve never been to Manila before and I’ve never seen a live show, with an imported singer, too.” She took out P5 from her pocket. “You can buy yourself a beer later, maybe two or three. Or a Coke.”

The security man laughed and snatched the bill. “Only a peek,” he said and led her into the marble lobby, introducing her to the photographers as his niece visiting from the province. “Stay at the back of the theater and make no noise. I’m sure by now the audience wants the show done and over with. Madame’s over an hour late.”

“Thank you,” Gamela said. She approached the stairs to feel the softness of the red carpet, then dropped to her knees and lay her head on a step to caress her cheeks against the fuzz. She had never seen a carpet before.

“Hurry. Hurry,” urged the security man.

Gamela entered a pair of mahogany doors down the lobby and hid behind an aisle seat. The audience rose to attention. A spotlight focused on the Philippine flag standing beside the stage. Since the flag was limp, the sun, enclosed in a white triangle, appeared to be slipping onto the red lower half of the flag. The symphony played the national anthem. Gamela hugged herself from the chill of the air-conditioner and turned her eyes to the audience, afraid that they’d notice an outsider was in their midst. When the anthem ended, the audience resumed their seats. A moment of silence followed. The spotlight switched on stage to an orchid in a tubular vase of paper thin glass suspended from the ceiling. The cord supporting the vase was fine and transparent, giving the illusion that the orchid was adrift in mid-air. As the theater darkened, the orchid’s petals brightened, wispy as the tail of a ghost.

Gamela covered her mouth to silence her breathing. She could feel the audience’s own anxiousness for the singer to appear. To rousing applause, a woman draped in a curtain of blue satin emerged from the wings. She stopped in front of the vase to scan the theater, starting from the orchestra section to the mezzanine level and then stopping at the private boxes above, right at the center one, where the First Lady Imelda must have shone like a white silhouette. Gamela sensed that the first lady was reciprocating the singer’s gaze and wondered what it was like for someone used to being gazed upon by millions of eyes to now play the role of spectator.

The singer nodded to the conductor. The soft sound of violins, flutes, and a piano silenced the applause. Looking up, she curled her brows, as if thinking of something hateful, then tragic, then woeful. And then she sang with a voice as haunting as a night dream. Gamela didn’t recognize the song. Neither did she understand its lyrics nor know what language the song was in. Nevertheless, the music closed in on her, echoing in her head and in her heart like the melody of waves in an empty

shell. The symphony stopped playing. The singer reached a note so high and piercing that her voice lingered in the air. Everyone gasped. Gamela, too, unable to find the words to explain why she felt both sad and elated. She could only cry.

If the audience hadn't applauded at the end of the song, Gamela would have stayed crouching behind the last row for the duration of the performance. She had to stand, if only slightly, to see the singer as part of the audience itself stood, shouting "Brava" and patting their eyes dry. The singer bowed her head as if in prayer. Gamela tried to picture herself on stage with these same people caught in an outburst of gratitude and love, for it was love. She herself was applauding and cheering without realizing it, without fearing the security men would kick her out. And what emotion other than love squelched fear?