

Love and Freedom: A Review of *Tanabata's Wife*

Tanabata's Wife. 2018. Choy Pangilinan, Charlson Ong, and Lito Casaje, directors. Choy Pangilinan and Charlson Ong, producers. 90 minutes.

Directed by a triumvirate of academics—the fictionist Charlson Ong, the playwright Lito Casaje, and the film scholar Choy Pangilinan—the screen adaptation of Sinai Hamada’s beloved short story, *Tanabata's Wife*, is currently showing at selected movie houses across the country, as part of this year’s TOFARM Film Festival.

This festival’s uniqueness is also, arguably, its “value added”: its films are required to thematize Filipino agricultural, horticultural, silvicultural, or otherwise broadly environmental issues, that immediately commit the filmmaker to “ground” his or her project in our beautiful but imperiled verdant and archipelagic localities in all sorts of literal and metaphorical ways.

From the get go, the team behind this adaptation project had their work cut out for themselves: Hamada’s memorable little story about an early 20th-century Baguio-residing Japanese farmer falling in love with and becoming the common-law husband of a younger and “inconstant” Bontoc woman is so well-written, so artfully realized, and so poignant that the burden of comparison would simply be inevitable.

And the good news is, this film by Ong et al. beautifully holds a candle to this remarkable text, illumining it even more precisely because it comes into its own as an equally remarkable work of (cinematic) art. While the script hews very closely to the short story, it also owns and reimagines it, affording the viewer the chance to sympathize not only with the man, but

also with the woman, to whom it bequeaths an inner life that Hamada's work merely provides the briefest glimpses of.

The story's central mystery has always been why Fas-ang would want to leave her husband, who has been all but entirely kind to her and their son, on whom he fervently dotes. Hamada's story would seem to suggest that she was simply too young when she agreed to marry the somber stranger, for whom she had initially worked as a servant and farmhand. Becoming his wife and a mother, may have simply been too much too soon, as can be gleaned from the way she avidly loses herself, after going through a difficult childbirth, in the Hollywood movies being shown in the center of town. Perhaps, what the experience provides her is the chance to dream herself into the romantic freedom of the stories that these magically moving pictures are offering.

And so, when the opportunity to escape presents itself—in the person of a Bontoc man, a hot-headed local warrior who was probably a former suitor—in a moment of heedlessness she decides to run away with him, bringing her son with her and abandoning the poor farmer, who very quickly withers away into anguish, along with the once robust cabbage and strawberry fields to which he had been lovingly tending, but which now lie fallow and forlorn.

Here at the story's crisis point, the “vegetal” metaphor that has flitted in and out of sight throughout the film finally fully unfurls itself: love is the pain and rapture of being truly alive; it is life's burning and blossoming point, in which the self's cherished bliss is revealed as living fully and radiantly in the other. Because love is life lived at its fullest, at its most fecund, its disappearance or forfeiture must result in life's very own curtailment.

The film keeps Hamada's proffered motivation for Fas-ang's action, but textures and deepens it, by insinuating into the picture the quietly seething “cultural” conflict between identity and difference. In the film, Fas-ang leaves Tanabata partly because despite his love she still can't completely accept his “otherness,” and seeks the comfort of the familiar

and the same (“her own blood”). Soon enough, she realizes that personal goodness has nothing to do with kinship, nor with socially approved structures of familiarity. It is at this point that she remembers the radiant truth that the stranger she has cruelly abandoned is her husband, who unconditionally loves her and her son.

Scripted by Ong, whose award-winning short and extended fictions and plays are distinguished by their closely observed portraits of human vulnerability and strength, the film also allows the viewer the satisfaction of reconsidering love’s true meaning: it is perfect kindness on one hand, and its very nature requires that it be freely given and freely received, on the other.

Returning from her increasingly extended trips to the “cine” one day, Fas-ang curtly answers her husband’s admonition by saying that while his house is also her house, it is also a cage. As Ong’s script would have it, she is the one who needs to remember that she has never lost the freedom to leave Tanabata’s home, and she does indeed leave, if only to be able to allow herself the freedom to come back, this time with a wiser and more “organic” understanding of what love actually is.

After all, it can be said that it was nothing if not her youthful brashness, her material neediness, her immaturity that effectively pushed her into a socially unsanctioned marriage with the older man: in a manner of speaking, she had probably “accidentally” married him out of little else than whimsy, curiosity, and/or convenience. Only upon returning to him at film’s end—after giving herself the chance to experience her freedom to choose what kind of life, what kind of love she actually and deeply desires—does she truly and meaningfully “marry” him, this time as an act of her own carefully examined and fully deployed volition.

The film is distinguished not only by its excellently adapted script, but also by its technical polish, its visual and sonic beauty, the dramatic lyricism of its three-act structure, and its strong performances. The actors must be commended for memorably en fleshing their characters (who spoke in any of the script’s three languages). Particularly notable are the veteran

theater actor and teacher Miyuki Kamimura (whose pained but dignified countenance, chiaroscuroed with epiphanous joy, ends the film) and the lissome newcomer Mai Fanglayan: they enacted the roles of Tanabata and Fas-ang with an admirable gestalt of strength, sympathy, and respect.

Hamada's story is a domestic drama for the most part, and this film's rhythms successfully capture its calm and subtle movements, even as the preponderance of close shots and the "minimalist" production design—in particular, Tanabata's practically ramshackle house, which going by the story should've been a mite better appointed—do reveal the constraints within which this production obviously needed to work.

In any case, a clear takeaway from this wonderful film is the luminous truth that it is possible (meaning, it can actually be done): the loveliest gems of our literary tradition—anglophone, yes, but also in all our other literary languages—can and do eminently lend themselves to filmization.

All that will be needed are comparable modicums of commitment, responsibility, talent, collaboration, intelligence, derring-do, and institutional support that have made this outstanding "transmedial translation" of one of our most memorable fictional classics possible.

In the end, one just has to say (actually, pray): more such adaptations and/or "translations," please (possibly, stories by Gonzalez, Arcellana, Joaquin, Tiempo, Brillantes, Cordero-Fernando, Rivera-Ford, et al.).

To the literate local moviegoer: please go and watch this very special film.

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Acknowledgments

This review first appeared as a Facebook note, “Love and Freedom: A Review of Tanabatha's Wife,” in the author's Facebook page:

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