

Resistance, Conformity, and Negotiation to Socio-cultural Anxieties: A Semiotic Reading of Female *Aswang* Characters in Selected Philippine Horror Films

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ABSTRACT

The Philippines has a rich tradition of folklore, often portrayed in horror films to reflect cultural anxieties and hegemonic ideologies to circumvent political censorship. Among the most popular horror genres in the country is *Aswang*. This study examines the depictions of female *Aswang* in *Aswang* (2011), *Corazon ang Unang Aswang* (2012), and *Maria Labo* (2015) through Barthesian Semiology. Female *aswang* characters and their narrative exposition were analyzed on a micro, meso, and macro level. In the micro level, the Filipina *aswang* as a cultural reject tries to resist male chauvinism through her transformation towards her true nature, gaining control over her life, and divergence from the societal norms. On the other hand, she is represented in *aswang* films as someone who is being boxed with societal prescriptions, depicted as the weaker one, and is governed by her emotion. The meso level discusses how the female *aswang* is viewed in the context of her community, and how the latter affects her perception of herself and her decisions in life. The three films underscore the expectation on women to be domesticated, and the lead characters portrayed how women respond to these societal standards. Additionally, the macro level investigated how female *aswang* characters are discursively positioned in relation to socio-cultural struggles in the past and present to uncover their hegemonic constructs on poverty, injustices, mental health, and historical distortion.

Keywords: *Aswang, horror films, Philippine folklore, semiotics, socio-cultural anxieties.*

INTRODUCTION

Jenkins (2022) says that film is vital in a society because while it offers people a momentary escape from reality, it also gives the chance to reflect on one's life and that of others who lead theirs differently. Miller (2022) echoes the sentiment and maintains that films allow us to look at cultures that are outside of our own, explore historical locations in their prime age, or give us insight into places that are just states away. Filipino horror films evolve into a genre of their own by incorporating more of the culture and traditions of the Philippines into its plot structure (Corbita, et. al., 2019). One rising trend nowadays in horror and thrillers is that it carries with its social commentaries, as filmmakers have opted to use these genres to make us confront the social ills and fears (Flores, 2022).

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Quintos (2020) argued that filmic folklore, which includes the *aswang* genre, produces new interpretations and meanings through contextualization and ideologies. *Aswang* is an umbrella term for menacing supernatural beings (men and women) from urban legends that appear and behave like normal humans during the day, but can transform into animal forms during the night, preying on the sick, pregnant women, and children. Meanwhile, Derain (2021) revealed that Dr. Jose Rizal described *aswang* as innocent people characterized by indifference and sporadic attendance at church which led to social rejection. Alternatively, Macapagal (2021) found that *aswang* could signify a metaphor for the horrific state-sanctioned killings committed by the Philippine government against innocent people who were tagged as drug addicts without due process; while Evasco (2000) elucidated that *aswangs* symbolize violence and criminality in the city. Meanwhile, Baes (2017) posited that *aswang* is a simple construction that people dislike about themselves or others, which associates the creature with rejection, anger, and hatred.

Filipino horror films, such as the *aswang*, are reflections of “sociopolitical conditions and culture-specific phobias that continue to haunt us” (Liwag, 2021). When put vis-a-vis present-day issues and concerns, a different facet of the feared creature (Godinez, 2008), is exposed. As questions on power and control also arise, the instillation of fear becomes a form of social control (Lico, as cited in Castañeda, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

Scenes in movies can reflect sociological reality semiotically (Gibraltar, et. al., 2023). Through a Barthesian Semiotic lens, this study explored the depictions of female *aswang* in Philippine horror films in the past decade of 2010 to 2020. The unit of analysis includes *Aswang* (2011), *Corazon: Ang Unang Aswang* (2012), and *Maria Labo* (2015).

The micro analysis focused on the biological, physical, rational, and emotional attributions of a female *aswang*, whereas the meso analysis examined the *aswangs'* gender roles and interpersonal relationships. The macro analysis explored the social, cultural, and historical implications of pertinent plots, which contributed to the development of ideologies on the feminization of *aswangs* in selected films.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Aswang (2011) features the “*abwak*” – a type of *aswang* that is capable of turning into crows or moving underground when going after their prey. It revolves around Hasmin who defies the oppressive leadership of her own kind, the *abwak*, against the people. *Corazon: Ang Unang Aswang* (2012) exposes Corazon’s plight from bearing a child to experiencing stillbirth, and then becoming the first *aswang* due to her mental instability. *Maria Labo* (2015), lastly, is a reimagined version of a contemporary legend in Visayas about Maria, a loving mother who became an *aswang*. Raped and then victimized by an older *aswang* while working abroad, she returned to the Philippines as a changed woman who didn’t have complete control of her faculties and newly-discovered strength.

Micro: Maria Clara and the Filipina Aswang

The *aswang's* biological, physical, rational, and emotional states were analyzed at the micro level. On the polarity of conformity and resistance to the machismo society, the resisting *aswang's* alter ego is a conforming Maria Clara. From the novels of Jose Rizal, Maria Clara is

the epitome of a Filipina maiden: lovely inside and out, prim and proper, and obedient to a point of submissiveness to the system.

Feminine in Physique

On the biological front, the female *aswang* is pinned to a societal expectation of becoming a mother. Corazon embodied the pressure and desperation of fulfilling the dream of child-bearing role through her devotional plight and sacrifices to become a full-pledged mother. Kulhari (2021) emphasized through an analytical lens that “[A] woman is not a human being but a sex object and a child-bearing machine” (p. 45). Indian and Filipino women’s worth are measured through her “obedience” to her husband, relatives and in-laws, and standards of a patriarchal society. She is deemed futile without her reproductive capacity.

The female *aswang*, as represented in the text, is expected to be pleasing to the eye. In the last scene of *Maria Labo*, the presumed dead Maria was brought to the morgue to be embalmed. The mortuary cosmetologist attempted to beautify the captured and defeated *aswang*, as the huge cut across Maria’s face is deemed unacceptable to the public, especially from a male perspective. Even at the last moments of her assumed human remains, she was still subjected to the misogynistic gauge of a woman’s worth through her physical appearance.

The social construction of gender and its cultural hegemonic states are depicted in the films and characters through the visual manifestations in the physical form of the human *aswang*. The consistent showcase of the Filipina *aswang* in a dress coincides with the excess and exaggeration in the portrayal of a monstrous female in horror films. In Hollywood, the use of red, tattered fabric, and flesh-like ruffles were observed and analyzed as crucial elements in Western horror films (Johansen, 2021). On the other hand, the costume design for Filipina *aswang* in the decade of 2010-2020 is still tied with the notion of gendered clothing, wherein despite being a powerful monster, the *aswang* is still restrained with effeminate representation – such as a dress – as a demonstration of patriarchal conformity. The Filipina *aswang* is still subjected to objectification and therefore must be beautiful for the male chauvinistic lens and machismo society’s gaze even in her monstrous transformation and death.

Tamed in Logic

Being gentle and tamed have been ingrained in the mind of women through the pervasive conditioning of society’s patriarchal constructs and media forms. The “I-must-be domesticated” perspective supplements and translates into the female *aswang*’s family orientation and religious devotion. Manifestations of this rational subordination were exhibited through Corazon’s guilt about her father’s death and his death wish, Hasmin being held back by her sister’s plea to marry their vicious leader Ipo Moises, and Maria’s acts of household service and seeking of permission from her spouse Ermin before becoming an overseas Filipino worker (OFW). The collective nature of the Filipino family is an impetus for women to pressure themselves to conform with the strong sense of familism, as embedded in the Filipino culture. The usual dominant voices in the family are the elderly and parents, specifically the father, whose point of view weighs heavier in the household (Morillo et al., 2013; Gozum, 2020). Women are conditioned to recognize patriarchal authority and female subordination that they themselves fail to perceive this skewed positionality in their interpersonal relationship dynamics.

Another gendered logical conditioning is demonstrated through vehement religious devotion. This was observed during Corazon's *panata* (devotion), and Hasmin's occasional stay in the church. An ideal woman should be dutiful to her spiritual religion. In essence, there is no harm whether a woman and a person entrust her faith to a divine entity – however, this becomes problematic with the notion of religious and societal pressure and condemnation of her. Muted rationality in religious devotion may be likened to Mary Magdalene's ascent to Golgotha and how she witnessed the resurrection of Jesus Christ. A religious woman is exemplar and is therefore recommended by social norms. She is deemed as a cultural reject when she descends and her religious faith is shaken. "The supernatural woman is subversive...She represents the history of the *babaylans* (shamans) who were "ostracized and condemned as she-devils...likened to the *manananggal*, or *aswang*" and then "relegated...to the mountains and caves," outside of society" (Cabanawan, 2010, p.62).

From a postcolonial lens, Spanish colonizers forced Catholicism on Filipino pre-colonial ancestors who were made to choose between deferring to the endorsed religion or rejecting the conversion to Catholicism. This affirms Zeus Salazar's (1996) discussion of what happened to the *babaylans* or *catalonans* (seers) during the Spanish occupation in the Philippines. *Babaylans* who conformed with the Spanish rule were turned to *hermanas* (nuns), while those who were divergent were deemed as sacrilegious and dubbed as witches. Furthermore, there is also a discourse on the question of engendering Catholic God as male. The pre-colonial and primeval concept of divine entity is likened to the mutuality of both sexes and non-subordination of women. This was elaborated by the etymology of the term *bathala* [*ba-tha-la*] (*god*), where the first syllable *ba* stands for *BAbae* (woman), which signifies generation; the third syllable *la* stands for *LAlake* (man), which signifies potency; and the second syllable *tha* stands for an aspirated H, which means light or spirit. This forwards the notion of union of women and men in light.

Filipina Aswang as the Fragile Monster

She is depicted as the weaker one, or in the words of the feminist Simone de Beauvoir, the second sex. She is strong in her own terms but there will always be a bargain: she is someone with something to lose or sacrifice – typifying her flawed nature and reinforcing the *aswang* as a societal reject.

Aswang films unearth the repressed, rejected version of a culture through showcasing the restrained imagination and fear rooted from the trepidation of the *aswang* as a monster. In the Philippine media context and culture, women in horror films co-opt the idea of "severe repression of female sexuality/creativity; the attribution to the female of passivity, her preparation for her subordinated and dependent role in our culture" (Sanchez, 2016, p.124). These repressed aspects of an individual (especially a woman) in a psychoanalytic perspective and culture are deemed as threatening, ugly, obscene, and evil — in Filipino terms — *malagim*.

a. The Brute Underdog

The frailty of a woman's body was highlighted numerous times in the text. Despite being a ruthless monster, Corazon's character in her human form is easily slammed on the floor, halting her religious uprising and resistance. Meanwhile, Maria's satisfaction of her carnal cravings led to her husband aggressively slashing her face, out of disgust and furiousness over their children's death and him having them for dinner.

The female *aswang* is always depicted as someone with something to lose: Hasmin's sister's demise and her damaged relationship with her niece, Corazon with her stillborn child, and Maria with her children. Corazon lost hope in fulfilling her ultimate dream of creating and completing her nuclear family. Maria's rape rendered a violation of her femininity as the unconsented penetration robbed her off of control over her body. As a result of the curse, Maria's very own hands that cared for her children were used to slaughter them. Both Corazon and Maria were depicted as underdogs upon the exposition of their narratives. From a scientific lens, this is the female *aswang* losing her mental stability due to postpartum depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.

The female *aswangs* were represented as someone with a fight but are still the weaker gender who needed saving by a male character. In the *Aswang* film, although Hasmin plotted the killing of their evil leader Ipo Moises, the actual stabbing that fulfilled the act was carried out by a human, Daniel. She – the female *aswang*, is brute yet helpless: “horror movies depict female characters as sexual helpless victims” (Sa’eed & Jubran, 2019, p.16). The strength of the female *aswang* was highlighted through her acts of resistance, but the executioner and completion of the patriarchal uprising is carried out by the men themselves.

b. Ruthlessly Imperfect

Despite the strength she gained as the monstrous feminine, the female *aswang* is still haunted by her mistakes from her human form. The deep scar Maria got from her encounter with her husband depicts the pain she carries. The loss of Hasmin's sister, and Corazon and Maria's cruel fate of losing their children, magnify the conflict between the woman creature and her life's circumstances. In contrast, it also suggests that there is still a subtle manifestation of humanity in her powerful monster form. The mortal particle in the female *aswang* highlights her vulnerability to the natural order of things, where everyone succumbs to death. Aside from the female *aswang*, death knows no monstrosity: the demise of a beloved is as good as losing a part of oneself, and even the Filipina *aswang* is not exempted from this oblivion. In a critical lens, women are represented in fragile and subjugated roles due to the parasocial cues towards the audience. Media producers assume that the audience will be moved in favor of the underdog (Wisniewska, 2009).

The Emotional Wrecking Ball

The Filipina *aswang* is represented through a misogynistic trait of being irrational and governed by her emotions such as guilt.

a. Young, Wild, and Broken

The depiction of women as a temperamental creature stems from her youth, naivety, and mental instability. In the *Aswang* film, Hasmin's niece persuades her to delight in her upcoming marriage by emphasizing the benefits they can reap. It may be deemed that conformity comes with being a young woman: through patriarchal enablers in the meso and micro level of a young *aswang*, her mindset is conditioned towards the normality of abjecting women in various contexts, spaces, and circumstances such as marriage. Also, with a series of unfortunate circumstances, the female *aswang's* plight leads her to a debilitated mental state. Aside from Corazon's biological postpartum state and Maria's possibly post-traumatic stress disorder, mental frailty through delusions is attributed with the breaking of a woman's spirit in terms of questioning her religious devotion and immense negative experiences.

b. Emotionally Speechless

Verbal words are the language of the civilized, while emotional language through excess and unnecessary disclosure is frowned upon. The bereaving Corazon, compared to her husband Daniel, displayed intense feelings of despair as she wailed about her child's stillbirth. Her heart-breaking scream represents her loss for words to communicate her emotions. Daniel, meanwhile, is shown with muted sorrow and tries to be strong for Corazon despite the hurt he is also feeling inside. Corazon's speaking lines forward patriarchal conformity while her screams emanate resistance. This depicts how the woman is stereotyped to have illogical reasoning as she raises her voice, screams, or wails, to communicate her meaning and intention. Towards the end of Corazon's narrative, she tried to push Daniel away with her bitter words – however, her facial demeanor and posture revealed the opposite of her utterances.

c. I Take The Blame

Towards the end of the film *Aswang* and after turning Daniel into a fellow *abwak*, Hasmin, in an ashamed tone, sought his forgiveness for what she did. Daniel assured her that he does not regret this decision. Corazon, until the end of her narrative, carries the guilt of their life circumstances: “*Daniel patawarin mo ‘ko. Sa kagustuhan kong ibigay sa’yo lahat, nawala ang lahat sa buhay ko... ‘di mo na ‘ko maliligtas, Daniel. Isinumpa na ako ng langit. (Forgive me, Daniel. In my desire to give you everything, I lost everything I have... You can’t save me anymore. The heavens have cursed me)*”. Family life adversities haunted and pushed her to desperation: as Corazon fled from the townspeople chasing her, the emphasis on Daniel's view implied that he will choose her until the end, even though she has succumbed to feelings of guilt and unworthiness. Maria, meanwhile, felt self-reproach after learning that her children were bullied in school due to their economic inadequacy. The Filipina *aswang* carries with her a sense of culpability drawn from the desire to constantly please their significant others such as their sister, children, and men in her life.

Women overthink due to her ‘must-submit’ notion, thus willingly taking the blame. Guilt drives the female *aswang* to doubt herself, and her emotionality is seen as a sign of weakness. *Aswang* movies and Hollywood tropes prey on the vulnerable state of the scorned woman and enclose her with stereotypic representations of subjugated and emotional wrecking balls (Kumar, 2022). The openness to emotional vulnerability is deemed as a falldown for women and is taken against her – however, this was substantially opposed by Brillon (2018) in her analysis of Darna, a popular Filipino heroine. Brillon contended that emotions are more of a strength than a weakness: “patriarchy has demonized or invalidated female emotions and labeled it as weakness because it was opposed to the desired trait of (male) rationality” (p. 150). It is high time for women such as Filipina heroines and *aswangs* to validate her emotions and honor her pain.

The Rise of the Cultural Rejects

The resistance of the female *aswang* is exhibited through various micro level manifestations. Her transformation, taking control of her nature and life, and divergence from the patriarchal social norms are some of the representations of sexism defiance in the *aswang* films in focus.

a. *The Conversion of Maria Clara to Sisa*

Yanggaw is an Ilonggo term synonymous to conversion or change in form. The *aswangs'* transformation to her monstrous nature, which is brute and is deemed unacceptable, is a defiance of the patriarchal expected behavior. She is ostracized and is frowned upon by the hegemonic flow and members of the society.

The external identity shift is manifested through physiological and biological changes in a woman's body. In the text, the transformation of the woman into a monster is signified by physical symbolisms of her claws, unkempt hair, and appetite for human flesh. The bodily transformation is the embodiment of strength for the female *aswang*. She loses the norm prescriptive feminine-like physical attributes of a Maria Clara and turns into a scorned woman like Sisa, the deranged woman in Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere*.

Another crucial transformation of the female *aswang* was prompted by her role of becoming a mother, as depicted through Corazon's birthing scene. The excruciating pain she endured while giving birth was paradigmatically rendered without sound effects to highlight her vocalized agony. The laboring mother represents a negotiated resistance, showing how a woman can sustain great heights of challenges to fulfill her inner desires.

Apart from the exterior changes, the mutation in the female *aswang's* internal state signifies an opposition to the sexist media representation of the monstrous Filipina. The human death to become an *aswang* is a pivotal avenue in showcasing the internal death of the meek and subjugated monstrous feminine in human form. The female *aswang's* internal death is demonstrated through Maria's physiological repose after being raped in a foreign country, the crumbling of Corazon's spirituality, and Hasmin's dissociation from the *abwaks* as she plotted the killing of her groom and their leader. Through this identity transformation, the female *aswang* liberated herself from the taming constructs and unleashed her true form.

Strong women characters are represented by having extraordinary will, perseverance, and brute strength. However, in a certain essence *she* – the Filipina – needs to “lose her humanity in order to regain some control over her life” (Baltan, 2020, par. 7). She needed to be rejected by the status quo so she can be who she wants to be in her natural element and her true self.

b. *Control of Her Nature and Life*

The female *aswang's* depiction exhibits patriarchal restraint through her gained dominance as she communicates her assent and dissent towards various circumstances. She resists machismo social systems through her will and action. In the film, Maria did not allow herself to be subject to penetration through embalming and enhancements on her slashed face. Corazon's desire of becoming a mother and keeping her stillborn baby were venerated through her unwavering drive to persist with what she wants, and regain ascendancy in her life.

In addition, the female *aswang's* authority is depicted through her control of situations where she can outrightly refuse and accept what fate offers her. Hasmin's rebellious character surfaces her refusal against ideologies that dictate her destiny, evident in her non-human flesh diet and blatant refusal to marry for power. Having control over one's fate and faith were exhibited by Corazon's religious disillusionment. In the falling action, Corazon shouts towards the sky, an expression of protest and curse versus her perceived divine entity. This conveys the woman's will to deviate from the religious norm – her resistance is manifested through her ideological jurisdiction and she decides where to put her faith and hope in.

c. Divergence from the Wave

Female *aswangs* exhibit bifurcation towards being a societal reject so she can accept herself. For one, Hasmin was represented as a rebellious *abwak* that resists their flesh-eating nature. She also defied her designated spouse and married life, despite the perks it could bring their family. Moreover, her wedding dress is a mix of white and black, which can also be seen as a divergence to norms. In the Philippines, the white wedding dress (and veil) represents the woman's purity (Town's Delight, 2021). As the bride is also expected to look physically gorgeous and to act puritanically, an unkempt hair, hideous face, and unruly claws are frowned upon.

The texts exhibited deviation from the patriarchal societal norms where a Filipina, including the female *aswang*, is pressured to conform to the Hedonic cycle of life. To be dubbed as accomplished and happy, a woman had to get married, have a child, and be a good mother. The societal prescriptions turn the pressure up for female humans and *aswangs*. The hegemonic culture loathes and ostracizes divergents, because they stir up the ostensible normal flow of society. However, continuous acceptance and conforming to what life and society has to offer and give, brings her forth towards the abyss of oblivion and beyond.

Meso: The Aswang as Light of the Home

The three *aswang* films implied the expectation on women to be domesticated. Like in most cultures out there, mothers are the rock and center of the home (Santiago, n.d.). In the Philippines, mothers are referred to as the "ilaw ng tahanan (light of the home)," and are assumed to take care of everything in the household: from the day-to-day chores to ensuring the physiological and psychosocial health and development of her family. In a 2021 survey among 640 digital Filipina mom respondents, it was found that 78% takes care of their children themselves (theAsianparent, n.d.). This proves that mothers spend a lot of time with their kids and the household, and are therefore the most fitting decision-makers with regards their family's needs.

Corazon and Maria lived up to this nurturing notion: Corazon was a doting daughter to her ill father and a devoted wife to her husband Daniel. Maria, likewise, is an ideal mother and spouse as she looks after every member's needs. This is aligned with Oxfam Pilipinas' 2022 research findings on unpaid labor in Filipino homes, which indicate that women still bear the brunt of unpaid care work (Guerrero, 2022). In the survey, half of the 232 full-time Business Process Outsourcing or BPO employee-respondents strongly agree that women take more responsibility for childcare and believe gender norms still persist in households.

Hasmin, however, could be seen as a deviation. Instead of projecting a docile woman who obeys the whims of those around her, she empathizes with those victimized by her clan. Neither does she explicitly express parental concern, as it is her mother figure Guada who serves as her go-to person for protection and safe space.

The structures that these motherly figures inhabit are feeble ones: wooden with little to no furnishings, these buildings could easily be demolished with one blow. These are in stark contrast with the edifices that the influential male characters in the films dwell in: spacious, cemented, and fully-furnished, these abodes spell power, dominance, and control – exactly what these men impose on the women. Incidentally, it is also in their encounters with these sturdy residences that the female *aswangs* felt more deprived and uneasy as they had to endure pain or hellish experiences.

The blatant differences of the characters' residences imply how women are perceived to be second to men. In a 2017 global poll conducted by Ipsos MORI, it was reported that one in five people worldwide believe women are inferior to men and should stay at home (Reuters, 2017). Despite people proclaiming their belief in equal rights, many still think that "true equality is not there yet," with women and girls less likely to be seen as suited to brainy tasks (Davis, 2018). These two studies, conducted within the time frame of the films in focus, show that despite the constant struggle to equalize rights and opportunities for both men and women, people still act upon long-standing stereotypes that view females as the lesser gender. Society doesn't push women to be in the workforce more often because it takes away from women staying at home and taking care of the household and kids (Patel, 2022). She is expected to be the main person who rears the children to be decent individuals, who abide by the law and know how to pray. Filipinos are known for their religiosity after all, and living in a dominantly Catholic country exacerbates this expectation.

In the films, the act of living by faith is demonstrated by Corazon. Heavily devout, she attends masses and frequently alludes to the Almighty. Consistent with the fashion of her times, she also proudly wears a cross necklace – a sure sign of ardent faith in God. This aligns with how society expects her to be religious, and with what "The Spiritual Child" author Lisa Miller said that "women are central to the spiritual development of children" (Miller, as cited in Grossman, 2015). She furthered that while children learn a lot of things from the father, it's the mother's spiritual practices and observances that impact the kids, especially the daughters.

The Thing with Gender Roles

Gender roles are when certain tasks are stereotyped as exclusive to males or females, and women carry the weight of them. Expected to be the domesticated gender, more functions are inevitably designated to the woman, leading to loads of unpaid labor.

The female *aswangs'* dilemma is mirrored in today's society as women are continually supposed to be the inferior. Jafar et al. (2022) note that gender stereotypes become damaging when it restricts a person's ability to develop skills, pursue professions, or make life decisions. Despite having a clear sense of what they do and do not want, women are not easily able to move towards their desired direction as they frequently need to consider what family members, peers, or even neighbors have to say. This constant struggle between meeting societal standards and achieving personal goals makes it harder for the woman to be her own person, because someone always assumes they know better for her. But as Bart and McQueen (2013) forwarded, women decision-makers are more inquisitive, cooperative, collaborative, and consensus-building; thus, "are significantly more inclined to make decisions by taking the interests of multiple stakeholders into account in order to arrive at a fair and moral decision" (Bart & McQueen, 2013).

Instances of compliance, defiance, and compromise persist throughout the *aswang* films. Conformity is most apparent in the cases of Corazon and Maria, who are both bent on bearing and rearing children in belief that this establishes their worth. The females felt compelled to do something to uplift their lives, yet their decisions did not yield the results they longed for. This somehow implies that women need their knight-in-shining-armors to catch them when they fall, because they're unable to come up with sound judgments.

It was Hasmin who proved that women can go for what they want, whether it means negotiating for a win-win situation or going all-out with resistance. Armed with knowledge of what she is capable of, she was not afraid to assert herself and fight for what she believes in. Hasmin defies the *abwaks'* norm of blindly obeying their leader. Despite her sister's repeated warnings and her looming union with the head of their clan, she insists on empathizing with the humans and writing her own fate.

Hasmin's eagerness to tread her own path is mirrored by present-day women who are willing to be the ebb in the flow. For example, participants in *Ariel Ahon Pinay* empowerment program completed technical courses in shielded metal arc welding, plumbing, automotive servicing, and electrical installation and maintenance, and eventually excelled in these male-dominated fields (WhenInManila.com Team, 2019). Tatler Philippines (2022), also highlights Filipinas who are making great strides in altering the cultural spectrum: renowned athletes Mikee Conjuangco-Jaworski and Hidilyn Diaz, broadcaster Karen Davila, and former vice president Leni Robredo are but some.

Although some females today inevitably still abide by notions of inferiority, it is uplifting to know that Filipino urban millennial couples recognize that more women are taking on breadwinner roles (Guerrero, 2022). This implies the need for the recognition of what they can do, and a better representation of women in leadership functions.

No Better Gender

The movies' pairings prove that interdependence is possible between men and women who come together with mutual respect and honor. Licensed professional counselor Clarke (2023) explains that as interdependence involves a balance of self and others within the relationship, it recognizes that both partners exert effort to meet each other's needs in appropriate and meaningful ways.

Hasmin's goal of eradicating Ipo Moises would be impossible without the help of Daniel, and Corazon would wallow in self-pity if her spouse did not appreciate her as a woman. Similarly, Ermin never ceased protecting his wife Maria – to the point that he covered up for her monstrosity to the police. Scenes like these show that there is a shift in people's mindsets regarding what men and women can bring to the table. These advancements are welcome, no matter how gradual they are.

Countering the patriarchy is a long shot as it entails a reorganization of the culture that one has been born into. But as these films show, it is possible that in time, the old adage "behind every successful man is a woman" can be repurposed to say "beside every successful man is an equally successful woman" – because that's what leveling men and women is about. That also rings true with what the concept of feminism forwards: it's not about women being better than men (IWDA, n.d.), but about all genders having equal rights and opportunities.

Driven Enough

The title "*ilaw ng tahanan*" has long been romanticized. Although pleasant-sounding, a deeper reading of this moniker reveals its patriarchal orientation: it expects women to be domesticated, shining in a space that is boxed by the "*haligi ng tahanan*" (pillar of the home) – the man of the house.

Despite the modern times, instances that assume men's superiority still find ways to manifest themselves. This pushes the empowered woman to constantly struggle to carve her niche and prove her worth. The silver lining is that today, women are driven enough to

continually break free from societal prescriptions. In her article for the Philippine News Agency, Gita-Carlos (2022) cited the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Report 2021, where the Philippines ranked 17th among 156 nations and remained an Asian top performer in closing gender inequality.

Empowered women find allies in fellow women who support their cause. Mothers are teaching sons to fend for themselves, indoctrinating the necessity of learning domestic chores so they can share in "mundane" tasks such as maintaining the household. Even some men are opening up to the idea that women are their own persons.

Macro: The Monster and the Monstered

"*Inaswang*" refers to getting something rightfully owned by someone else, which can pertain to romantic relationships or employment opportunities. Meanwhile, "*pag-aaswang*," in this discourse, describes the process of excluding those who are different. In this context, *pag-aaswang* is defined in two different ways: 1) oppressive behaviors against divergents or 2) liberating actions that are out of sync with social norms. Therefore, the concept of *pag-aaswang* can be enacted by either the oppressor or the oppressed.

It is apparent in the films that *aswangs* belong to the lower socioeconomic classes deprived of their agency, freedom, and dignity, whereas the oppressors have always been regarded as higher classes. There was also a strong emphasis that even at the height of their power, *aswangs* can fall prey to humans. This othering of the marginalized groups, all for the glorification of patriarchy, reveals the false prophet in sheep's clothing. Therefore, the selected films depicting oppressive men taking away women and people's opportunities for growth and liberation illustrate the patriarchy as the wicked beast and true enemy of society.

The Trinity of a Patriarchal Society

a. Women as Deviants

Women, who also represent other marginalized groups, are the main targets of the supreme dictator of social norms. Historically, women's stories are often silenced or consigned to the private sphere (Aziz et. al, 2022) – and despite their conformity to societal pressures to protect their relationships over themselves, these key players are denied their liberty.

In an ardent desire to protect what they deem important – people and principles – women resist social expectations, leading to their villainization that constitutes the concept of "*pag-aaswang*" against the marginalized. Upholding their beliefs, values, or attitudes that go against the rules of the almighty dictator can also be seen as deviance. Lintag-Tababa (2019) indicates that female *babaylans*, who were knowledgeable in medicine and religion, earned the same respect as *pandays* (blacksmiths) and *datus* (chieftains) as they preserved the culture and traditions together. But when the *babaylans* led the revolt against the colonizers, they were branded as disciples of the devil or *aswangs*, then burned to death. As a result, ancient Filipinos were instilled with Christian teachings that favor male dominance.

b. The Community as the Enabler

As a key player in the power dynamics, the community plays a vital role in determining whether the almighty dictator's experiment will be successful or not. In its capacity as an emissary, this sector can make or break the moral agency of the people. Therefore, this sector has the potential to either be an ally or an enemy to marginalized groups. Casibual (2022)

argues that the function of monstrosity through oral stories and media content is to regulate conformity or resistance among the members of the community.

c. Patriarchy as the Almighty Dictator

The patriarchy, also known as the impassive dictator, establishes the dominant perspectives. In order to maintain its position at the top of the power structure, it suppresses other key players through the process of othering or “*pag-aaswang*”. As a result of this power play, misogyny, sexualization, oppression, violence, and manipulation against women and vulnerable groups is perpetuated. This power play maintains the authority of the patriarchy. According to Brillon (2018), effeminate characteristics, such as feelings, constrain the abilities of superheroes, but at the same time, feelings can also be a sign of strength.

Conformity, Resistance, and Negotiation

The films in focus were teeming with instances of women’s conformity, resistance, and negotiation, whether or not she is a female *aswang*. To better illustrate how these behaviors are manifested, the researchers plotted these where they are most observed or rampant on the woman’s body. The succeeding expositions, along with Figure 1 below, present how these are mapped.

a. Pagtalima (Conformity)

In the symbolic representation of *aswangs* in selected films, women are enslaved to conform with the physical and biological functions of the body, such as beauty and conception. As demonstrated in micro analysis, the female leads looked pleasant even in their monstrous *aswang* forms. They were also made to deal with the weight of child bearing or rearing, as was intertwined in the movies’ plots. In Figure 1, a woman’s face, bosom, torso, and vagina are colored green – alluding to her conformity.

Wanting to preserve peace and harmony in a community, women conform – and become sexualized in the process. In turn, this leads to social issues such as violence and mental health problems. Women are historically at the bottom of the power structure due to gendered ideology and normative conformity. It was only on April 30, 1937 that Filipino women were granted the right to vote and be elected to office. The Philippine Institute for Development Studies (2018) also reported that women are underrepresented in appointive and elective offices as well as in high level positions within corporations. Consequently, Filipino women earn only 78 percent of what men earn, revealing a significant pay gap (Global Gender Gap Report, 2021). Further, the Philippine National Police (2020) reported that there were over 76,000 cases of violence against women and children in 2020, showing a significant amount of gender-based violence during the peak of the coronavirus pandemic.

b. Pagtutol (Resistance)

Amidst her shackles of conformity, the woman maneuvers to free herself and resist societal limits. Her lips and her extremities, colored red in Figure 1 below, become instrumental to her resistance.

Women facilitate revolt to combat the perpetuation of inequality, sexual violence, racial discrimination, exploitation, stereotyping, injustices, environmental destruction, and other irrationalities. By enunciating her thoughts, a woman connects with her community and empowers others. Although outnumbered by enablers, she doesn’t hesitate to use physical

force when necessary. This leads to instances where women are punished for their resistance, and become othered by those who conform with the dominant perspective.

c. Pakikipagkasundo (Negotiation)

Rationality is a powerful weapon, and women know that using their brains to their advantage could allow them to challenge established norms. Thus, the blue shade in the woman's mind in Figure 1, implying her (peaceful attempts to) negotiation.

Through negotiation, a woman strives to interrogate the unjust while surviving punishments for her defiance. In this light, a woman's true strength is seen not only through her physical prowess, but in her feminine power: her ability to think, be concerned with quality and substance, and be accepting and inclusive.

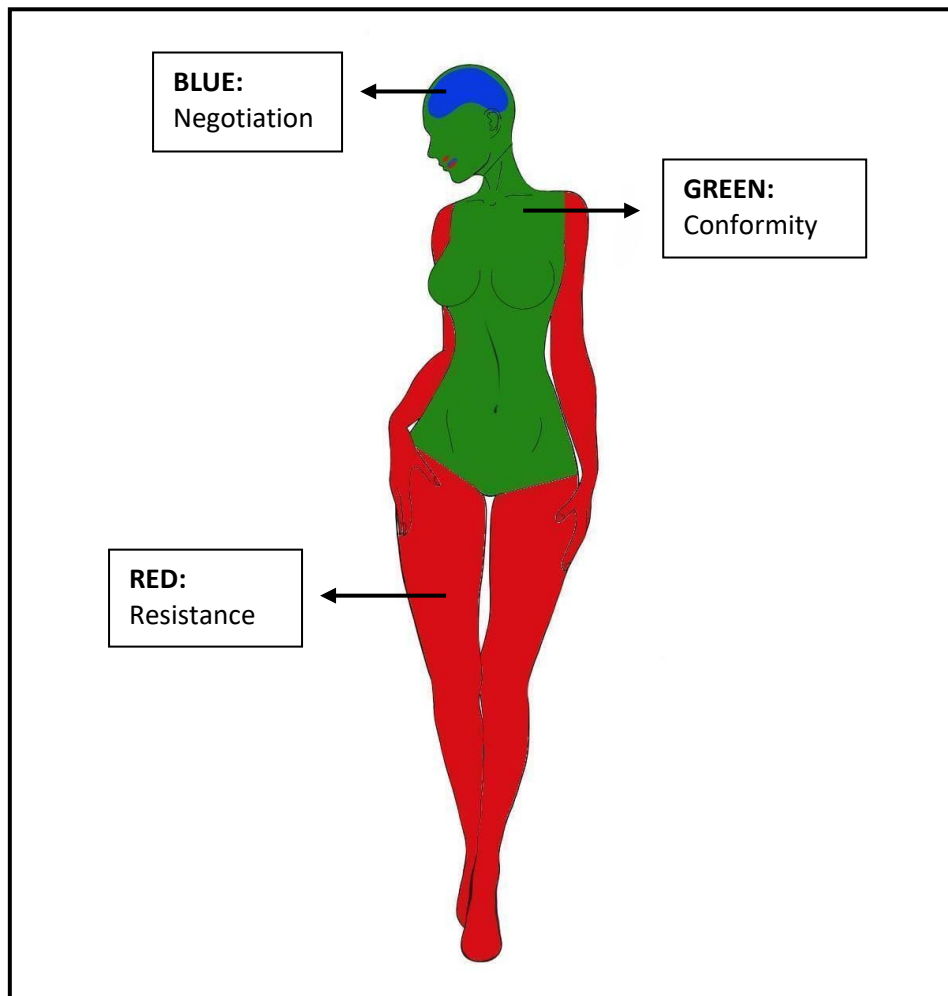


Figure 1: The mapping of conformity, resistance, and negotiation in a woman's physique.

The Socio-cultural Anxieties

a. Poverty

The films' structure depicts disparities between landlords, middle-classes, and the poor, mirroring real-life inequalities. Some resist and others commit crimes because of their desperation to survive. Further, poverty is depicted as one of the post-war horrors of an

inchoate nation, symbolically illustrating the many challenges involved in rehabilitating a country liberated from colonialism in the 1940s.

b. Misogynistic Injustices

The films demonstrated the gendered and racialized plight of women OFWs that often face extortion, sexual harassment, prostitution, murder, and other forms of violence. As women represent the vulnerable and marginalized populations in this study, the researchers argue that human rights violations are perpetrated against women by our patriarchal society in the same manner as they are perpetrated against the "othered" members of our community who show resistance against the ruling class: activists, environmentalists, journalists, and other progressive groups. In this sense, *pag-aaswang* may also be viewed as red-tagging as it is known in modern times. By red-tagging, government critics are maliciously labelled as communists or terrorists regardless of their political views and affiliations, therefore due process is violated.

c. Mental Health Problems

The demonization of mental health challenges, which is most prevalent among women, reflects the restrictive roles assigned to them that prevent them from being in control of their own lives. *Corazon ang Unang Aswang* and *Maria Labo* suggest how women can still be invalidated by society, even when they are at the height of their power, and how they require men's support to reestablish their credibility and value. Moreover, the two *aswangs* depicted as prisoners of mental health disorders reflect the inaccessibility of quality healthcare services, particularly in rural areas. Approximately six out of ten Filipinos die without having the opportunity to see a physician due to a lack of healthcare facilities and resources (Sanvictores, 2015).

d. Historical Distortion

The depiction of *aswangs* as menacing without providing historical context diminishes the fight the *babaylans* carried out to preserve gender equality and our country's sovereignty during the Spanish colonization. Salazar (1996) asserts that many messianic rebellions were initiated by *babaylans*, including those in Bohol that involved Sumuroy's father and Waray Tupung. He added that *babaylans'* rebellion against Spanish colonization began as a religious and cultural struggle until it became political during the revolution of the Katipunan. The demonization of *babaylans* as *aswang* during the Spanish colonization is narrated in Hermenia Mendez's essay, *The Viscera-Sucker and the Politics of Gender* in 1991. Additionally, Father Juan de Plascencia asserted that the *catalonans*, who served as healers, community leaders, and shamans, equivalent to *babaylans*, were considered evil in his essay *Customs of the Tagalogs* in 1598.

CONCLUSION

This study intends to elevate the discourse on feminist folklore by unmasking the monstrous woman. By scrutinizing the *aswang* as a mythological creature, it was found that indigenizing communication research through expansion of folkloric imagination offers a magnanimity of heuristic value.

In the micro level, the Filipina *aswang* as a cultural reject tries to resist male chauvinism. She transforms towards her true nature, gains control over her life, and diverges from societal norms. Ironically, she is also represented in *aswang* films as the weaker gender, governed by her emotions, and boxed by societal prescriptions.

The meso level discusses how the female *aswang* is viewed in the context of her community, and how the latter affects her perception of herself and her decisions in life. The three films underscore the expectation on women to be domesticated, and the lead characters portrayed how women respond to these societal standards. As surfaced, women have the choice to conform, negotiate, or resist these norms, and whatever her choice may be, her environment perpetually attempts to have a say in the way she opts to live.

The macro analysis tackles the discursive positioning of female *aswang* characters as juxtaposed with sociocultural struggles in the past and present. This section reveals that *aswang* symbolizes the othering of marginalized sectors of society.

In conclusion, the selected *aswang* films illustrate how power plays are orchestrated in society, as facilitated by key players: (1) the women, (2) the enabler, and (3) the almighty dictator. Women, representative of marginalized groups, are denied autonomy and dignity whenever they display resistance to established norms or manifest potentials that threaten men's dominance. They are also labelled pariahs and transgressors due to unjust circumstances perpetrated by those in power who undermine women and depoliticize their rights. The enablers are the members of the community, which can either be allies or oppressors. Lastly, the almighty dictator symbolizes the patriarchy that establishes the accepted beliefs, attitudes, and actions within a community. The patriarchal system administers the *pag-aaswang* of the outcasts, and manipulates them by sowing fear among community members. This kind of culture produces socio-cultural anxieties such as poverty, misogynistic injustices, mental health challenges, and historical distortion.

BIODATA

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