



UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES

Bachelor of Arts in Broadcast Communication
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E KASI, BABAE:

Myths about women who love women in Filipino films

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Date of Submission
April 2013

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Fritzie D. Rodriguez

April 2013

E KASI, BABAE:
MYTHS ABOUT WOMEN WHO LOVE WOMEN IN FILIPINO FILMS

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Submitted to the
COLLEGE OF MASS COMMUNICATION
University of the Philippines Diliman
In partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of
BACHELOR OF ARTS IN BROADCAST COMMUNICATION

April 2013

E KASI, BABAE:
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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

My sincerest gratitude goes to everyone who fuelled my desire to pursue this study.

My parents. I love you. Ma, Da, words are not enough to tell you how happy and grateful I am to be your daughter.

Sir Eli. You have instilled in me the desire to learn. I am very fortunate to have you as my [very patient] mentor. Thank you for making us see the world differently. You have challenged me to think more critically, but also to think more playfully.

U.P. Journalism Club. My college life would have been very different without you. See you around! I'll be a proud alumna. *Critical thought and action.*

U.P. Tangway. My first family away from home. I'm sorry I haven't been around that much. Thank you, Tangway. I miss you. *Fly High.*

U.P. I love you. I cannot even put my gratitude into words. I shall express my gratitude through my actions. This will be a lifetime commitment. *Honor and excellence.*

bELibers (My thesismates). It was a fun semester. Thank you for the sleepless nights (if you know what I mean). I'm so happy to be in our team. Never *guieb* up!

Sir Eric Manalastas. It all started with your class. It was an enlightening semester. You have inspired me to learn more and to do more for our ongoing fight against discrimination and indifference.

My friends. Especially Ramon, Faith, Angel, Malee, Ralph, Nille, Maine, Cheng, Jodesz & Karmela (Geek Club), Jamu, et al. Thank you. I'm so happy we met. Cheers!

B.C. '08. I miss you all. You were my first friends in C.M.C. Thanks for the happy memories. Now it's my turn to graduate. See you soon.

U.P. O.E.C. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to study in Kyoto. I learned so much from that year. I hope you continue to help more students.

My professors. Especially Ma'am Maeanne Los Baños, Ma'am Marion Tan and Ma'am Sarah Raymundo. You may not remember me. I just want to thank you for being an inspiration. All of you are such strong, intelligent and independent women. I have learned so much from your classes. Someday, I hope to be as inspiring as you.

Women. I love you. This is for you. *Mabuhay ka!*

*Inaalay ko ito sa lahat ng mga Filipino na sarado ang puso't isipan
ukol sa usapin ng sexualidad at karapatan ng kababaihan.*

*Sabay-sabay nating palayain ang ating mga sarili
mula sa hawla ng lipunan.*

*Pagpupugay sa lahat ng
babaeng umiibig sa kapwa babae!*

ABSTRACT

Rodriguez, F. D. (2013). *E KASI, BABAE: Myths about women who love women in Filipino films*, Unpublished undergraduate thesis, University of the Philippines Diliman College of Mass Communication.

This qualitative study examines the representation of women who love women as observed in Filipino films which are considered broadcast texts. The research explores whether such representations are supporting or deconstructing the dominance of patriarchy in society. Through purposive sampling, the researcher studied the films *T-bird at Ako* (1982) and *Rome & Juliet* (2006) as the materials of the research. I chose these films because they were possibly the earliest and the latest Filipino films that mainly focused on woman-to-woman love. Using textual analysis as a methodology, the study explores the issues of homophobia, gender and women's oppression. The units of analysis are the representations and interactions of both female and male characters, script, symbolisms and narrative development.

This study examines the Filipino struggle for *lesbian visibility* as cited by Roselle Pineda (2001). The study identifies, describes and critiques the differences and similarities in the representations of love between the 1982 film and the 2006 film; it is important to note that the former was produced before the active struggle for lesbian visibility began in the Philippines. This research offers a critique of the existing representations as interpreted by a woman.

Keywords: *film, gender, homophobia, patriarchy, representation, same-sex love, women*

ABSTRAKT

Rodriguez, F. D. (2013). *E KASI, BABAE: Myths about women who love women in Filipino films*, Unpublished undergraduate thesis, University of the Philippines Diliman College of Mass Communication.

Sinusuri ng pag-aaral na ito ang representasyon at kakulangan ng representasyon ng mga babaeng umiibig sa kapwa babae sa mga pelikulang Filipino na itinuturing na mga textong pambrodkast. Sinusuri ng pag-aaral kung ang mga representasyong ito ay tumutulong sa pagsulong o sa pagwasak ng patriarkiya sa lipunan. Sa pamamagitan ng *purposive sampling*, pinag-aralan ng mananaliksik ang pelikulang *T-bird at Ako* (1982) at *Rome & Juliet* (2006). Pinili ko ang mga pelikulang ito dahil ang mga ito ang posibleng pinakauna at pinakahuling ginawang pelikulang Filipino na ang pangunahing pokus ay ang pag-ibig sa pagitan ng dalawang babae. Gamit ang *textual analysis*, sinuri ng pag-aaral ang mga isyu ng *homophobia*, *gender* at pagkaapi ng kababaihan. Ang mga yunit ng pagsusuri ay ang representasyon at interaksyon ng mga babae at lalaking tauhan, iskrip, simbolismo at ang katangian ng paglalahad ng istorya.

Sinusuri rin ng pag-aaral ang pakikibaka ng ilang Filipino tungo sa *lesbian visibility* hango sa sanaysay ni Roselle Pineda (2001). Sinusuri ng pag-aaral ang mga pagkakaiba at pagkakahalintulad ng representasyon ng pag-ibig sa pagitan ng mga pelikula noong 1982 at 2006; mahalagang tandaan na ang naunang pelikula ay nilikha noong panahong hindi pa nagsisimula ang aktibong pagpupunyagi para sa lesbian visibility sa Pilipinas. Nag-aalok ang pag-aaral ng kritika ng mga umiiral na representasyon ayon sa interpretasyon ng isang babae.

Keywords: *babae, homophobia, gender, patriarkiya, pelikula, representasyon, same-sex love*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Consent page	i
University permission page	ii
Title page	iii
Approval sheet	iv
Biographical data	v
About the researcher	vi
Acknowledgement	vii
Dedication	viii
Abstract	ix
Abstrakt	x
Table of contents	xi
List of tables	xv
List of figures	xvi
CHAPTER I	
INTRODUCTION: LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT	1
A. Women in love: How this research began	1
B. Films as venue for love: Theoretical inquiry and research problem	3
C. Films as broadcast texts	4
D. Objectives of the research	5
E. Significance of the study	6
F. Scope and limitations	6
G. Methodology	7
H. Theoretical framework	8

CHAPTER II	
MEET THE WOMEN	10
A. Women who love women	10
B. The Invisible women	12
CHAPTER III	
TIME AFTER TIME: WOMEN'S OPPRESSION	15
A. Does history repeat itself?	16
B. No lesbians allowed?	17
C. Love in the time of patriarchy	20
<i>Postcolonial reading</i>	20
<i>Compulsory heterosexuality</i>	21
<i>Homophobia</i>	22
CHAPTER IV	
WOMEN, MEN, AND FILMS: IT'S COMPLICATED	24
A. Media stereotypes	24
B. Independent women, Independent films	25
C. Lesbians in Filipino films	26
D. The visible man	30
CHAPTER V	
INTRODUCTION OF FILMS	31
A. First film: T-bird at Ako (1982)	31
<i>Film summary & characters</i>	31
<i>Initial reaction</i>	33
B. Second film: Rome & Juliet (2006)	34
<i>Film summary & characters</i>	34
<i>Initial reaction</i>	36
<i>Film Title</i>	38

CHAPTER VI
THE MYTH OF MASCULINIZATION AND FEMINIZATION

A. The masculinization of Sylvia	40
<i>Lalaking-lalaki</i>	41
<i>The aggressive Sylvia</i>	41
<i>Katawan lang 'yan a</i>	44
<i>Why can't we be (more than) friends?</i>	44
<i>Who wears the pants?</i>	44
<i>Implications</i>	47
B. The feminization of Sylvia	48
<i>Dress to impress?</i>	48
<i>Implications</i>	49
C. Woman defined by man; woman defined by her uterus	50
D. Resisting the myth	53
<i>Independent women</i>	56
<i>Sexual fluidity</i>	57
<i>Sex = Promiscuity?</i>	58
<i>Implications</i>	59

CHAPTER VII
THE MYTH OF WOMEN'S SPACES

A. The nightclub	60
B. Reincarnation of the church	62

CHAPTER VIII
THE MYTH OF GAZES

A. [T]bird's-eye view	66
<i>Can't Isabel fantasize over Sylvia?</i>	68
B. God gazes over Sylvia gazing over Isabel	69
C. Female gaze?	73

CHAPTER IX	
THE MYTH OF VILLAINS AND VICTIMS	76
Shifting roles	78
CHAPTER X	
THE MYTH OF MISERABLE FATES	80
A. Paths of women in T-bird at Ako	80
B. Paths of women in Rome & Juliet	82
<i>Everything will be okay at the brink of death</i>	83
<i>Direct consequences/Indirect consequences</i>	84
CHAPTER XI	
SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATION	85
EPILOGUE	91
REFERENCES	92
NOTES	97

LIST OF TABLES

Table No.	Title	Page
1	Summary of Eviota's observations: Women throughout changing societies	12
2	Summary of the myth of women as villains and men as victims	76

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure No.	Title	Page
1	Sylvia confesses her love to Isabel	43
2	She wears the pants	45
3 & 4	T-birds: Maxi & Sylvia	46
5 & 6	Sylvia the t-bird & and Babette the heterosexual	46
7	Happy ending?	49
8 & 9	Jake kisses Sylvia, but stops shortly after	51
10 & 11	Rome and Juliet: Unafraid of intimacy	53
12-15	Rome's and Juliet's diverse choices of clothing	54
16	Girls kissing in public	55
17 & 18	Rome's rejected suitor.	55
19	Marc & Juliet in the shower.	57
20	Rome & her FuBu (Fuck Buddy)	57
21	Rome & Juliet in the shower	57
22	Isabel's first appearance happens inside the nightclub	61
23 & 24	Kill him or get raped. Sylvia is not given much choice	62
25-28	Simbang Gabi: Rome & Juliet's first encounter	63
29	Rome & Juliet: Lovers and churchgoers	64
30	Rome & Juliet's love confession inside the church	65
31	Isabel the gazed	66
32	Sylvia the gazer	66
33, 34, 35	Are we watching Isabel dance from Sylvia's perspective?67	
36	Jesus Christ watching over your steps	70
37	Jesus Christ gazes over Sylvia gazing over Isabel	70
38	Saints by the door	70
39	Jesus Christ in every meal	70
40	Isabel and the Virgin Mary	70
41	Sylvia and the cross	70
42	The same religious environment inside Jake's home	71

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure No.	Title	Page
43 & 44	Isabel from Sylvia's point of view?	72
45 & 46	In the end, Sylvia panics and leaves Isabel's room	72
47-52	Rome and Juliet expressing intimacy as lovers	73
53-58	Juliet gazing over Rome	74
59	Girlfriend in a coma: Juliet after the car accident	83

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

“I remember hesitating many times and thinking how automatic it had become to alter one’s immediate thoughts with tamer words.”

— Lani T. Montreal, *The Smell of Sleep*, 1998: 21.

A. Women in love: How this research began

As a moviegoer, I have observed that many Filipinos seem to be fond of watching films about love and romance. As a child, my concept of romantic love was that of between a woman and a man. But as I grew older, I was exposed to more perspectives, people and experiences; hence I began to understand that love is not limited to a relationship between a woman and a man. I have seen love prosper between two women; I have seen this happen in real life, in literature, songs, paintings, photographs, films and dramas. However, in the Philippines, finding such materials concerning woman-to-woman love is not easy. At least for me, based on my own experience, there seems to be a rarity of such works.

Being a woman myself, I have always kept a keen eye on how women are represented. I grew up with the television almost always turned on and I observed that women who love women are rarely seen on Philippine television and films. This made me rethink the concept of love. If love can exist between two women, just as much as between a woman and a man as well as between two men, then how come Philippine media does not create more programs and films about it? If ever they are featured, these women are usually given minor roles, hence given less airtime compared to heterosexual characters or couples.

Based on my observation, more often than not, representations of women who love women seem to be problematic. Women fall as victims of stereotypes not only on how they are physically represented, but also on how their interaction with women, men and society is represented.

I originally wanted to focus on how woman-to-woman love is represented in Philippine television, but I had a very difficult time looking for materials to study. I admit that time constraint and lack of resources made it more difficult to look for materials. I was looking for television shows that mainly focus on same-sex love among women, but the closest material I could find was a few episodes of *Maalaala Mo Kaya (MMK)* as studied in an undergraduate thesis by Queyquep in 2012. In her study, she examined the representation of lesbians in four episodes aired between the years 1998 and 2010. Queyquep (2012) concluded that sexual categorization exists in television, and lesbians are no exception. Queyquep noted that lesbians were represented as “mere mimics of male trend” (p. 75). However Queyquep also stressed that despite the misrepresentations of lesbians in *MMK*, television can still be a “site for lesbian liberation” (p. 76). I wondered why *MMK* started featuring lesbian characters only in 1998. I am sure that Filipino lesbians have already existed many years earlier than 1998.

During the wee hours of the day, perhaps at one or two in the morning, I accidentally watched *T-bird at Ako* (1982) on television. It was aired on *Cinema One*.¹ The whole movie revolves around the relationship between two women. Then I began searching for other Filipino films centering on woman-to-woman love and/or desire. At the end of my search, I was only able to find a few titles. This only intensified my curiosity as to why woman-to-woman love as a central theme is rarely represented in Philippine media, which I argue is a form of invisibility.

Pineda (2001) argues that lesbians suffer from three levels of *invisibility* – in history, within the feminist movement, and within the queer movement. She calls this a *lost history*, saying that the lesbian struggle for visibility is rather vague and under-documented, if not completely erased from our history. Why are there only a few materials focusing on woman-to-woman love? Do women who love women also suffer from invisibility within the media? If I were looking for materials regarding heterosexual love, I would not have such a difficult time. This query pushed me to trace the visibility (or invisibility) of women who love women in Philippine media.

¹ *Cinema One* is a Filipino cable T.V. network which shows local and foreign films.

B. Films as a venue for love

This research explores the discourse of love in Filipino society. It examines how love between two women is represented in Philippine media. The research focuses on how woman-to-woman love is represented in the Filipino films *T-bird at Ako* (1982) and *Rome & Juliet* (2006). This study examines whether such representations are supporting or deconstructing the dominance of patriarchy in Filipino society.

I used the purposive sampling technique to select which films to study. After searching for Filipino films that I can use for my study (those with available copies), I finally chose *T-bird at Ako* (dir. Zialcita, 1982) because it seems to be or is at least one of the first Filipino films that have a woman loving a woman for its central character (Nora Aunor as Sylvia). It also features a self-identified lesbian character who is in a relationship with a woman (Odette Khan as Maxi). An earlier film *Manila by Night* (dir. Bernal, 1980) features a lesbian character, but she is not the main character and her story is not the focus of the film.

I chose *Rome & Juliet* (dir. Macatuno, 2006) because it seems to be or is at least one of the latest Filipino films that have central characters who are women in love with each other (Mylene Dizon as Rome and Andrea del Rosario as Juliet). The whole movie revolves around their story. *Kaleldo* (dir. Mendoza, 2006) also features a lesbian character, but again she is not the central character and her story is not the main focus.

The first movie was released when the women's movement in the Philippines did not actively include *lesbian issues*. Pineda (2001) argues that it was only in the 1990s when lesbian issues were actively and publicly discussed. "Before this time, issues that were discussed were always along the lines of heterosexual concerns in relation to socio-economic conditions" (Pineda, 2001: 139).

Meanwhile the second film was made at a time when lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues have already been publicly discussed by various groups through various modes. I find it interesting to examine the representations of woman-to-woman love in Filipino films within those transformative years in the history of the Philippines.

C. Films as broadcast texts

One might wonder why I am studying films instead of TV or radio materials. I do not claim to be an expert in film studies or an expert in broadcasting. My approach is less technical; my focus is on the implications of Philippine media's representation of women, love and society, and how such representations may be linked to our history. I use this research as an application and synthesis of all the things that I have learned from studying media and gender during my four years in this university.

Since I cannot find Filipino television programs focusing on woman-to-woman love, I decided to study Filipino films. After all, such films are also aired on television (and in this case, at very late hours). The timeslot of such films, as how I see it, may imply that these films are "not good enough" for the primetime slot, or that these films are intended for adult viewers only (since younger viewers are assumed to be already asleep during those hours). Does this timeslot further the invisibility of women who love women? Or is it an attempt, in its earliest stages, to represent women who love women in Philippine media?

Television and film are both avenues in which women are represented in different roles, contexts and ways. This study aims to investigate how love between two women is represented through such video materials.

I am not claiming that there are no local studies about the representation of woman-to-woman love in the Philippines, my observation is that there are only a few local studies focusing on Philippine media. One of which is Libay Cantor's essay *Lesbiana, Lesbiana, Paano Ka Isinapelikula? Ilang Pagmumuni-muni sa Pagsasadula ng mga Lesbiana sa Pelikulang Filipino* published in 2003. Cantor comes from a film studies background. She analyzed films that featured lesbian characters; her focus was on the stereotypes employed in the portrayal of such characters.

The difference between my study and hers is that my research attempts to dig deeper into the plausible factors surrounding the representation of woman-to-woman love by tracing the history of lesbian visibility in the Philippines, as well as the history of women's oppression rooting from our colonial past and patriarchal society. The latest film she studied was a film produced in 2001. My research hopes to contribute in the growth of studies focusing on this specific topic. Cantor's essay helped me see that such

problematic representations of women and love are visible in almost all of the few films dealing with woman-to-woman relationships I was able to find. Her essay confirmed that my observations were shared by others or at least by another woman.

In her essay, Cantor cited two ABS-CBN television programs that featured lesbian characters – *MMK* and *Sa Puso Ko, Iingatan Ka*. Both had problems in representing lesbians. In the latter, the lesbian was portrayed as a villain. Cantor argues that both TV and film have problems when it comes to the representation of women who love women, such as the negative portrayals as well as the lack of portrayal.

Ang telebisyon ay ang teknolohiyang anak ng pelikula at kahit dito, hindi pa rin masuwerte ang mga lesbiana dahil sa halos wala ring positibong portrayal na makikita sa mga drama anthology, TV series (o teleserye), at sitcom. Kadalasan, lahat ng mga negatibong portrayal sa pelikula ay ipinapalabas din sa telebisyon. (Cantor, 2003: 373)

(Television is a technology born from films. Even in television, lesbians are unlucky because they do not have a positive portrayal in drama anthologies, TV series, and sitcoms. Usually, all the negative portrayals found in films are also seen on television.)

Guieb (2012) suggests that it is not only television which is born from films; films are also born from television. In my observation, the real issue at hand is not the medium at which materials are made to reach the public; the real concern should be the content. The main concern is for us to critique the misrepresentation of women as well as to dissect the possible roots and implications of such representations or the lack thereof.

D. Objectives of the research

The research identifies, describes and critiques the representation of woman-to-woman love in Filipino films as broadcast on television. This research is made with the awareness that the Philippines remains a patriarchal society. The research seeks to examine whether such representations are progressive or unchanging. To do this, the research compares two films produced in different decades – the early 1980s and the late 2000s. The research aims to see whether the developments in the struggle for lesbian visibility during the 1990s has brought change in the manner of representing love in film or if it only continued to represent woman-to-woman love as forbidden love.

E. Significance of the study

As a woman and a critic, I find the misrepresentation and underrepresentation of women who love women as another form of oppression. Tan (2012) argues that for hundreds of years, Filipino women have been victimized by inequalities, both through subtle and obvious means, prevailing in our semi-feudal and semi-colonial patriarchal society.

This area of study is relatively young in our country, as Pineda (2001) pointed out. It was only in the 1990s when matters of women's gender and sexuality were openly discussed in different areas of discourse. As a media student, I would like to contribute to this field of study. Women who love women have been boxed into stereotypes for too long; there is a need to problematize, critique and discuss the (mis)representation of women in the media. All women deserve media representation just like everyone else.

This research aims to liberate the minds of both women and men. It also wishes to encourage more students to develop a more gendered perspective in terms of analysis. I would like to offer this thesis as a way of expressing my interest for merging gender studies with media studies.

F. Scope and limitations

The study is limited to the textual analysis of the films *T-bird at Ako* (dir. Zialcita, 1982) and *Rome & Juliet* (dir. Macatuno, 2006). The research compares how these two films handled the representation of women who love women. The research examines only the characters, script, symbolisms and narrative development.

The study does not focus on the inquiry whether the realities in Filipino society are informing how love is represented in films or whether Filipino films are informing the realities of Filipino society. Either way, the study acknowledges that there are problems concerning the rigid representation of women, men and love. The research also discusses concepts of homophobia, women's oppression and gender in relation to media studies.

G. Methodology

Using textual analysis in this qualitative study, I examine the notions and characteristics of love between two women as represented in the films *T-bird at Ako* (1982) and *Rome & Juliet* (2006). The interpretation comes from me as a woman and a critic. Through textual analysis, I intend to “make sense” (McKee, 2003: 1) of how woman-to-woman love and/or desire is represented at a given time. I compare the two films to see if there are any similarities or differences in their representations of love and gender. I also examine the context in which these films were produced by looking at the history of the Filipino lesbian struggle for visibility. These are the units of analysis: the female and male characters – their physical representation, character development and interactions with each other. I also examine the script and narrative development to see if it may be interpreted as homophobic, sexist or empowering.

Benyahia, Gaffeny and White (2006) define the process of *reading films* as “interpreting symbols in relation to intended meanings... ‘Reading’ immediately suggests a depth of investigation and an intensity of focus that ‘watching films’ simply does not convey” (p. 7).

Units of observation:

1. Script: Language bias, offensive language, choice of words
2. Physical representation (i.e., clothing, behavior, movements, appearance)
3. Characterization and background (i.e., views, personality, class, job, relationships)
4. Narrative development and story flow (i.e., conflicts, solutions, ending)
5. Symbolisms (i.e., religious images)
6. Music, lyrics
7. Camera shots, angles

H. Theoretical framework

One way of learning about a society is through media studies. The discourse of love between two women, as represented in Filipino society, is explored through films. This study is guided by the merge of gender and media studies.

I have observed that in the few Filipino films I have found that dealt with woman-to-woman love, with the exception of *T-bird at Ako* and *Rome & Juliet*, the women involved are only created as minor characters with minor participation and representation in the film. This led me to an assumption that non-heterosexual women's imposed position as a sexual minority in Philippine society has extended to a similarly imposed position as minor characters in Philippine media. However, in the rare instances in which women who love women are created as major characters, these women are characterized in such a way that their difference from other characters is greatly emphasized.

For lesbian figures to function as localizing sites of homosexuality within a homosocial televisual space, they must be sufficiently different from the other female characters that every one – both within the diegesis and outside of it – can tell the difference. Such minoritizing representations tend to rely on the assumption that lesbian sexuality is so different from heterosexuality as to be unrepresented; what lesbians do in bed is, in this discourse, truly unimaginable. (Torres, 1993: 180)

Torres (1993) studied the representation of lesbians in an American television drama called *Heartbeat*. Torres observes that American television has difficulties in “articulating lesbian erotic possibility” (p. 177). Physical intimacy between women are only hinted and limited. Torres examined the characterization of each female character and their interactions with other characters. My study observes the same approach and assumptions by Torres.

De Lauretis (1993) suggests that women as subjects may recognize other women “as subjects and as objects of female desire” (p. 142). De Lauretis also discusses *sexual indifference* in which women are seen as those who are or want the same as men. De Lauretis concludes that “within the conceptual frame of that sexual indifference, female desire for the self-same, an other female self, cannot be recognized” (p. 142). This is problematic because representation may become singular or uniform for both men and women who desire women. De Lauretis' observations are used as a foundation for my

study of how women who love women are represented in Filipino films. It seems that this particular kind of love is categorized differently from the kind of love shared by a heterosexual couple. This study examines whether the films' representation of female desire is merely patterned after male desire.

The succeeding chapters (Chapter II, III, IV) discuss the related review of literature. These include studies regarding women's sexuality, women's oppression, media stereotypes and women's representation.

CHAPTER II

MEET THE WOMEN

*“where is the politics
in all this?
my wounded heart
learns again
the essence of struggle
this time, my fears
my own enemy”*

— Aida F. Santos, Notes on pains, 1998: 59.

This chapter introduces ideas generated by three women – Diamond, Butler and Eviota – regarding gender, women’s sexuality and oppression. In the first section, Diamond (2008) explains the concept of *sexual fluidity* in the context of psychology, while Butler (1990) explains the concept of *gender performativity*. In the second section, Filipino historian Eviota (1992) discusses the *sexual division of labor* in the Philippines and how it is linked to our colonial past. Before I introduce the difficulties faced by Filipino women who love women, it is necessary to first explain the overall problems faced by Filipino women throughout history. These three texts serve as a foundation for a better understanding of same-sex relationships and women’s oppression.

A. Women who love women

Pineda (2001) focuses on lesbian invisibility, while Queyquep (2012) examines lesbian representation. In my study, I prefer to use the term *women who love women* (or *woman-to-woman love*) so as not to exclude women who do not identify themselves as lesbians but do acknowledge their experiences of love, desire or attraction towards fellow women. While I do agree with Pineda’s stand on the Filipino lesbian struggle for visibility, in my research, I prefer to use the phrase the *struggle for the visibility of women who love women*.

Psychologist Lisa Diamond, in her groundbreaking research in 2008, explores the issue of sexual fluidity among women.

Sexual fluidity, quite simply, means situation-dependent flexibility in women's sexual responsiveness. This flexibility makes it possible for some women to experience desires for either men or women under certain circumstances, regardless of their overall sexual orientation... women of all orientations may experience variation in their erotic and affectional feelings as they encounter different situations, relationships, and life stages. (Diamond, 2008: 3)

Diamond followed the lives of 100 women over a span of 10 years and interviewed them about the changes, if any, in their patterns of attractions and relationships. Some women who originally identified as having relationships with men only, at some point in their lives, experienced love and/or desire for another woman. And some women who originally identified as having relationships with women only, at some point, fell in love with a man. Diamond concludes that sexuality is in a flux; it is not always static or unchanging. At some point in a woman's life, there could be many changes in her patterns of love, attraction and desire. Some of her respondents noted that they fall in love with the personality, not the gender. Diamond, however, stresses that some women are more fluid than others. She explains that one's behavior does not necessarily reflect one's sexual orientation; desire might be one of the markers of sexual orientation. Diamond's study suggests that sexuality is a very complicated matter and that the discourse itself is in a continuum.

In line with Diamond's research, this study does not assume that all women who love and/or desire other women identify themselves as lesbians. This research proposes to explore the love between two women, without confining them into labels. I examine whether this way of thinking is applied in the two films I critique.

Judith Butler (1990) opposes the presumptions made by a binary gender system (having only two categories) for it only retains the belief that gender mirrors sex or is restricted by it. Butler also introduced the concept of gender as being *performative*. Butler views gender as a certain kind of enactment. Butler suggests that the appearance of gender is often mistaken as a sign of inherent truth; it is prompted by obligatory norms of being one gender or the other. The next section discusses the history of women's oppression in the Philippines through a gender and class lens.

B. The invisible women

Historian Elizabeth Uy Eviota (1992) argues that class and gender are interrelated factors in society. She examines women's roles and representations in the Philippines from its pre-Hispanic times, the colonial era from 1521 to 1946, and until the neo-colonial period (Table 1).

Table 1. *Summary of Eviota's observations: Women throughout changing societies.*²

I. Pre-colonial era:	
a. Primitive communal	No concept of gender and class inequality
b. Semi-communal, semi-slave community	Women are sexual and labor slaves
c. Feudal system	Men are superior over women Women are domestic slaves
II. Spanish era	Feudal culture, agricultural, rule of man Women are mostly stuck in convents, passive and oppressed
III. American period	Bourgeoisie culture, capitalistic Women are in pink-collar jobs, some have opportunities to study, but are still confined to courses "for women" (i.e., education, nursing, nutrition)
IV. Post-colonial period (1946-1989) Note: Eviota's book was published in 1992	Hierarchy continues Women have higher rates of unemployment/underemployment Women are more empowered, but also continue to face old problems

² I made this summary based on my understanding of Eviota's text. Summary is not non-verbatim.

Eviota argues that changes in the stages of society bring changes not only in the modes of production and the political economy, but also changes in gender relations. In each passing era, women continue to be oppressed in many ways (Table 1). Eviota looks at how the Philippines' colonial past is interlinked with the current dominant sex-gender ideology in the country, which is patriarchy – which traps women in the reproduction sphere (work inside the house) and men in the production sphere (work outside the house). The former is deemed unpaid, unskilled and undervalued; while the latter is viewed as paid, skilled and valued labor. The emergence of private ownership signalled the emergence of women's oppression. This sexual division of labor has extended to almost all aspects of society, further solidifying traditional gender roles.

Her use of a political economy and post-colonial study explains how each colonizer has forcibly injected its gender ideology into the Philippines. This resulted to society expecting women and men to behave in certain ways. Eviota also calls the conventional notion of a family as a site for women's subordination – for it supports a hierarchy of sex and age, and dictates the options that women can have in terms of work and experience. The common notion of a family is that of a dad, a mom and child(ren). How about children with two dads? Or two moms? These are seen as taboos.

Women are discriminated on multiple levels. First, for the mere fact that they are women living in a patriarchal society; second, for disobeying the norms in a heterosexist society; and third, they are discriminated based on other aspects of their existence – class, race, ethnicity, religion, among others. These forms of oppression have also reached the media; women also suffer from a history of oppression in terms of misrepresentation and underrepresentation. The misrepresentation and underrepresentation of women seem to penetrate both on-cam and off-cam realms; problems are encountered by all women – women working in the media, women represented by the media, and the women who are consuming media products.

It seems that women who love women, who also belong to the lower class, are at the bottom of society's hierarchy – as seen in the representation of a lesbian character in *Manila by Night* (1980). The lesbian is represented as a poor woman roaming the streets of Manila at night, selling drugs. She is eventually beaten up and killed.

It is not just men who can oppress women, but also fellow women who frown upon same-sex love. Eviota's book is significant to my research because its historical approach provides a good foundation for my exploration of how the patriarchal ideology in the Philippines has hijacked the representation of love between two women. This will be further discussed in the next chapter through the ideas introduced by Filipino scholars Pineda and Roces.

The next chapter focuses on the Philippine context. Roces (2010) provides a brief history of the women's movement. While Pineda (2001) discusses the history of the Filipino lesbian struggle for visibility.

CHAPTER III

TIME AFTER TIME: WOMEN'S OPPRESSION

*“women, feminists say
do not make each other
enemy, after the phase
of loving and sharing
warm beds and starlit nights
both feel the same pain
but patriarchy
is such a good mentor
and we have been
good students”*

— Aida Santos, Notes on pains, 1998: 58.

This chapter discusses the linear history of the women's movement in the Philippines and the history of the Filipino lesbian struggle for visibility. These two struggles are discussed separately in order to highlight the supposed internal conflict within the Filipino women's movement – the concerns of heterosexual women were prioritized, while issues of gender and sexuality were neglected. Pineda (2001) calls this divide as the *lesbian invisibility*. Pineda explains that although the women's movement in the Philippines was already active in the 1980s, it was only in the 1990s when lesbian concerns were finally included in the movement's agenda.

This discussion is relevant to my research because it gives us an overview of the changes that occurred in Philippine society regarding the understanding of women's sexuality. This chapter paints a picture of the Philippines in the 1980s until the 1990s. This timeframe exhibits two phases in the lives of Filipino women who love women – phase one: the state of invisibility *before* the lesbian struggle for visibility (pre-1990s), and phase two: the state of women *during* the lesbian struggle for visibility (1990s).

In my study, I also make use of this timeframe to observe and to critique the representation of women who love women in Filipino films. The first film, *T-bird at Ako* (1982), belongs to phase one. While the second film, *Rome & Juliet* (2006), belongs to phase three: the state of women *after* the lesbian struggle for visibility (post-1990s). The goal of the study is to create a comparative analysis of the two films in order to

emphasize the changes, if any, in the representations of women who love women over the past two decades. The study may also reflect whether or not the initial success of the Filipino lesbian struggle for visibility in the 1990s left its mark on the current representation of women who love women in Philippine media.

A. Does history repeat itself?

To better understand what Pineda (2001) meant by the *lesbian struggle for visibility*, I also researched about the history of the women's movement in the Philippines. Pineda argues that despite having a women's movement, issues concerning lesbians were not freely discussed. I used an essay by Mina Roces (2010) to trace the history of women's activism in the Philippines. Roces divided women's activism in the Philippines into two major phases – the fight for suffrage in the 1920s and 30s, and the post-1980s struggle. The former demanded for women's right to vote, while the latter focused on socio-economic problems during the Marcos regime.

The 1960s marked the start of student activism among women. In the 1970s, MAKIBAKA (*Malayang Kilusan ng Bagong Kababaihan* or Free Movement of New Women) was formed.

It was founded initially to mobilize women as part of the student activism of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which protested social injustices, the Vietnam war, the USA's influence on domestic affairs, oil prices, inflation, the Marcos government's fascist tendencies, and the wide disparity between the rich and the poor. (Roces, 2010: 36)

MAKIBAKA started to develop a “feminist consciousness,” (Roces, 2010: 36) but Martial law was declared in 1972 and it successfully silenced the group. In the 1980s some women from the Communist Party of the Philippines who experienced gender discrimination within the party formed KALAYAAN (*Katipunan ng Kababaihan Para sa Kalayaan*). This feminist organization tackled issues of rape, domestic violence, pornography and violence. KALAYAAN worked with another feminist organization called PILIPINA to revive feminist activism in the country. The two groups insisted that women's issues should be given equal importance. But after the assassination of Marcos' rival, Benigno Aquino Jr., in 1986, the women's liberation movement had to be

“temporarily shelved in order to focus on the movement to oust the dictator” (Roces, 2010: 37).

As Pineda (2001) points out, the women’s agenda at that time was primarily focused on socio-economic issues, excluding matters of gender and sexuality.

GABRIELA (General Assembly Binding Women for Reforms, Integrity, Equality, Leadership and Action) was formed in 1986. Roces notes that GABRIELA was originally focused on the anti-Marcos dictatorship movement, rather than advocating specific women’s rights. In 1986, post-Marcos, the “women’s movement gained momentum” (Roces, 2010: 37). GABRIELA became more feminist in orientation and viewed issues in a gendered perspective. Roces states that this marked the beginning of the exploration of many issues of different sectors such as Muslim women, indigenous women, peasants and the urban poor. Prostitution, comfort women, domestic violence, rape, incest, women’s health, reproductive rights and sexuality were among the many topics which received attention.

B. No lesbians allowed?

Pineda (2001) says that a new brand of Catholic-bourgeois culture began in the 1990s and issues of gender and sexuality started to gain popularity. However, lesbian issues were left untouched. Pineda argues that lesbian concerns were treated as mere peripheral issues and were not part of the central issues of the women’s movement.

Despite their marginalization, lesbians formed groups within women’s organizations. In 1992, TLC (The Lesbian Collective) was formed as the first lesbian formal organization. In 1993, during the women’s march with the theme *Violence against Women*, TLC read a statement about issues of violence against lesbians. Pineda (2001) notes “that lesbians after all are women, thus, the issue of violence against women also affects lesbians” (p. 134).

TLC had its fair share of struggles. During the event, some organizers asked them to read their statement during the march instead of reading the statement in Mendiola (the final destination of the march). Eventually some of the older feminists allowed the younger lesbians to read their statement in Mendiola. It was the first time that something about lesbians was read in public.

Pineda writes that in the same year, the valentine's issue of the *Sunday Inquirer Magazine* published an article entitled *When Aida met Giney*. It featured an interview with lesbian activist Aida Santos, discussing lesbian issues related to love and sex. It was the first time that lesbian issues were covered by the media, showing that lesbians are ordinary people too. The article also published the hotline number of WEDPRO (Women's Education, Development, Productivity and Research Organization) which lesbians can call for advice or help.

In 1994, *Woman-to-Woman: Prose and Essay*, the first lesbian anthology in the Philippines, was published. In the same year, the country's and also Asia's first LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) pride march was held. This was organized by ProGay Philippines and the Filipino Metropolitan Community Church. In 1996, the First National Lesbian Rights Conference (FNRC) was held in Cavite. The event was covered by newspapers in which many issues concerning lesbians were discussed. During the FNRC, it was declared that December 8 would be the official National Lesbian Day in accordance with the celebration of Human Rights Day on December 10. Pineda (2001) calls this the "marking of the struggle" (p. 150).

This is the statement of the FNRC held in December 7-9, 1996 in Silang, Cavite:

We, the seventy-five lesbians in attendance represent 208 lesbians from the ranks of the workers, students, professionals, urban poor, peasants, indigenous people and other sectors who participated in the sectoral consultations prior to the conference. We have gathered from the different regions of the Philippines which include Davao, Baguio, Laoag, Cotabato, Olongapo, La Union, Cebu, Nueva Vizcaya, Manila as well as the United States and Canada. We speak different languages and express ourselves in distinct ways, our knowledge and experiences are rich and varied, and we define ourselves and realities in many ways. Our views, political beliefs and actions are diverse. We have come together to share and discuss the stories of our lives. We discovered the multiplicity of our existence and have agreed to process our experiences towards a common analysis, action and vision.

However, we live in a society that cannot accept us yet. Homophobia, the irrational fear and hatred of gays and lesbians, is a giant shadow that looms over us. We encounter violence in its many forms. We face so many obstacles towards the expression of our sexuality. We are denied the opportunity to express our knowledge, capabilities and skills in various

fields of endeavor. We are deprived of the right to lead and conduct our lives freely unlike other people. This situation is further compounded by the existing discrimination levelled against women and the economically disadvantaged in general.

Today, we claim the rights that have been denied to us by our society. We will communicate to our families and friends the realities of our existence towards understanding and respect. We shall slowly dismantle the discrimination, fears and the negative images sown by churches and the mass media.

1. We reiterate that our rights as lesbians are human rights.
2. We have the right to express our sexuality,
3. We have the right to form families,
4. We have the right to self-determination,
5. We have the right to participate in political discourse and action,
6. We have the right to just wages, benefits and job security.

Now is the time to harness strength and take action. We claim the right to live as lesbians in our society with dignity, respect and integrity. We shall set the direction that we wish to take. On this day, the 9th of December 1996, on the eve of the international human rights day, we loudly declare that we are here united as we claim our lesbian rights and existence.

In 1996, the first lesbian art exhibit was launched. Two years later, another one was held in the University of the Philippines Diliman. In 1998, *Tibok: Heartbeat of the Filipino Lesbian*, a lesbian anthology, was published. Despite the developments, Pineda reminds her readers that the Filipino lesbian struggle for visibility is still an ongoing struggle.

Pineda's account of the history of the lesbian struggle for visibility also talks about the media's role in covering the events organized by lesbian organizations and the issues that they face. As a media student, I can say that Pineda is right when she said that the struggle still exists. Women who love women may no longer be completely invisible in the media today, but another problem other than underrepresentation is misrepresentation. Perhaps today's struggle is not only for visibility but also for a fair and equal representation of women who love women.

It is also important to recognize the power of the media, culture, and cross-sexual identity coalitions for the expansion of our ranks. However, there is a great need to recognize the original vision of our struggle. This vision is based on socio-economic conditions because our country is still largely arrested in this overwhelming poverty. We can only emancipate our sexual identities in accordance to the emancipation of our socio-economic condition into a level that would give us the luxury of time, space and means to freely think about diverse sexual identities. (Pineda, 2001: 158)

Like Eviota (1992), Pineda (2001) also looks at class and gender as interrelated factors in society. Pineda analyzes the Filipino lesbian struggle with an awareness of the Philippine's current and prevailing socio-economic condition.

C. Love in the time of patriarchy

This section discusses how women's misrepresentation may be linked to the introduction and prevalence of patriarchy in society. Eviota (1991) explains how Filipino women are viewed in a patriarchal society, while Nagy-Zakmi (2003) introduces how women from Third World postcolonial countries are represented as the *other*. The combination of these two texts help in creating a historically grounded analysis of how women are treated and represented in a Third World, post-colonial, patriarchal country such as the Philippines.

Postcolonial reading

Eviota (1992) argues that women, during our pre-Hispanic era, were more independent. They had more control over their lives, such as their expression, labor and the number of children they want to have. Eviota also notes that women engaged in pre-marital sex, which during that time, were not seen in a negative light. Eviota argues that "indigenous ideas about sex were altered by colonial prescriptions which contained a male-dominated Christian view of sexuality" (p. 37). Perhaps this also contributed to how same-sex relationships are commonly viewed in our society; this may also be observed on how the media represents (if represented at all) such relationships. "Colonial gender ideology is based on the notion of the inherent inferiority of women" (Eviota, 1992: 44).

Nagy-Zekmi (2003) analyzes the construction of the postcolonial female subject by using postcolonial and feminist theories. Her work focuses on Third World countries, specifically in Latin America and North Africa. She calls the female subject as the *gendered subaltern* as coined by Spivak. Nagy-Zekmi analyzes how woman authors in the postcolonial world represented the female subject in Third World countries. Nagy-Zekmi argues that these women are being represented as the *other* – the oppressed groups and individuals. The *other* is silent and the colonizer or the male patriarchy speaks on their behalf.

I use Nagy-Zekmi's theory as a guide for my own research about the construction of love between two women in the Philippines (as a postcolonial, patriarchal, predominantly Catholic, Third World country), as represented in films. I argue that women who love women are represented as the *other* in the Filipino films I have examined. The woman-to-woman relationship is represented as the *other*, as opposed to the socially accepted heterosexual relationship. This *othering* creates a hierarchy between women and men and between heterosexual and same-sex relationships. It is ironic because even if the women who love women are the main characters in these films, they are still represented as the *other*.

Compulsory heterosexuality?

Lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life. It is also a direct or indirect attack on the male right of access to women (Rich, 1980: 649).

Feminist Adrienne Rich (1980) challenges the presumption that heterosexuality is the sexual preference of most women. She introduced the concept of *compulsory heterosexuality*, which she argues was imposed on women through social constraints. I argue that this compulsory heterosexuality extends to women in films. This strips women of their freedom to express themselves without being harassed and the freedom to love whoever they love without being judged. Rich (1980) argues that feminist theory must not “merely voice a toleration of lesbianism as an alternative lifestyle” (p. 632).

It becomes an inescapable question whether the issue we have to address as feminists is, not simple ‘gender inequality,’ nor the domination of culture by males, nor mere ‘taboos against homosexuality,’ but the enforcement of heterosexuality for women as a means of assuring male right of physical, economical, and emotional access. One of many means of enforcement is, of course, the rendering invisible of the lesbian possibility, an engulfed continent which rises fragmentedly to view from time to time only to become submerged again. (Rich, 1980: 647)

Rich (1980) examines four books written from different points of view, but were all presented as feminist texts. Rich argues that these books could have been more powerful if they had included the lesbian existence. Rich suggests dealing with the lesbian existence as reality and as a source of knowledge and power available to women; and heterosexuality as a “beachhead of male dominance” (p. 633). One of the books she analyzed was written as if lesbians do not exist, not even as a “marginal beings” (p. 634). This may also explain why there seems to be very few Filipino films discussing same-sex love among women, despite the presence of women-oriented films.

Homophobia

Another feminist, Suzanne Pharr (1997), defines patriarchy as an “enforced belief in male dominance and control” (p. 8). In a patriarchal system, gender roles separating women and men exist. Such roles are maintained by weapons of sexism: homophobia, economics and violence. All these imply that women are subordinate to men.

HOMOPHOBIA—the irrational fear and hatred of those who love and sexually desire those of the same sex (Pharr, 1997: 1, emphasis in original).

Pharr argues that homophobia’s power can make people live in fear. It looks at same-sex love as something sick, immoral and abnormal. It also attaches the notion that same-sex love is sinful, people who believe this rely on the Bible for proof. Pharr cited an essay entitled *Christianity and Crisis* written by Dr. Virginia Mollenkott who argues that discrimination against same-sex love is a result of misreading the Bible. Mollenkott argues that the English translation of the Bible uses the word *homosexual* in a negative manner, but the truth is that the word *homosexual* does not really appear in the Bible. The

terms *heterosexual* and *homosexual* did not exist until the 1890s. Mollenkott calls this as an extreme bias.

The next chapter puts the previous discussions about women and oppression in the context of media representation.

CHAPTER IV

WOMEN, MEN, AND FILMS: IT'S COMPLICATED

*“we spoke in the same language
cried at the same scenes of suffering
we touched with gentleness and passion
all in one, loved women the way we loved our
friends and sometimes, even our enemies”*

— Aida F. Santos, *We Were Once Lovers & Sisters*, 1998:54.

This chapter looks at how women and men are represented by the media. Dyer (2002) discusses the different media stereotypes and how such representations are produced out of power relations. De Lauretis (1994) explains the infamous butch/femme dichotomy as observed in films. Weiss (2004) compares how lesbian characters are represented in independent films and in the mainstream media. These texts are necessary in understanding how women who love women are generally characterized in video materials. Earlier discussions are put into a Philippine context by Cantor (2003); she also enumerates the different lesbian stereotypes observed in Filipino films. Lastly, Neale (1992) discusses how the media stereotypes men.

A. Media Stereotypes

For many years and until today, it is still quite common for the media to trap women who love women in binaries – as either a *butch* (more masculine) or a *femme* (more feminine) – neglecting the fact that not all people identify this way. And this categorization in itself implies a rigid understanding of relationships. Why is there a need for one of the two women to be manly? De Lauretis (1994) asks the same question in her study on lesbian representation in films. De Lauretis argues that in some films, whatever women may feel for other women cannot be sexual desire unless there is *masculinization* involved – an imitation of man’s desire. In one of the films she analyzed, one woman is convinced that she is a man because she desires another woman. This implies that one

may not be born a woman or a man, but one can desire only as a man (De Lauretis, 1994: 112). De Lauretis applies a *textual reading* on these films.

In his essay, Dyer (2002) examined stereotypes in media. Dyer suggests that the important questions to ask are *Who proposes the stereotype? Who has the power to enforce it?* Stereotypes are used to draw the boundaries of what is accepted and legitimate behavior and what is not. Dyer also suggests that social categories are fluid and it is impossible to draw a line between them and adjacent categories.

Like Diamond (2008) and Butler (1990), Dyer also opposes the rigid dichotomy of homosexuality and heterosexuality; he says that, to some extent, both homosexual and heterosexual responses and behavior are experienced by everybody. Dyer believes in the “malleability of human sex activity” (p. 3) and its possibility for change. He argues that stereotypes are used to make fluid concepts rigid and to make the invisible visible – but all of these are done in favor of the social definitions made by those in power. Dyer says that there may be instances when lesbians and gays do not recognize themselves in the identities claimed by LGBT cultures or movements. Negative designations of a grouping may also cause harm to its members.

B. Independent Women, Independent Films

Weiss (2004) describes lesbian independent films as those attempting to control and define lesbian representation in ways different than those offered by the dominant media. Weiss explains that the goal of a lesbian independent film is to imagine lesbian desire outside the pornographic parameters of the dominant cinema. It stirs away from how cinema has been constructed for the male gaze. Weiss says that all these come from the “search for lesbian self-definition” (p. 43).

In the U.S., lesbian independent cinema began in the 1970s with the start of the gay and women’s liberation movements. It was also a result of the 1960s American independent film movement. Weiss says that American lesbian independent films are usually unrecognized and marginal, especially in Hollywood. There is a lack of government or television subsidy for such independent films in America. Perhaps the same can be said about the Philippines.

Weiss (2004) explains that the first American lesbian independent films were inspired by the lesbian/feminist movements of the 70s, hence these films supported that lesbianism is not just a personal sexual matter, but also a form of sociopolitical liberation. These films from this period addressed the lesbian audience with an assumption that the viewers are familiar with the cultural assumptions, symbolisms, humor and characteristics of the American lesbian-feminist community at that time. But for some filmmakers, they saw this as a way of further excluding the male viewers by exclusively showing such films in women-only spaces (i.e., coffeehouses, women's centers).

Relating this to my research, I formulated the following questions – Where can we watch *T-bird at Ako*, *Rome & Juliet* and similar films? In my experience, I was able to watch them on TV in *Cinema One* at late hours. Other options include the internet and the audiovisual library in my college. Such films, in my observation, are not easily bought on video stores or featured in popular movie houses and malls.

In the 1980s, issues of representation of working-class lesbians, lesbians of color, androgynous and masculine lesbians were raised. Weiss observes that contemporary lesbian independent films are in the experimental form, rather than in documentary or narrative. She argues that this new form was able to circumvent problems posed by classic narrative film conventions. One of the films I critique, *Rome & Juliet*, is also a low-budget independent film that also experimented with poetry as part of its narration.

C. Lesbians in Filipino films

Cantor (2003) studied seven Filipino films involving lesbian themes or characters: *Si Malakas, si Mahinhin, at si Maganda*; *Nang Mamulat si Eba (Part 2)*; *T-bird at Ako*; *Manila by Night*; *Jack en Jill*; *Tatlo Magkasalo* and *Baliktaran*.

Cantor argues that lesbianism is rarely mentioned in the Philippine film industry and its products. She notes that there have been a lot of films featuring themes of homosexuality during the 1970s, dubbed as the golden age of Philippine cinema by many, because of directors like Lino Brocka and Ishmael Bernal who were also openly gay men. However, it was still rare to see lesbian characters or themes in those films. Most films focused on gay men.

Nagkaroon din naman ng mga lesbianang karakter sa pelikula, pero nararapat suriing mabuti kung maganda ang kanilang pagkakagawa o ang pagkakalahad ng kanilang kuwento (Cantor, 2003: 302).

(There were also lesbian characters in films, but it is apt to effectively analyze if the manner by which the characters and stories were made and told are good.)

I summarized the lesbian stereotypes commonly generalized by filmmakers as observed by Cantor in the seven films she analyzed.³

The lesbian look:

1. A lesbian is a man inside a woman's body.
2. Lesbians want to look and act like a man. They want to hide their female qualities.
3. A *stone butch* usually wears a pair of pants and a t-shirt topped by a polo with a big collar and short sleeves. They are mere copies of men (*paggaya lamang sa kalalakihan*).
4. A *soft butch* dresses like a man, but is less tough (*hindi siya ganoon ka-astig*) compared to a stone butch.
5. A girl who is *tomboyin* looks like a *soft butch*, but acts like a *stone butch*. This may be considered a phase which will eventually end.
6. A *femme* is a lesbian not suspected of being a lesbian because she looks like a *normal* woman.

The lesbian's love:

1. A lesbian pursues a heterosexual woman who is said to be open to a relationship with tomboys (*pumapatol lang sa tomboy*).
2. A lesbian has a man's heart (*pusong lalaki*) hence she will only love a real woman (*tunay na babae*) and not a fellow lesbian.

³ I made this summary based on my understanding of Cantor's text. Summary is non-verbatim.

3. To show that lesbians love each other, some nude and sex scenes are shown. Cantor says that this is in line with the tradition of *Seiko* films.⁴
4. A *butch* is usually paired with a *femme* or a heterosexual woman. In *Tatlo Magkasalo*, there were two femmes in love. However, one of them died of cancer. The surviving femme had a relationship with a man after her lover's death. *Butch-to-butch* and *femme-to-femme* relationships are rarely seen.

The lesbian and the man:

1. Lesbianism gradually disappears and a woman becomes heterosexual again in her actions and views after she:
 - a. gets married to a man,
 - b. gets pregnant/gives birth,
 - c. has sex with a man.
2. A lesbian will eventually fall in love with a man (*napatibok rin ng isang lalaki ang puso*). The lesbian will then start to look like a real woman (*tunay na babae*).
3. A girl will eventually leave a lesbian for a real man (*tunay na lalaki*).
4. A man will make a lesbian realize her womanhood (*nagmulat sa kanyang pagkababae*) by forcing her to have sex with him. In the end, the lesbian will also enjoy the sex.
5. A man can cure a lesbian when she already passes through his hands (*mapapagaling ng isang lalaki kapag dumaaan na ang lesbiana sa mga kamay nito.*)
6. A husband will accept his wife's lesbian past (*lesbianang nakaraan*) for the sake of their children.
7. A lesbian disturbs a man and a woman's relationship.

⁴ *Seiko* films is a Philippine film company which earned popularity for its bold movies in the 1990s.

The lesbian's destiny:

1. The lesbian character in *Manila by Night* was portrayed as a troubled woman – a stone butch who sells drugs. She is eventually attacked and killed in the film.
2. The lesbian will eventually meet a man to marry. Cantor suggests that these films represent lesbians as having internal homophobia. Hence some try to have sex or marry a man, hoping that this would erase their lesbianism.
3. Lesbians are unlucky in life; they have to deal with many complications. In *Tatlo Magkasalo*, a femme died of cancer.

In the succeeding chapters, I also plan to make my own list of observations and analysis regarding stereotypes. Cantor (2003) argues that the stone butch is not just a stereotype in Filipino films, it is already an archetype. She claims that if a character is said to be lesbian, we would automatically think that the character is a stone butch with a man's heart. Such characters are paired with a heterosexual woman who will eventually leave them for a real man.

Cantor argues that such representations give lesbians a negative image. She claims that such films are condoning lesbianism. Cantor admits that some lesbians in real life do act and look the way films present them to be, but it is also true that not all lesbians in real life act and look that way. Not all lesbians are as unlucky as those presented in the films. Cantor is looking for films that also represent femme-to-femme and butch-to-butch relationships, happy and long-term lesbian couples, successful lesbians and old lesbians. She argues that such diversity of lesbians is not seen in films. What we only see are the stereotypes created by filmmakers.

“...pero dapat ay ipakita ito nang malinaw at di lang basta-bastang tatalon mula sa pagiging lesbian tungo sa pagiging heteroseksuwal na babae”
(Cantor, 2003: 368).

(The character's transition from lesbianism to heterosexuality should have been shown more clearly. It should have not been shown in such an abrupt way.)

Cantor argues that one of the reasons why such stereotypes persist is that some film producers, directors and writers do not understand lesbians. Such kind of filmmakers

often think that a movie will not sell if the main character is a lesbian, unless there is nudity or lesbian sex scenes involved. Cantor argues that such films do not target lesbian viewers; its real target is the male audience. Cantor acknowledges the concept of fluidity, which was also discussed by Diamond (2008), but the problem Cantor sees is that the character's transition from lesbianism to heterosexuality is usually not well-explained in the films.

D. The visible man

Neale (1992) argues that much of the discourse of gender, sexuality and cinema has focused on the representation of women. Most of the discussions on men are found only in the gay movement; hence the focus is on the representation and stereotypes of gay men. Neale says that there has been little research done on representations of men outside the gay discourse. Neale explores the representations of heterosexual masculinity in films.

Neale argues that heterosexual masculinity has been identified as a structuring norm in relation to images of women and gay men. The mainstream cinema has its own assumption of a male norm. Based on the films he analyzed, he argues that the identification of men is in accordance with the socially defined and constructed categories of female and male. This kind of imagery can entail a notion of masochism between the spectator and the image. The common notions associated with masculinity are attitudes reflecting aggression, power, control, mastery and omnipotence. Neale also discusses issues of male narcissism and the construction of the ideal ego. The next chapter introduces the two films critiqued in this study – *T-bird at Ako* (dir. Zialcita, 1982) and *Rome & Juliet* (dir. Macatuno, 2006). Each film's storyline and set of characters are explained in detail. Chapter V also discusses my initial reaction to both films.

CHAPTER V

INTRODUCTION OF FILMS

*“Like fruits ripening, we do come to an end
but must we allow ourselves to forget
that once, we were lovers and sisters.”*

— Aida F. Santos, *We Were Once Lovers & Sisters*,
1998: 57.

This chapter introduces the two films, their stories and characters. My initial reactions to both movies are also explained in this chapter.

A. First film: *T-bird at Ako* (1982)

The film is directed by Danny Zialcita and written by Portia Ilagan, an openly lesbian screenwriter. It stars Nora Aunor as Sylvia and Vilma Santos as Isabel. The supporting characters include Odette Khan as Maxi, Dindo Fernando as Dante, Tommy Abuel as Jake and Suzanne Gonzales as Babette.

Film summary & characters

Sylvia is a rich, successful and independent lawyer. Throughout the film, she struggles with her same-sex attraction towards Isabel. Isabel is a poor nightclub dancer. She is accused of murdering a rich man who attempted to rape her. She also struggles to reunite with her son. Seven years earlier, Isabel gave up her son for adoption because she cannot afford to raise him alone.

At the beginning of the movie, Sylvia is handling a murder case for her client, Maxi. Maxi is a self-identified *t-bird* who is accused of murdering a man who allegedly disturbs her relationship with her girlfriend, Rubia. During Maxi's trial, she is mocked by a male lawyer for being a lesbian. Sylvia successfully defends her in the courtroom.

Sylvia then becomes curious about her own sexuality after discussing such topics with Maxi. In one of their conversations, Maxi tells Sylvia about a beautiful dancer named Isabel. Out of curiosity, Sylvia visits a nightclub to watch Isabel dance. Sylvia

asks Babette, her assistant who is a self-identified heterosexual woman, to join her in the nightclub. Her attraction towards Isabel is established in the nightclub scene. After Isabel's shift, a customer invites her to dinner but the man attempts to rape her. Acting in self-defense, Isabel accidentally shoots the man. She is then imprisoned for murder.

Upon reading Isabel's murder case in the newspaper, Sylvia bails Isabel out of jail, invites her to stay at her house and offers to be her lawyer for free. Since Isabel has no other means of supporting herself, she accepts Sylvia's help. The whole movie follows the lives of Sylvia and Isabel during the course of the murder trial.

There are two important male characters in the film. The first one is Jake, Sylvia's friend who is also a successful lawyer. He is interested in Sylvia romantically. While handling Isabel's case, Jake and Sylvia go against each other in the courtroom for the first time; Sylvia defends Isabel while Jake defends the family of the man Isabel killed.

The second male character is Dante, an ex-convict and Isabel's ex-boyfriend. He did not know that Isabel was pregnant when he abandoned her seven years ago. Upon his release from jail, he explains to Isabel that he was framed and was imprisoned for seven years. He also confesses that he was married during his relationship with Isabel, but his wife already died. He asks Isabel to start a new life with him. Together they plan to get their son back.

Sylvia becomes jealous of Dante and warns Isabel to stay away from him. In an attempt to sabotage Isabel's relationship with Dante, Sylvia orders Babette to negotiate with Dante. Babette lies to Dante and tells him that he must stay away from Isabel if he wants Isabel to win her case. On the night that Dante and Isabel are supposed to elope, Dante does not show up. Isabel is left devastated.

Sylvia confesses to Jake that she is in love with a woman. Jake reacts negatively, insults Sylvia and claims that women are only to be loved by men. Sylvia proceeds to confessing her love to Isabel. Isabel also reacts in disgust. The two women have a heated argument. In the end, Isabel agrees to "give her body" to Sylvia if they win the case.

Meanwhile, Maxi murders another man who she claims to be disturbing her relationship with her girlfriend. Maxi is then imprisoned for murder.

Sylvia and Isabel win the case. Upon their agreement, Isabel and Sylvia are to meet in a hotel. But when Isabel arrives at the hotel room, she is shocked to see Dante

instead of Sylvia. Dante reveals that Sylvia arranged for him and Isabel to reunite. Meanwhile, Sylvia is seen to be wearing a dress for the first time in the film. She goes on a date with Jake. Jake calls Sylvia a real woman (*babaeng-babae*). Sylvia ends up with Jake, and Isabel ends up with Dante. Both couples are shown smiling at the end of the film.

Initial reaction

What is remarkable about *T-bird at Ako* is that it features two women as its main characters and the issue of woman-to-woman attraction as its main topic. In my observation, it is difficult to find such kind of Filipino films. This rarity of films dealing with woman-to-woman love and/or desire, as opposed to the abundance of films featuring heterosexual relationships, may suggest that inequality exists in the representation of women who love women not only in films but perhaps also outside the films – within our society in which such films are made. It is also important to note that there seems to be more local films featuring love and/or desire about gay men than films featuring woman-to-woman relationships. The main objective of this study is to enumerate, question and critique the misrepresentation of women who love women in the few films that do feature them.

The film shows how Sylvia underwent different levels of struggles before and after she admitted her feelings for a woman. Most of these struggles dealt with the self, peers, society and religion. The movie had a promising premise to work with; I thought that the film wanted to clear stereotypes and to dissolve the dichotomy between women and men, between heterosexual and same-sex relationships. It had a chance to prove that woman-to-woman relationships are just as healthy and normal as any other kind of relationship. Unfortunately, the film ended with a weak message. The film's ending led us back to the very stereotypes and misconceptions critics seek to correct. By the last few minutes of the film, the story was on the verge of being preachy, ultimately putting women who love women into their graves.

The film successfully reinforces the belief system of patriarchy. It normalizes the notion that man is exclusively for woman, and woman is exclusively for man. A woman should look and act in a certain way, and a man should look and act in another way. It

allows no space for diversity in terms of identity and representation. It is not only the women who are given stereotypes but men as well. Both Jake and Dante are represented as aggressive characters. They are both angered and saddened by the fact that *their women* are being taken away by another woman.

These problems observed in the film, though at first may seem shallow, can actually reflect a larger problem silently resting among ourselves and our society during the time when this film was made.

B. Second film: *Rome & Juliet* (2006)

The film is written and directed by Juliet Connie Macatuno and co-written by Chris Violago. It stars Andrea del Rosario as Juliet Flores and Mylene Dizon as Rome Miranda. The supporting characters include Rafael Rosell as Marc and Mico Palanca as Carlo.

Film summary & characters

Juliet is a preschool teacher engaged to a man named Marc. She financially supports her family. Her family, as opposed to Marc's, is represented as a lower-middle class family. Juliet is the main provider for the family; this is one of the reasons why she does not want to have children yet. Her father suffered from a stroke and her brother uses some kind of illegal drug. Juliet makes sure that her family is always well taken care of. In the beginning of the film, it is well-established that Juliet is very obedient towards her fiancé Marc. She follows Marc's demands for her to dress and behave "conservatively." Marc always commands her to tie her hair up and to button up her blouse.

When Juliet accepts Marc's wedding proposal, her friend recommends Rome to be their wedding planner; this is how they meet. The two women develop a close friendship while planning Juliet's wedding.

Rome is a wedding planner and a florist. Compared to Juliet, she seems to be less conventional and more outgoing. She has her own business, a car and an apartment in the city. It may be interpreted that she is more financially well-off compared to Juliet. She does not seem to have a family to support. Later on in the film, it is revealed that she has

an ex-boyfriend who cheated on her. Before she realized her feelings for Juliet, she was also having a fling with a foreign man.

Like *T-bird at Ako*, this film also features two male characters each partnered with a woman. Marc, Juliet's fiancé, is a councilor who aspires to become a mayor. It seems that he comes from a wealthy family based on how he and his mother are represented; they have cars, personal maids and drivers. Marc wants Juliet to quit her job after they get married and also to have children right away. These are the two things that Marc and Juliet usually argue about. The second man is Carlo, Rome's ex-boyfriend. Three years earlier, Carlo and Rome broke up because he cheated and impregnated another girl. Carlo had to marry the pregnant girl. Later on in the film, he returns and asks Rome to start over, but Rome rejects him because she is already in love with Juliet.

Juliet and Marc start having more fights because Juliet does not want to quit her job and to be controlled by Marc all the time. During this time Juliet becomes even closer to Rome as she seeks comfort. Marc starts to feel jealous over the two women's closeness. Meanwhile Juliet starts feeling jealous because of Carlo's attempts at reconciling with Rome.

Juliet's mother and brother have a fight over her brother's drug use; Juliet is devastated and calls Marc to ask if she can stay over at his place for the night. Marc refuses because he will have dinner with his mom that night, but he invites Juliet for a quickie at a motel. Even more devastated, Juliet calls Rome. The two women make love that night. After that night, Juliet avoids Rome and contemplates on the situation. Meanwhile Rome is depressed by Juliet's evasion. Juliet seeks advice from her close friend who also comes out to her as a woman who loves women. Rome seeks advice from a nun who warns her about her feelings for Juliet. The two women finally meet at a church to confess their love for one another.

In one scene, Marc catches Rome and Juliet cuddling in the shower. Juliet apologizes to Marc and calls her affair with Rome a mistake. The next day, Marc cancels the wedding; his secretary hears this and starts spreading the news. The rumors reach Juliet's school and she is warned of being dismissed unless the rumors are disproven – by pushing through with the wedding. From here, a series of dramatic events take place: Juliet's mother discovers her same-sex relationship and shuns her, Juliet's father dies of a

heart attack, Juliet's mother forbids her from seeing her father in his deathbed and finally, Juliet gets hit by a car. This accident brings together Juliet's family, Marc and Rome. When Juliet is in a coma, her mother starts to accept her same-sex relationship. Marc also starts to accept that Juliet deserves to be with Rome.

Rome eventually recovers from her coma. The final sequence shows Rome lighting candles inside a church and Juliet riding a jeepney. The film ends with a shot of Juliet's smiling face. The end credits roll, then cuts to a short scene set in Rome's bedroom in which the two women are watching something on a laptop. Then it cuts back to the end credits.

Initial reaction

This film deserves merit for choosing to center on the story of two women in love. The first stereotype it breaks is the infamous *butch-femme* pairing commonly seen in films. I praise the film for representing a woman-to-woman relationship in which neither of the two is artificially masculinized.

Throughout the second half of the film, after Rome and Juliet's relationship is revealed, Juliet is ridiculed and shunned away by her own loved ones. The terms *eskandalo* (scandal), *kahihyan* (shame), abnormal, immoral, *eksperimento* (experiment) and *mali* (wrong) are used by different characters in the film to describe Rome and Juliet's relationship. Other characters feast over gossiping about the relationship, making it appear that same-sex relationships are out of the ordinary. A sense of *otherness* is attached to woman-to-woman relationships. A woman-to-woman relationship is labelled as abnormal and wrong, suggesting that what is normal and right is a heterosexual relationship. I assume that the film did this in order to depict how same-sex relationships are perceived in contemporary Filipino society, and in this regard, I agree that many people still have this way of thinking. Although there are some developments in the LGBT movement, issues of woman-to-woman love and/or desire seem to remain as taboos, especially among some families and workplaces. Some people may say that they do not discriminate against the LGBT community, but their words do not translate into actions. When they actually meet someone who is in a same-sex relationship or someone

who identifies with the LGBT community, they still cannot perceive or treat these people in the same way that they perceive and treat heterosexuals.

The film supports woman-to-woman relationships, as opposed to how *T-bird at Ako* explicitly discourages woman-to-woman relationships, by enabling Rome and Juliet to acknowledge their real feelings and for them to pursue those feelings. The film tries to create a reality in which two women may meet (perhaps under unexpected circumstances), fall in love and stay together. However, I argue that the two women did not fully empower themselves. The women, especially Juliet, are represented as passive characters. The second half of the film is practically full of tears, apologies and tragic events unfolding one after another. The women did not stand up for themselves or for their relationship. Juliet only accepted every bit of insult thrown at her, she did not even attempt to defend not just herself, but women in general. If these women are represented as empowered individuals, they should have expressed their opinions better. Instead we just see them cry and repeatedly say “I’m sorry.” At least in *T-bird at Ako*, we see empowered characters like Maxi and Sylvia (before her feminization) engaging in discussions about same-sex attraction and love. We do not see Maxi apologizing for being a *t-bird* because there is nothing to apologize for in the first place.

It is the car accident, instead of the characters themselves, that solves the conflict. I argue that these two women partly contributed to their own state of *otherness*; since they are passive, they allowed society and the people around them to label them as the *other*. There is no active resistance to the *otherness* being imposed upon them.

The film depends on one conflict to solve the other conflicts. It seems that a woman has to be on the brink of death before her family could accept her. The film ends with the two women being together and all the people around them accepting them, but such acceptance is sudden and unexplained. It is almost similar to how *T-bird at Ako* ended – forced and abrupt.

The fact that Juliet cheated on her fiancé does not seem to be the action that angered and humiliated people; what really triggered the negative reactions is the fact that she cheated with a woman. This dismisses the issue of cheating as a form of betrayal in itself; instead the problem highlighted is the issue of a woman loving another woman instead of a man. This representation, although it may seem to come with good intentions

(seeing that the two women had a happy ending), may be problematic because it stereotypes women who love women as villains.

The same kind of representation is observed in a more recent film from Sweden called *Kyss Mig* (dir. Keining, 2011) in which a woman calls off her wedding because of her affair with another woman (who also broke up with her previous girlfriend because of the affair). The same thing happens in *Imagine Me & You* (dir. Parker, 2005) a British-American film about two women in love; a newly wedded woman and her wedding florist.

Since these woman-to-woman relationships start as illicit affairs that lead to the demise of earlier relationships, there might be an impression that this kind of relationship is unstable and merely fuelled by lust, confusion and curiosity. Woman-to-woman relationships are represented as those that start on a whim hence might not last.

Film Title

The title seems to allude to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* which is a tragic story about forbidden love. In *Rome & Juliet*, the two women cannot be together because the society in which they live is patriarchal and heteronormative; it frowns upon same-sex relationships. People will always judge them negatively no matter what they do. Their love, although similar to any other kind of love, is considered forbidden because it exists between two women.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, one dies for the other and upon their deaths, their feuding families reconcile. *Rome & Juliet* tries to follow the same pattern – Juliet goes into a coma because of a car accident; this tragedy brings together all the feuding characters (Juliet's mother, Marc and Rome). The tragedy, which almost kills Juliet, resolves the conflict existing among all the characters. Unlike *Romeo & Juliet's* sad ending, Rome and Juliet get a happy ending after the tragedies they have been through.

If *Rome & Juliet* does allude to Shakespeare's masterpiece, then I argue that *Rome & Juliet* partly fails. Rome's and Juliet's will to defend and to fight for their relationship is not well-established. The film's main anchor is the car accident which draws sympathy for Juliet not only from her mother, Rome and Marc, but also from the audience. The car accident is represented as an easy escape from all the problems

hindering Rome and Juliet's relationship. Their union in the end of the film did not result from their own efforts, but only from the pity they received due to the miserable fates they had to endure. A form of *deus ex machina*⁵ is observed; this is further discussed in Chapter X (The myth of miserable fates).

The succeeding chapters (Chapters VI, VII, VIII, IX, X) identify and critique the stereotypes observed in the two films. As we observe the similarities and differences in the myths about women who love women, it is important to keep in mind that the first film was produced in the early 1980s and the second film was produced in the mid-2000s.

The succeeding chapters identify and describe the different myths about women who love women. These myths are based on my interpretation of *T-bird at Ako* and *Rome & Juliet*.

⁵ Merriam-Webster defines *deus ex machina* as “a person or thing (as in fiction or drama) that appears or is introduced suddenly and unexpectedly and provides a contrived solution to an apparently insoluble difficulty.”

CHAPTER VI

THE MYTH OF MASCULINIZATION AND FEMINIZATION

*“a friend had said
intuition is woman’s best guide
feel our hearts
i thought i felt something
more than a friendly touch
and my friend will
never lie
and i do not.”*

— Aida Santos, Notes on pains, 1998:59.

This chapter discusses how Sylvia from *T-bid at Ako* is artificially masculinized and feminized, and how the two women from *Rome & Juliet* resist this myth. In this chapter, I discuss my interpretation of how a female character is masculinized in order to make a woman-to-woman relationship work onscreen or in order to make it believable in the eyes of the filmmaker and/or the audience.

How is *T-bird at Ako* made into a love story if its main characters are both women? It seems this was made possible by making one character more masculine and the other more feminine. As argued by de Lauretis (1994) in Chapter IV, films usually represent sexual desire as something that involves men; hence for a woman to desire another woman, she must undergo masculinization.

A. The Masculinization of Sylvia

I use the term *masculinization* to describe how women are forced to abide by traditional male roles. In doing so, women who love women are made to appear and act as men in order to qualify as suitable lovers for their female partners. I support de Lauretis’ (1994) observation that in films, for two women to have a real relationship, one of them is forced to masculinize herself. What they imitate, however, is the popular notion of what a *real man* is. Of what a real man is, I cannot say. As for the film, it

suggests that a *real man* is tough, aggressive and someone who wears the pants (literally and figuratively).

Sylvia's masculinization is created by emphasizing contradictions between herself and heterosexual women such as Isabel and Babette. The latter are represented as *real women*. In order to masculinize Sylvia, she must be everything a *real woman* is not. She is represented not as a *real woman*, but not as a *real man* either. These differences are observed in the women's choices of clothing and views on relationships.

Lalaking-lalaki

In the dialogue below, Sylvia, the lawyer, confesses her feelings to her client, Isabel. The love confession turns into a heated confrontation about Sylvia's sexuality.

Original	English translation
<i>Sylvia to Isabel:</i>	<i>Sylvia to Isabel:</i>
Isabel, sa 'yo lang ako sira. Lalaking-lalaki. Gusto kita, mula ulo hanggang paa.	Isabel, I am crazy only for you. Very manly. I want you from head to toe.

My problem with this dialogue is the phrase *sa 'yo lang ako sira. Lalaking-lalaki* (I am crazy only for you. Very manly). Why does a woman have to be very manly just to express her feelings for another woman? Does being masculine (*lalaking-lalaki*) count as an advantage or a measure for one's love and/or desire towards a woman? This supports the myth that for a woman-to-woman relationship to become valid, one of the two women must be masculinized.

The aggressive Sylvia

The dialogue below emphasizes Sylvia's aggressiveness. The study does not claim that women cannot be aggressive. This interpretation is only made within the context of the film. Since the film makes use of stereotypes to distinguish male characteristics from female characteristics, the study identifies *aggressiveness* as a male trait. This aggressiveness is observed in Sylvia upon her masculinization. However, after undergoing feminization, her aggressiveness seems to have disappeared.

Original

Isabel:

Tumigil ka. Ang kamay mo, baka kung saan mapunta.

Sylvia:

Bakit? Ayaw mo ba sa akin?

Isabel:

Hindi ako sanay sa babae.

Sylvia:

Masasanay ka rin.

Isabel:

Sa lalaki, kahit pangit, kahit matanda, kahit mabaho. Pero hindi sa 'yo.

Sylvia:

Bakit? Ano bang nararamdaman mo?

Isabel:

Nandidiri ako.

Sylvia:

Bakit? Sino ka ba? Ano ipinagmamalaki mo? Katawan lang 'yan a. Saan ba galing 'yan? Sa putik!

Isabel:

Putik nga ako. Ganito nga ako, pero kahit na ganito ako, nagsisimba pa rin ako kahit papaano. Ang sabi sa taas, ang sala sa lamig, sala sa init, iniluluwa ng langit, isinusuka ng Diyos!

(Sylvia slaps Isabel. Isabel slaps back.)

English translation

Isabel:

Stop. Your hand, it might venture somewhere.

Sylvia:

Why? Don't you like me?

Isabel:

I'm not used to a woman.

Sylvia:

You'll get used to it.

Isabel:

With a man, even if he's ugly, old or smelly. But not with you.

Sylvia:

Why? What are you feeling?

Isabel:

I am disgusted.

Sylvia:

Why? Who are you? What are you so proud of? That's only a body? Where did that come from? From mud!

Isabel:

Yes, I'm made from mud. I am what I am, but even so, I still go to church. What they say up there, a sin in the cold, a sin in the heat, heaven spits it out, spitted out by God!

(Sylvia slaps Isabel. Isabel slaps back.)

Sylvia:
I'm sorry.

Isabel:
Ano ba naman 'to? Katawan lang
'to. Konting tubig, konting sabon,
wala na. Tapusin na natin ang kaso,
tapos sabihin mo kung kailan, saan.
Darating ako, ang katawan ko.

Sylvia:
I'm sorry.

Isabel:
What is this anyway? It's only a
body. A bit of water, a bit of soap,
it will be gone. Let's end the case,
then tell me when and where. I will
come, my body.

Fig. 1. Sylvia (left) confesses her love to Isabel (right).



In the confession scene (Fig. 1), Sylvia is shown to be more direct and aggressive as opposed to her earlier trait of being subtle and reserved. This change is sudden and unexplained; it seems out of character. This makes it seem that her sudden change, her new *evil* (refer to Chapter IX) is because of her newly realized attraction for the same sex. Sylvia is made to appear demanding and aggressive (stereotyped male traits), as if forcing Isabel to reciprocate her feelings even if Isabel already makes it clear that she is not interested and that she is heterosexual. This gives Sylvia, a woman who desires another woman, a negative image.

Katawan lang ‘yan a

In the dialogue above, Sylvia even said *masasanay ka rin* (You’ll get used to it) to Isabel, implying that same-sex attraction is something that may be forced or adapted (as opposed to being natural). The context of the confession also makes it seem that Sylvia’s intentions only revolve around matters of sex and physical desire.

In the end, Isabel agrees to *give her body* to Sylvia. This whole dialogue minimizes woman-to-woman attractions and relationships to mere lust and sex. Throughout the entire film, we rarely see Isabel and Sylvia having deep or personal conversations. Their closeness is not well-established, as if implying that they never really fully understood each other. It seems that Sylvia’s attraction is mainly rooted from Isabel’s physical beauty. This is in contrast with how Isabel’s relationship with Dante (Isabel’s ex-boyfriend) is represented. Isabel and Dante’s closeness is established through their conversations. This contrast shows that a heterosexual relationship is based on something that goes deeper than the physical, while a woman-to-woman relationship is simply based on the physical.

Why can’t we be (more than) friends?

Isabel, a heterosexual woman, is also given a negative image. She is represented as someone who is harsh. She does not seem to have any empathy towards Sylvia. Although she does not like Sylvia in a romantic sense, she could have been kinder to her out of respect. She could have turned her down without discriminating her. This stereotypes heterosexual women as those who are close-minded and unaccepting. This also subtly implies that a real friendship between a heterosexual woman and a woman who loves women is impossible.

Who wears the pants?

In my observation, defining a character’s manner of dressing is one of the commonly used ways of establishing a character’s personality. This method can be effective but it can also confine a character to stereotypes. Although a character’s choice of clothing and her or his actual personality may not always coincide or be relevant to one another, a character’s clothing is still one of the first things a viewer notices. This

method is made even more effective if the character is always or is frequently seen wearing the same type of clothing, this helps in establishing a pattern which may hint something about the character's personality.

In *T-bird at Ako*, a character's choice of clothing is used as a device to distinguish one woman from another. Sylvia and Maxi are placed in the same category – the *masculinized* women (the *other*). The film represents both of them as women who prefer masculine clothing (Fig. 2, 3, 4). They both desire women and want these women to return their affection. However, since they are labelled as neither a *real woman* nor a *real man*, they are having a difficult time receiving love from the women they love. Meanwhile, the likes of Isabel and Babette (heterosexual women) are often seen in blouses and skirts. The film makes use of this stereotype, the masculine clothing, to establish Sylvia's and Maxi's difference from other women (Fig. 5 & 6)

The women's choice of clothing does not establish individuality for each of the female characters, but it is only used as a device to categorize women into two: as either a *real woman* or as the *other* (the masculinized woman).

Fig. 2. She wears the pants.
(Left: Maxi; Right: Sylvia)



Fig. 3 & 4. T-birds: Maxi & Sylvia
(Left: Maxi. Right: Sylvia)



Fig. 5 & 6. Sylvia the t-bird & Babette the heterosexual
(Wears dress: Babette. Wears pants: Sylvia)



The pair of pants worn by masculinized women is used as a symbol for power in terms of material wealth – Sylvia as a powerful lawyer and Maxi, a self-identified t-bird, as a powerful provider (to her girlfriend). However, the pair of pants, when worn by women who love women is also used as a symbol for powerlessness in terms of love and relationships.

In the dialogue below, Maxi explains to Sylvia how economic power affects gender roles.

Original

Sylvia:
Hindi mo naman siya asawa e.
(Siya = Maxi's girlfriend)

English translation

Sylvia:
She is not your wife.
(She = Maxi's girlfriend)

Maxi:

Anong hindi asawa? Ako ang husband, siya ang wife. Ako ang gumagastos dyan, e di ako ang husband.

Maxi:

What do you mean she's not my wife? I am the husband, she is the wife. I am the one who spends money on her, so that makes me the husband.

Maxi, a self-identified t-bird, still subscribes to traditional gender roles in which a man is seen as the provider, hence representing the wife as being dependent on the husband. It seems that Sylvia acts the same way around Isabel – she acts as Isabel's saviour (bailed her out of jail, defended her in court) and as her provider (provides her a home, financial support).

Implications

Sylvia's limited choice of clothing and Isabel's freedom over her choices assume that a woman who desires another woman is limited to an imitation of a man's wardrobe. She is disallowed from wearing dresses like Isabel because this might terminate her identity as a woman who loves women.

Perhaps their choice of clothing is also attributed to the nature of their jobs; Isabel is a dancer, and Sylvia is a lawyer. There are stereotypes or norms of clothing common in each work category. The fact that the *masculinized* character (Sylvia) is assigned the role of a lawyer, and the *feminized* character (Isabel) is assigned the role of a dancer may already be interpreted as a representation patterned after the traditional gender roles produced by patriarchy.

This process of masculinizing one of the two women is commonly seen in films depicting same-sex relationships. However, I think that it is not always necessary. Although there are relationships that work this way, not all relationships are alike; and not all women are bound by such restrictions. To say that there is a need to masculinize a woman in order to make her love for another woman genuine minimizes a woman's identity and sexuality into a mere imitation or subcategory of men. The need for masculinization may be interpreted as society's need to maintain the man-woman pairing as the norm; thus eliminating the existence of relationships outside this imposed norm

(heterosexuality). This representation embodies and maintains the ideas produced by patriarchy.

B. The Feminization of Sylvia

Sylvia undergoes a second transformation in which she realizes her *real womanhood* and pairs up with a man. This dismisses the fact that she already is a woman even before the transformation. It is interesting to point out that Sylvia's character, a woman, had to undergo two processes (masculinization and feminization) in order to pass standards set by man.

The film sends a wrong message: for a woman to be loved by a woman, she must masculinize herself – dress like a man, act like a man, love like a man. For a woman to be loved by a man, she must feminize herself – dress like a woman, act like a woman, love like a woman; these are the prerequisites to becoming a *real woman*. A woman is forced to undergo such processes in order to please and satisfy men's desires and standards instead of her own.

Dress to impress?

In the end, Sylvia is also seen wearing a dress (Fig. 7); a scene which signals her transition into a *real woman*. Sylvia's newly found or perhaps recovered sense of identity as a woman is acknowledged and approved by a man (Jake). In the film, a dress is used as a device that marks the transformation of Sylvia into a *real woman*. In order to become a *real woman*, Sylvia is not only forced to change her outer appearance, but also to erase her past, including her attraction towards Isabel (or perhaps towards any woman in general). She is forced to alter her identity in order to make herself more appealing to men (as lovers) and to women (as friends), ultimately conforming to the norms of a heterosexual society. In the end, Sylvia's admiration for Isabel shifts from desire to imitation.

Fig. 7. Happy ending?
(Left: Sylvia. Right: Jake)



Implications

Perhaps people behind such films deem that society is not yet ready to see a relationship that does not follow a heterosexual formula. It could mean that these people in power (those in control of such media products) assume that viewers are used to the man-woman pairing, hence the media must sustain this tradition. It is also possible that the creators of such media products fear that if they change the popular formula, their products (i.e., movies, T.V. programs) will not sell. Hence the nature of such films is also dependent on society's existing views on women, men and relationships. Such views may dictate the market, the kind of films made and the kind of representations made within the films. As discussed earlier, the 1980s was still ten years away from witnessing the first active struggle for lesbian visibility in the country.

I also observed that it is common among films to masculinize only one of the two women; it is a taboo to masculinize both women. But in the film *Rome & Juliet*, the taboo of feminizing both women is broken. However, it seems that most films reproduce a reality in which all relationships are either a heterosexual relationship or are patterned after it. A woman-to-woman relationship consisting of two femme (feminized) women or of two butch (masculinized) women are deemed impossible, hence are often unrepresented. Although all these are only labels, which are not necessarily true for everyone, there are people who do identify with these labels and they need to be represented as well.

C. Women as defined by men; women as defined by her uterus

T-bird at Ako creates its own version of a *real woman*. We see Sylvia being deprived of her identity as a woman by a man. The man insults Sylvia for experiencing same-sex love. The dialogue below takes place at Jake's house in which Sylvia confesses to Jake that she is in love with Isabel.

Original

English translation

Sylvia:

Ano bang tingin mo sa akin physically?

Sylvia:

How do you see me physically?

Jake:

Well, sa nakikita ng aking dalawang mata, sa abot ng aking isip, babae, babaeng-babae.

Jake:

Well, from what my two eyes can see and as far as I know, you're a woman, very womanly.

Sylvia:

I think I'm in love.

Sylvia:

I think I'm in love.

Jake:

Well, it's about time. 'Di na tayo bata. Sabi ko na nga ba't this is my lucky day. Masuwerte talaga akong lalaki.

Jake:

Well, it's about time. We're not that young anymore. I knew it, this is my lucky day. I'm really a lucky man.

Sylvia:

Hindi sa lalaki.

Sylvia:

Not with a man.

Jake:

Ano kamo?

Jake:

Pardon me?

Sylvia:

Babae.

Sylvia:

A woman.

Jake:

Babae?

Jake:

Woman?

Sylvia:

Oo, Babae! Hinugot sa tadyang ni Adan, hindi nanggaling sa ulo, hindi rin nanggaling sa paa. Sa ilalim ng puso, para mahalín.

Sylvia:

Yes, a woman! Pulled from Adam's rib. Not from the head, not from the foot. Under the heart, to be loved.

Jake:

Yes, to be loved by a man, not by another woman. Jesus! God gave you the capacity to ovulate para manganak ka, para maging inahin! Don't cripple it. It's a gift. God gave you an intelligent mind, don't search so far for your woman. Be a woman! Babae ka! Babae ka! Babae ka! Sinong lecheng babae 'yan? 'Yung nakatira sa bahay mo, 'yung inampon mo, 'yung dancer? Don't insult yourself! What do you want from me?

Sylvia:

Make me feel like a woman.

(Jake kisses Sylvia, but stops shortly after)

Jake:

Yes, to be loved by a man, not by another woman. Jesus! God gave you the capacity to ovulate so you can get pregnant, so you can be a hen! Don't cripple it. It's a gift. God gave you an intelligent mind, don't search so far for your woman. Be a woman! You're a woman! You're a woman! You're a woman! Who is the wicked woman? The one living in your house, the one you adopted? The dancer? Don't insult yourself! What do you want from me?

Sylvia:

Make me feel like a woman.

(Jake kisses Sylvia, but stops shortly after)

Fig. 8 & 9. Jake kisses Sylvia, but stops shortly after.



The dialogue below shows how Jake begins to insult Sylvia after kissing her.

Original

Jake to Sylvia:

Sorry. I don't make love to the desert. Umuwi ka na. Next time, kung bumalik ka, nakadamit babae, katawang babae, pusong babae ang nasa loob. Good night.

English translation

Jake to Sylvia:

Sorry. I don't make love to the desert. Go home. Next time if you return, make sure that you have a woman's clothes, a woman's body and a woman's heart inside. Good night.

In this confrontation (Fig. 8 & 9), we see how a man looks down on a woman because she is in love with another woman. The man references to God, saying that a woman's capacity to give birth is a gift, hence she must be thankful for it. The woman is called a hen (*inahin*) which implies that her only role is to give birth. This minimizes a woman to a single role, a baby-maker. A woman's life is not limited to her capacity to give birth; her value and identity is not defined by her uterus. Her anatomy does not predestine her future.

Jake praises a woman's ability to give birth, but at the same time, he is placing this ability as a burden exclusive to women. This implies that women who love women are abandoning their identities as women – based on the argument that one's capacity to give birth defines one's identity as a woman. This deprives women of their right to create an identity for themselves and to freely love whoever they love. Does this mean that women who are not capable of giving birth are not real women? How about women who choose not to have children? And women who choose to have children through adoption or other means? Everyone should have autonomy over their bodies and freedom over their choices.

Feminist Simone de Beauvoir critiques the way women are defined. Beauvoir (1949) argues that a “woman has ovaries, a uterus: these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature” (p. 3). De Beauvoir argues that man defines a woman not as an autonomous being but only as someone relative to him. De Beauvoir calls the man as the *Subject*, the *Absolute*; while the woman is the *other*. In line with this perspective, I argue that even within the group of the *other*, even among women, a woman who loves another woman is further pushed into another kind of *otherness*. In this scenario, the heterosexual woman becomes the *Subject*, the *Absolute*; while the woman who desires women is labelled the *other* – seen not as a real woman nor as a real man.

D. Resisting the myth

Sylvia from *T-bird at Ako* succumbed to the myths of masculinization and feminization. The 1980s must have been a difficult time for women to resist such myths. In the second film which is set in the mid-2000s, Rome and Juliet are able to step outside the same borders that trapped poor Sylvia.

Rome & Juliet breaks the myths of masculinization and feminization. The film does not assign gender roles to its characters; Rome and Juliet's relationship succeeds and neither of them is masculinized. Rome and Juliet's love is not validated by the presence or imitation of man. The two women are also seen being intimate with one another (Fig. 10). It is also implied in some scenes that they have sex (Fig. 11). This helps in disproving the old notion that for sex to be valid, it has to involve a man and a woman (a penis and a vagina).

Fig. 10 & 11. Rome and Juliet: Unafraid of intimacy.



It is rare to see Filipino films showing a woman-to-woman relationship in which neither of the two women is masculinized. Rome and Juliet are represented as women who wear skirts, heels, blouses, pants and all types of clothing (Fig. 12-15). Unlike the women in *T-bird at Ako*, the women's choices of clothing in *Rome & Juliet* are not limited.

Fig. 12-15
Rome's and Juliet's diverse choices of clothing.



The film does not make use of labels to identify the characters, but if we are to use such labels for clarity's sake, it may be interpreted that both Rome and Juliet are femmes. By featuring a femme-to-femme relationship, *Rome & Juliet* is able to break a stereotype, showing that woman-to-woman love is not formulaic; hence labels will only remain as labels. After all, these women (butch, femme, bi, queer, or however they identify) are all women. This film, unlike *T-bird at Ako*, does not question the authenticity of Rome and Juliet's relationship.

Another woman-to-woman relationship is shown in the film; Juliet's friend reveals that she also has a girlfriend (Fig. 16). The pairing is also represented as a femme-to-femme relationship.

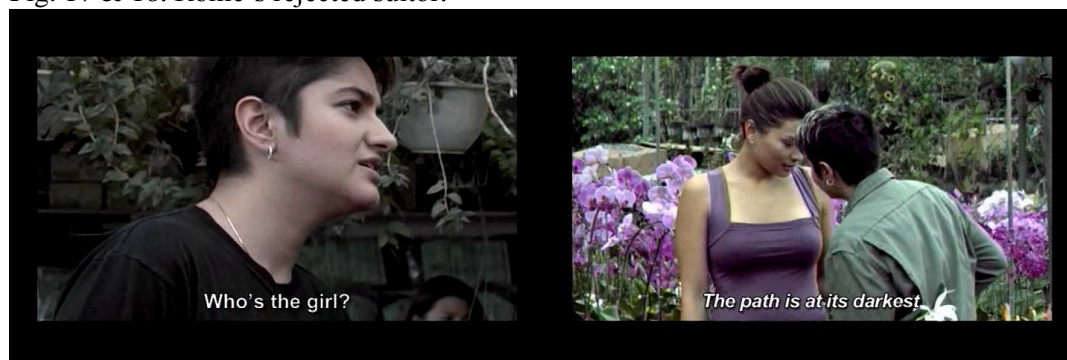
Fig. 16. Girls kissing in public



Rome & Juliet also features one woman who seems to be a butch, if we follow the stereotypes commonly seen in films. She has short hair, tattoos, ear piercing and wears baggy clothing (Fig. 17 & 18). However, she is only briefly shown during the time when Juliet is avoiding Rome. The unnamed character expresses interest in Rome, but Rome rejects her. It is good that the film tries to show the diversity among women who love women.

Unlike *T-bird at Ako*, *Rome & Juliet* shows that there are other women in the story, aside from the main characters, who are also experiencing same-sex attraction. This suggests that such kind of attraction is not uncommon; in fact, it may be experienced by someone you personally know.

Fig. 17 & 18. Rome's rejected suitor.



Independent women

Both Rome and Juliet are represented as independent career women. Rome is a wedding planner, a florist and a business woman (she owns her own flower shop). While Juliet is represented as a passionate teacher who aspires to build her own school someday. Unlike, *T-bird at Ako*, neither Rome nor Juliet is given a superior or inferior role in terms of employment, education or class. One woman is not dependent on the other. Although Rome seems to live a more luxurious life compared to Juliet, the women's economic power is not treated as a big issue. One woman does not act as the other woman's saviour or provider.

Juliet also counters the patriarchal notion that women must leave the production sphere (work outside the home) for them to be able to focus on the reproduction sphere (childbearing and childrearing).

Original:

Juliet to her mother:

Alam mo, Imang, gusto ni Marc na patigilin ako sa pagtuturo e. Kasi gusto niya raw kaming magka-anak. Ako naman, hindi pa. Gusto ko, mga three years pa kasi. Gusto ko, marami pa mangyari sa buhay ko.

English translation:

Juliet to her mother:

You know, Mom, Marc wants me to stop teaching. Because he wants us to have children right away. Me, I don't want to. I want to wait three more years because I still want a lot of things to happen in my life.

Original:

Juliet's mom to Juliet:

Tama 'yan, pakinggan mo ang puso mo at sundin mo.

English translation:

Juliet's mom to Juliet:

That's right. Listen to your heart and follow it.

The film empowers Juliet and her mother by representing them as independent women who do not conform to the norms of patriarchy. However, the mother suddenly becomes unsupportive when she learns of her daughter's same-sex relationship.

In another scene, Marc becomes angry because he finds out that Juliet has been using contraceptives. Marc wants to have children, while Juliet does not. During a confrontation, Juliet stands up for herself and decides to continue using contraception. This representation gives women autonomy over their bodies and decisions.

Sexual Fluidity

Before Rome and Juliet met each other, they each had relationships with men. Juliet was engaged to Marc, and Rome was dating a man. It is shown that both women shared physical and emotional intimacy with their male partners (Fig. 19 & 20). Upon starting their relationship, Rome and Juliet ended their physical and emotional intimacy with their previous partners, and began sharing the same kind of intimacy with each other (Fig. 21). Their sexual history (dating men exclusively in the past) did not hinder them from pursuing a same-sex relationship in the present.

Fig. 19. Marc & Juliet in the shower.



Fig. 20. Rome & her FuBu (Fuck Buddy)



Fig. 21. Rome & Juliet in the shower.



Sexual fluidity among women means that a woman may experience same-sex attractions under certain circumstances in her life. Such changes in their patterns of love and desire may come unexpectedly. A woman who identifies as a heterosexual may one

day realize that she is in love with a woman. However, Diamond (2008) clarifies that this does not mean that all women are bisexual; she says that “just as women have different sexual orientations, they have different degrees of sexual fluidity. Some women will experience relatively stable patterns of love and desire throughout their lives, while others will not” (p. 10).

Diamond argues that “a woman’s sexual orientation is not the only factor determining her attractions” (p. 11). In the film, Juliet tells her friend that she is not a lesbian, but she does acknowledge her feelings for Rome. It is also clear in the film that Juliet was in love with Marc before she fell in love with Rome. All these facts do not eliminate the possibility of Juliet falling in love again with a different person who happens to be a woman. Diamond argues that even if a woman experiences such changes, it is possible that her “overall sexual orientation” (p. 11) does not change.

It is commendable that *Rome & Juliet* did not masculinize one woman and feminize the other in order to validate the women’s same-sex attraction. The film explores the issue of sexual fluidity in the context of a relatively conservative Philippine society. Hopefully this representation left its viewers with questions they may seek to answer on their own.

Sex = Promiscuity?

It is quite common for women who engage in romantic and sexual relationships with both women and men to be stereotyped as promiscuous women. It is important to note that once Rome and Juliet’s relationship was established, neither of the two women were seen having intimate physical, sexual or emotional moments with anyone else.

Sex and love are different things; however, there are people who associate sex with love. There are also some people who do not associate sex with love. In the film, it may be interpreted that sex is used as a device to connote love and/or affection between two characters. This applies in the case of Marc and Juliet, and Juliet and Rome. However, Rome makes it clear that her situation with her FuBu (Fuck Buddy) is different; she claims that their sexual affair has nothing to do with love. The film tries to show that there is more than one perspective on sex and love. The film does not judge its

characters for whichever perspective they have. The point is that multiple perspectives do exist.

The good thing about the film is how it represents Rome and Juliet's relationship – its foundation is not sex, but it does not mean they do not or cannot have sex. Rome and Juliet's closeness is well-established since the beginning of the film. What may have started as physical attraction develops into a close friendship and emotional connection. The latter then further develops into a romantic and sexual relationship.

Rome & Juliet breaks the stereotype that women in same-sex relationships are only after the thrill of sex with a woman or that these women are only after a woman's emotional support because their boyfriends cannot provide it. The film does not aggrandize sex; it does not make a big deal out of it just because it is sex between two women instead of sex between a woman and a man. By normalizing sex between two women, the film removes same-sex relationships from its alienated position. The film shows that there is no grand difference between a heterosexual relationship and a same-sex relationship. If a woman and a man can have sex, so can two women. If a woman and a man can love each other, so can two women.

Implications

The myth of masculinization and feminization is embodied by *T-bird at Ako* (1982). The same myth is then broken by *Rome & Juliet* (2006). This change in the representation of women who love women, in this aspect, may suggest that people's views on same-sex relationship is no longer completely patriarchal.

Rome & Juliet attempts to clear some of the misrepresentations of woman-to-woman relationships. The next step, for future films and broadcast materials, is to feature underrepresented pairings such as *butch-to-butch* relationships. Out of all the Filipino films I am able to find, I did not see a film featuring two women in a relationship who are represented or who self-identifies as a *butch*.

CHAPTER VII

THE MYTH OF WOMEN'S SPACES

“It is not the means of male domination that are similar but its tradition. It is not the religions that are the same, but the role religion plays in patriarchal oppression.” — Nagy-Zekmi, 2003.

This chapter focuses on the spaces in which women who love women interact. The differences in the films' ideologies are reflected by the location of the women's first encounter. The two films exhibit multiple contradictions: the nightclub versus the church, the raunchy versus the holy, the hidden versus the public. This chapter also discusses how the image of the church has been transformed from being an instrument of surveillance into an avenue of acceptance.

In the next two chapters (Chapter VII: The myth of women's spaces & Chapter VIII: The myth of gazes), I explore the spaces shared by women who love women. I visit Isabel's nightclub, Sylvia's religious home, and Rome and Juliet's church.

A. The nightclub

“Hidden spaces; illegitimate places.”

— Guieb, 2013.

The use of a nightclub (Fig. 22) as the space where the two women meet for the first time seems to imply that spaces in which love between two women may exist or begin to exist are few and hidden, suggesting that such spaces are unacceptable and/or unpopular. It may be implied that such places are cheap and raunchy. Sex, violence and shame are also subtly attached to such spaces. It may be interpreted that woman-to-woman relationships are heavily founded (and sustained) on lust and/or carnal desires. This confines same-sex relationships to a physical and/or sexual sphere, dismissing other aspects of the relationship. It also implies that women who love women may only find

love in such places. In the same way that nightclubs are hidden in the dark, woman-to-woman relationships are also hidden as taboos. In the same way that customers pay to see women dance, it seems that assigning the nightclub as the first space shared by Sylvia and Isabel is a foreshadowing of their fate – one woman must pay to make the other woman stay. In the end, a customer cannot have the dancers all to herself or himself. Sylvia cannot have Isabel. A woman cannot have another woman. The film represents such pairings as only temporary.

Fig. 22. Isabel's first appearance happens inside the nightclub.



Sylvia and Isabel's relationship is founded on tragedy and it ends in the same way. The only remedy to their tragic fates is union with a man, a prerequisite to becoming a *real woman*.

The nightclub, in the film's context, may be interpreted as a clandestine space, a somewhat hidden and underground rendezvous. A place where people come to watch women dance; a space where one satisfies her or his desires by gazing over a woman's body. But these people are ashamed of being seen in that kind of place, hence it must be hidden from public view and it must operate at late hours. It is a private space where one's visit is kept secret, saving the visitor (Sylvia) from shame, while exposing the dancer's body (Isabel) to objectification and/or admiration.

It is the same space in which Isabel meets a man who assaults her (Fig. 23 & 24). After dancing, a man invites her to eat, but then proceeds to trying to rape her. Isabel,

while trying to protect herself, accidentally kills him using the gun the man carries around *for protection*.

Fig. 23 & 24. Kill him or get raped. Sylvia is not given much choice.



Even in this situation, the man (rapist) is represented as the *victim*; he was killed by Isabel. Although at first, the woman is given the victim role, by the end of the sequence, the roles are reversed, and the woman becomes the *villain*. The myth of villains and victims is discussed in Chapter IX (The myth of villains and victims).

B. Reincarnation of the church

As opposed to the nightclub as the first space shared by women, Rome and Juliet's first shared space is the church. As opposed to the nightclub as a private space, the church is a public space. This puts women who love women in the public, hence removing them from dark and isolated spaces exclusively meant for them.

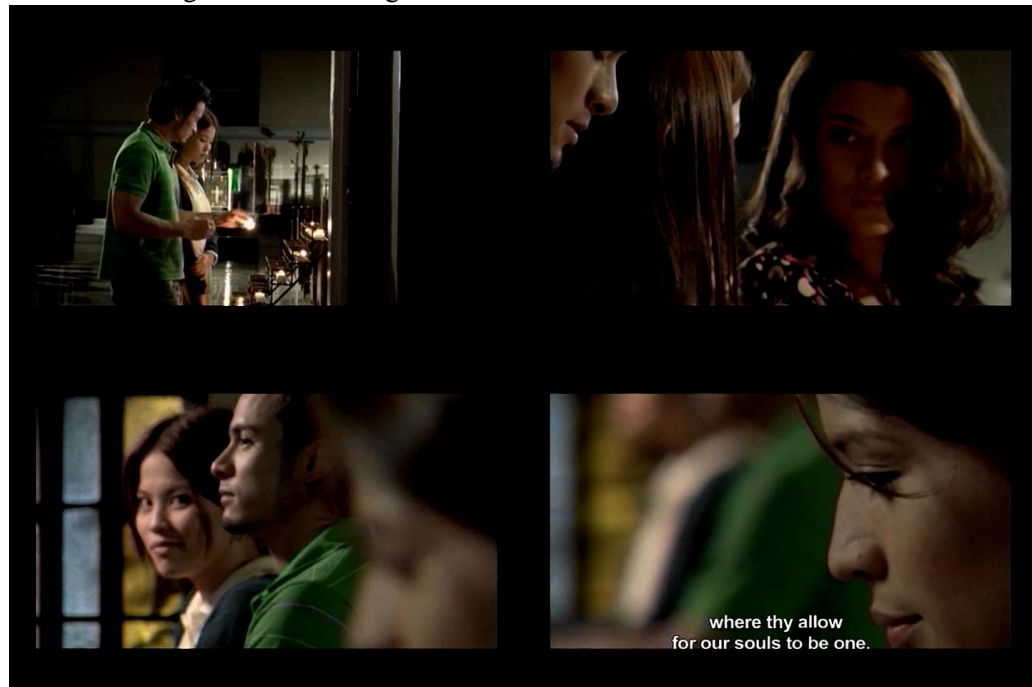
By choosing to let Rome and Juliet meet inside a church, the film reinvents the public's imagination of where two women may find love. The location choice suggests that a woman does not have to pay for an opportunity to meet women and such opportunities are not confined to the late hours of the night. Such kind of encounters is not forced, it may happen anywhere, even in unexpected circumstances and in this case, even in sacred places. Unlike the nightclub which subtly attaches notions of shame and secrecy to its visitors, Rome and Juliet's meeting place does not attach any kind of stigma to its visitors.

This choice of space also implies that finding love is no longer dependent on or restricted by the kind of place where certain kinds of people meet. Whether the individual

is rich or poor, male or female, loves the opposite sex or the same sex, young or old, whoever she or he is and whatever she or he may do in life, anyone can find love anywhere, even in supposed spaces of patriarchy, ironically.

It is also quite ironic for *Rome & Juliet* to choose the church as the meeting place of the two women, given the firm stance of the Philippine Catholic Church against same-sex relationships. This contrast enables the film to debunk another myth – that all people engaged in same-sex relationships are non-believers of the Catholic faith or any kind of religion. It seems that both Rome and Juliet are women of faith; they also practise their religion. This breaks the stereotype that women who love women are those who are living sinful lives because they have lost faith in God. The film does not make use of the Bible to discriminate same-sex relationships, unlike how *T-bird at Ako* directly makes use of Bible references. In *Rome & Juliet*, the two women do not let their religious beliefs hinder their personal relationships.

Fig. 25-28. Simbang Gabi: Rome & Juliet's first encounter.



The first time the two women meet in the church (Fig. 25-28), they do not actually talk with each other. Juliet, who is with Marc (her fiancé) at that time, stares at Rome while they are lighting candles. Then the three of them are shown sitting on the

same row, Juliet looks at Rome and gives her a smile. Rome smiles to herself. During this scene, Juliet (voice-over) prays to meet the one whom she will grow old with. It seems that she is still praying for signs to make sure that marrying Marc is the right decision. In this scene, it may be interpreted that there is some kind of attraction between Rome and Juliet. This scene may be interpreted as a foreshadowing of Rome and Juliet's relationship; it may also be interpreted that God heeded Juliet's prayer, hence the chance encounter with Rome. If the latter is the film's intention, then the film is trying to debunk the belief that God only pairs woman with man, and man with woman. The film shows that God does not look down on women who love women; in fact, the film seems to imply that Juliet's prayers are answered, her "soulmate" just happens to be a woman.

(Fig. 25-28) The church scene literally puts Marc in between Rome and Juliet. The sitting positions of the characters (blocking) in the church bench show Marc separating the two women. This may also be interpreted as a foreshadowing of the fate of the three characters.

Fig. 29. Rome & Juliet: Lovers and churchgoers.



Rome and Juliet's introduction to one another happens in front of the church. The two women talk about hiring Rome as Juliet's wedding planner. As friends, the two women are seen going to church together (Fig. 29). The two women's love confession also happens inside the church (Fig. 30). And the film ends with Rome lighting candles inside the church, while Juliet is riding the jeep, perhaps to meet Rome at the church. Throughout the film, the church is represented as a space shared by the two women. The

recurrent presence of the church may be equivalent to the recurring religious images seen in *T-bird at Ako* (discussed in Chapter VIII). It may be interpreted that *Rome & Juliet* makes use of the recurrent presence of the church as a space shared by the two women to connote the prevalence of the Catholic Church in the country. The church not only affects an individual's religious beliefs, but it also seems to interfere with the other aspects of an individual's personal life such as her relationships.

Fig. 30. Rome & Juliet's love confession inside the church.



Rome & Juliet seeks to defeat the traditional notion that one's faith must be a hindrance to one's personal relationships. In the film, the love between two women happens in a society in which the Catholic Church is dominant; in fact, most of the important confrontations between the two women happen inside the church. This may imply that it is possible for same-sex love to exist and to continue to exist alongside religion; these two do not have to cancel each other out.

Instead of using the church to show hate and discrimination towards same-sex relationships, *Rome & Juliet* uses the church as a positive image to show love and acceptance. This is one of the positive changes which happened in the representation of woman-to-woman love in films.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MYTH OF GAZES

“Ngunit sino ang hinihintay kong makita kung lagi kitang nakikita: tuwing humaharap sa salamin, at sa mga sulok ng lungsod sa bundok kung saan tayo nagkita’t nanirahan. At kung saan mo ako iniwan.” – Faye Cura, Sa Odd Manila, 2011: 21.

This chapter explores whether the concept of the *male gaze* is applied in *T-bird at Ako* (1982) and *Rome & Juliet* (2006) or whether the films created their own versions of *gaze*. This chapter discusses three types of gazes observed in the films: male gaze, female gaze and God’s gaze.

A. [T]bird’s-eye view

Their first encounter (Fig. 31 & 32) shows Isabel dancing in front of Sylvia. Inside the nightclub, Sylvia and other customers (both female and male) come together to gaze at Isabel’s body.

Fig. 31. Isabel the gazed.



Fig. 32. Sylvia the gazer.



Mulvey (1975) discusses the concept of the male gaze in feminist film theory. She says that women are seen as sexual objects of the male gaze. Mulvey argues that men “control the film phantasy” (p. 838), hence men are in power for they are like the eyes

that the film audiences see through. Since most filmmakers are male, the audience is also placed in the perspective of a heterosexual male.

Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen. For instance, the device of the showgirl allows the two looks to be unified technically without any apparent break in the diegesis. A woman performs within the narrative, the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude. (Mulvey: 1975: 838)

Mulvey suggests that the gazing is done by the characters within the film and by the audience watching the film. *T-bird at Ako* does not have a male protagonist, but it has a *masculinized* female protagonist (Sylvia). Sylvia calls herself *lalaking-lalaki* (very manly) during her love confession to Isabel. We see Isabel through Sylvia's eyes, we focus on Isabel the way Sylvia focuses on her. In this sequence, we see close-up shots of Isabel's crotch area and full body shots of her while dancing (Fig. 35).

Fig. 33, 34, 35. Are we watching Isabel dance from Sylvia's perspective?



We are presented with how a woman (Sylvia) sees another woman (Isabel) whom she desires (Fig. 33, 34, 35). It is also important to note that *T-bird at Ako* is directed by a man, Danny Zialcita. How does this affect the way we see Isabel? Does this mean that the filmmaker wanted Sylvia to adopt or assume the role of a male gazer? And as an audience, are we to adopt the same perspective? In this particular sequence, Sylvia is the *masculinized gazer* and Isabel is the *feminized gazed*.

Meanwhile Jacobsson (1999) muses over the existence of a *female gaze* as opposed to Mulvey's concept of the male gaze. Jacobsson critiques the American film

Fatal Attraction (Lyne, 1987) and asks whether it is possible for a woman to be the one to objectify a man as a subject of her desire. In *T-bird at Ako*, I ask if it is possible for a woman to objectify another woman as a subject of her desire. Jacobsson says that identifying with a female gaze “could be a mere cross identification with masculinity. The femininity is repressed and the character attracts more masculine features. Masculinity is the norm, determining the feminine gaze” (p. 18). Following this perspective, it may be argued that whether Sylvia assumes a female gaze or a male gaze, such gaze does not reveal much difference. Either way, her gaze is still an imitation of the male perspective. I apply Jacobsson’s theory to my own interpretation of *T-bird at Ako*.

Fatal Attraction provides us initially with a demonstration of a possible female gaze but is also an example of how the audiences, preferences, and desires forces the film text to be altered into the more traditional male gaze. (Jacobsson, 1999: 9).

T-bird at Ako tries to feature a story about same-sex attraction from the perspective of a woman who desires a woman, but in the end, it also fails to deliver a perspective that is different from the so-called traditional *male gaze*. I argue that since Sylvia looks at herself as *lalaking-lalaki* (very manly) upon having feelings for Isabel, then perhaps she is also assuming a male gazer’s role. In my research, I was only able to find the works of Mulvey (1975) on male gaze and Jacobsson (1999) on female gaze. Both works focus on the heterosexual perspective; it will be helpful to discuss the concept of gaze from a non-heterosexual perspective. Since the issue of gaze is not the focus of my study, I limit this discussion to this chapter.

Can’t Isabel fantasize over Sylvia?

Can’t a feminine character be the first to experience attraction towards a masculine character? In the film, it is Sylvia (the masculinized) who desires Isabel (the feminized). It is also Maxi (the masculinized) who actively pursues her girlfriend (the feminized). It seems that the initiator of the attraction is always the masculinized woman. In the films that Cantor (2003) studied, she also observed that it is always the butch who first experiences the attraction or is the first to act on her feelings. It is also usually the

femme who breaks up with the butch. More often than not, the femme leaves the butch for a *real man*.

According to the principles of the ruling ideology and the psychical structures that back it up, the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like (Mulvey, 1975: 838).

Following Mulvey's argument, could this be the reason why the masculinized woman is rarely (if not never) the object of another woman's desire? Jacobsson (1999) makes use of the same argument and asks whether this might also be the reason why the film *Fatal Attraction* "introduces the possibility of a female gaze and then deserts it for a male gaze" (p. 13). Perhaps the same can be said in *T-bird at Ako*.

B. God gazes over Sylvia gazing over Isabel

The characters in *T-bird at Ako* makes use of Bible references to discourage woman-to-woman relationships; it seems that the purpose of the religious images seen in Sylvia's house is to remind her to thwart her same-sex desires, both in action and in thought.

I have observed several religious images inside Sylvia's house, a space shared by Sylvia and Isabel, in which most of their interactions occur. In this space, the women are constantly surrounded by images of Jesus Christ and saints. Sylvia, who is experiencing same-sex love as opposed to the Adam-and-Eve kind of love mentioned in the Bible, is under the constant watch of religious images. I interpret Sylvia's house as a smaller version of our society during that time. It is a house full of respect for religion and yet short of respect for diversity. I see these paintings and figurines as a symbol for Sylvia's faith which is one of the factors pushing her to hide and suppress her feelings for Isabel. Such decorations are seen in almost every important room of the house such as the bedroom, staircase, bathroom and dining room; these are the places where Sylvia and Isabel usually have their confrontations. Such images are there to remind Sylvia that it is not only her actions being guarded, but also her thoughts and desires.

Fig .36. Jesus Christ watching over your steps.



Fig. 37. Jesus Christ gazes over Sylvia gazing over Isabel.



Fig. 38. Saints by the door.



Fig. 39. Jesus Christ in every meal.



Fig. 40. Isabel and the Virgin Mary.



Fig. 41. Sylvia and the cross.



Fig. 42. The same religious environment inside Jake's house.



Fig. 36-41 are seen inside Sylvia's house, while Fig. 42 is seen inside Jake's house. Fig. 37 shows Sylvia gazing over Isabel's sleeping body. As Sylvia gazes over Isabel, a crucifix hangs above the bed and Jesus Christ gazes over the two women. The big crucifix is placed above the bed, at the center of the wall. The crucifix seems to be omnipresent – it witnesses Sylvia's lust, desire, confusion and frustration. It guards and limits Sylvia. It prevents Sylvia from expressing her desires. This scene is accompanied by a song entitled *Hiwaga ng Pag-ibig* (Mystery of Love). Here are the song's lyrics:

Original

May hiwaga palang ganito.
 Kapiling kita ngunit 'di totoo.
 Ang isip ay nalilito.
 Ang kahulugan ay pag-ibig ito.
 Bakit kaya ganoon?
 Ako ba ay himala ng panahon?
 Damdaming ito, bakit aking taglay?
 Sa 'yo ang alay
 Unti-unting nadarama ko ang kulay
 ng buhay ng dahil sa 'yo..
 Kay hirap ng pusong ito,
 pag-ibig na tanging 'di mapasaiyo.

English translation

So there is this kind of mystery.
 I'm with you, but it isn't true.
 The mind is confused.
 The meaning is that this is love.
 Why is it like that?
 Am I a miracle of time?
 Why do I possess this feeling?
 The offering is for you...
 Little by little, I am feeling the
 color of life because of you.
 This heart is so difficult,
 love that cannot be yours.

Fig. 43 & 44. Isabel from Sylvia's point of view?



Fig. 45 & 46. In the end, Sylvia panics and leaves Isabel's room.



(Fig. 43 & 44) The camera angles focusing on Isabel's body seem to confirm that Sylvia's feelings are not platonic, but are sexual and/or romantic. Based on Sylvia's facial expression and on the song, it may be interpreted that Sylvia's character, a woman experiencing same-sex attraction for the first time, is experiencing an internal struggle. It seems that Sylvia is starting to acknowledge the fact that she is in love with a woman, but she is still having a difficult time accepting this new realization about herself (Fig. 45 & 46). The reasons for this internal struggle may be attributed to the fact that her feelings for Isabel are in contrast with her religious beliefs.

I interpret the song as Sylvia's feelings for Isabel. It is possibly Sylvia's first time to not only fall in love with a woman, but to fall in love in general. Although the song seems positive in its description of how love has made Sylvia's life more colorful, it also hints that this kind of love (same-sex love) is different and wrong; hence it is a forbidden love. The song's narrator is questioning why she is burdened with such a dilemma. The

line *Kay hirap ng pusong ito. Pag-ibig na tanging di mapasaiyo* (This heart is so difficult. Love that cannot be yours) differentiates same-sex love (difficult) from heterosexual love (easy).

C. Female gaze?

Unlike *T-bird at Ako*, *Rome & Juliet* freely expresses physical intimacy between the two women (Fig. 47-52). Unlike Sylvia's house in *T-bird at Ako* in which images of God are constantly watching over the two women, Rome's house is free from such surveillance. In Sylvia's house, we get a feeling that we cannot see much of the two women's intimate moments (or perhaps they did not have any). Meanwhile, in Rome's house, we get a feeling that we are given much access to the Rome and Juliet's intimate moments. Does *Rome & Juliet* successfully create its own version of a *female gaze*? How are we to view Rome and Juliet's intimacy? Perhaps it is also important to note that the film is written and directed by a woman.

Fig. 47-52. Rome and Juliet expressing intimacy as lovers.



Rome and Juliet's friendship is well-established, not only based on their physical closeness (i.e., sleepovers, Rome lending her undergarments to Juliet, intimate hugs during sleep), but also based on their emotional closeness. The latter is established through their conversations, shared time and activities. When Juliet has problems, she confides in Rome. Rome also introduces Juliet to her older sister. In *T-bird at Ako*, Sylvia and Isabel's closeness is not as well-established, hence implying that Sylvia's attraction towards Isabel is only based on the physical. However, in *Rome & Juliet*, it is represented that the women have a deeper connection other than the physical. This allows the film to break the misconception that woman-to-woman relationships are only based or sustained on physical desires. The film is also unafraid of showing two women sharing a kiss, a bed and a shower. This representation helps in normalizing same-sex relationships, without treating these intimate scenes as something intended for the amusement of its audiences.

Fig. 53-58. Juliet gazing over Rome.



The film also shows how a woman may desire another woman, without questioning the validity of such same-sex attractions. In one scene (Fig. 53-58), Juliet accidentally sees Rome changing her clothes. This scene establishes the earlier stages of Juliet's attraction towards Rome. Perhaps this is the film's way of creating its own version of a female gaze. In *T-bird at Ako*, it is shown that Sylvia felt somewhat confused or guilty (Fig. 45 & 4) after gazing over Isabel's body. However, in *Rome & Juliet*, Juliet does not seem to show any signs of worry after gazing over Rome's body. Such kind of representation may imply that

One of the main differences between *T-bird at Ako* (1982) and *Rome & Juliet* (2006) is the type of gaze dominant within the films. The first film seems to have used the male gaze for watching over women, and God's gaze for guarding women's desires and actions. Meanwhile, the second film seems to have attempted to create its own version of a female gaze. Although most of Rome and Juliet's interactions took place inside the church, it seems that God's gaze is not omnipresent or is not as powerful as how it was used in Sylvia's house in *T-bird at Ako*.

CHAPTER IX

THE MYTH OF VILLAINS AND VICTIMS

*“rain, rain
pour away
me and my queen
want to play”*

– Ling Quisumbing, *Rainbow queen*,
1998: 66.

In both films, the characters are given roles as either villains or victims. This chapter examines how women and men exchange roles in the two films.

In *T-bird at Ako*, there is a phenomenon in which women and men vie for the affection of one woman. I call this phenomenon as a *competition* because one loses (woman) and the other wins (man). The latter is represented as an underdog who at first seems to be defeated by the woman, but in the end, he still wins. Men are also represented as victims, as if something (women) which is rightfully theirs is taken away.

In the end, men win the *competition* and end up with their women. Jake gets Sylvia, and Dante reunites with Isabel. It may be argued that the women are treated as mere prizes to be won by the male characters. It is not the women’s desires that matter; it is the men’s desires which are granted.

Table 2. *Summary of the myth of women as villains and men as victims*

Woman #1	Man	Woman #2
- Prize fought over by two people in <i>competition</i>	- Real owner of women - Has a kind heart - A faultless victim: * His woman is stolen * His affection is rejected	- Thief who steals women from men - Destroyer of relationships - Villain who rejects affection given by Men

(Table 2) Isabel (Woman #1) is fought over by Sylvia (Woman #2) and Dante (Man). Because Sylvia desires Isabel, she rejects Jake (Man). In this scenario, the men

are represented as the victims because their relationships are hindered by women – Dante cannot have Isabel because he is competing with Sylvia; Jake cannot have Sylvia because he is competing with Isabel. At the same time, women are represented as villains who disrupt potential (heterosexual) relationships – Isabel unknowingly takes Sylvia away from Jake; Sylvia aggressively tries to take Isabel away from Dante. In the process of *competing*, both women are neglecting the affections given to them by men.

Sylvia is rejected when she confessed her love to Isabel. Isabel is labelled as a *real woman* because she chooses to be with a man. Meanwhile Jake says that Sylvia is *not a real woman* because she loves another woman. In the end, Sylvia decides to become a *real woman* like Isabel; she decides to be with a man as well. Jake wins the competition and gets Sylvia. The conflict is resolved by pairing man with woman, woman with man. This formula disallows same-sex relationships, implying that they are invalid.

Sylvia is represented as a *villain*. She plots against Dante in order to separate him from Isabel. She even orders Babette to help her in keeping Dante away from Isabel. Here we see that even Babette is represented as a *villain*, an accomplice of the evil *t-bird*. Dante is represented as a man with a *kind heart*; although it hurts him, he follows Babette's advice and moves away from Isabel. He is also represented as a *victim* – it is not his fault that he is separated from Isabel, it is only because of bad luck and Sylvia's intervention.

Sylvia after her *masculinization* is given a *villain's* role. But after her *feminization*, she transforms into a *real woman* and is given a *kind heart*. In order for women like Sylvia to become kinder and better people, they need to become *real women* first. How? By abandoning their same-sex desires and by choosing to be with men.

Maxi, a self-identified *t-bird*, is also represented as a *villain*. She murders a man out of jealousy. Again, a man (the man Maxi killed) is represented as a *victim* whose misfortune (in this case, death) is caused by a woman who loves women. The man (rapist) Isabel accidentally killed is also represented as a *victim*.

The men are also represented as *cures* to the 'inappropriate' relationship that Sylvia and Isabel may potentially develop if not thwarted. Jake is the instrument used to verify Sylvia's identity as a real woman. Dante is also an instrument used to maintain

Isabel's identity as a real woman. Sylvia's and Isabel's identities as real women are dependent on their relationship with men.

Shifting roles

Rome & Juliet, like *T-bird at Ako*, represents women and men competing against each other for the love of one woman. Rome is competing with Marc for Juliet, and Juliet is competing with Carlo for Rome. In *Rome & Juliet*, women and men exchange roles, men are represented as the *villains* and women as the *victims*. It is the woman who is represented as an underdog who at first seems to be defeated by men, but in the end, still *wins*.

The men, Marc and Carlo, are represented as hindrances to Rome and Juliet's budding relationship. Carlo, like Dante in *T-bird at Ako*, is represented as an irresponsible man who cheats and abandons Rome.

After disappearing for three years (seven years in Dante's case in *T-bird at Ako*), Carlo suddenly returns and asks Rome to reconcile. Unlike *T-bird at Ako's* Isabel who reunites with her ex-lover, Rome bravely rejects her ex-lover.

Carlo unknowingly hinders the two women's potential relationship by causing jealousy; he is seen by Juliet as a threat. Meanwhile Marc is represented as a *villain* seeking revenge, he does this by emotionally hurting Rome and Juliet. Although it is only expected of Marc to be angry since his fiancé cheated on him, he could have handled the situation better by showing respect to both women. Marc actively plots against the two women. Even before Marc finds out about Rome and Juliet's relationship, he is already represented as an overly jealous boyfriend. He is jealous of Rome and Juliet's close friendship. It seems that men are represented quite negatively in this film; which is in contrast to how men are positively represented in *T-bird at Ako*.

Rome and Juliet are represented as victims of circumstances, society, men and fate. They meet under unfortunate circumstances; Juliet is already engaged to be married and Rome will become a destroyer of a relationship if she pursues Juliet. The two women live in a patriarchal society in which same-sex relationships are frowned upon; their relationship is seen as an abnormality. They also live in a society in which people gossip about other people's personal issues (i.e., break-ups, affairs, sexual orientation);

and some parents within this society give more value to their neighbors' opinions rather than their own children's decisions. The two women are also represented as victims of men. Rome is abandoned by her ex-boyfriend, and Juliet is overly manipulated by her fiancé, together Rome and Juliet are harassed by Marc. Lastly, Rome and Juliet are victims of miserable fates; Juliet suffers from a coma due to a car accident, and Rome suffers from sadness due to forbidden love. The women who love women are represented as underdogs. Society is against them, their co-workers discriminate them, men insult them and even their own families (Juliet's mother, Rome's sister) do not accept them.

It is good that the film tries to clear women who love women from their villain image; however, they are only given another stereotype as passive victims. The focus is on the victimization of women who love women, instead of their empowerment.

The *shifting roles* (victim-villain roles of women and men) in the films may imply that there has also been a shift in people's views regarding woman-to-woman relationships. Compared to the 1980s, perhaps the mid-2000s was a time when people became more aware and concerned about the inequalities and injustices experienced by women. *T-bird at Ako* is blind to the problems faced by women who love women; it places Sylvia and Maxi in unfortunate situations, while also giving them villain roles. Meanwhile, *Rome & Juliet* gives men the villain roles, while still placing Rome and Juliet in unfortunate situations. The negative effect of this representation is that instead of empowering women who love women, the emphasis is placed on the victimization and helplessness of women.

The positive change in the representation of women who love women in the second film is that it clears women of their supposed *villain* roles. However, it is also quite dangerous to assume that men are always and are the only oppressors of women. In some cases, it is also a woman who oppresses a fellow woman. It is also true that in other cases, both women and men are either oppressed or are supportive of each other.

CHAPTER X

THE MYTH OF MISERABLE FATES

*“don’t be afraid
to spread your wings
out in the darkness
you can be free”*

— Ling Quisumbing, *Rainbow queen*, 1998: 67.

Both *T-bird at Ako* (1982) and *Rome & Juliet* (2006) did not escape from the myth of miserable fates. Sylvia, Maxi, Rome and Juliet are all represented as victims of miserable fates. These miserable fates are represented as results of having or pursuing a woman-to-woman love and/or desire.

A. Paths of women who love women in *T-bird at Ako*

In *T-bird at Ako*, it is the woman who made the conscious effort to be with a man instead of a woman. Sylvia decides to be with Jake and goes to the extent of helping Dante reunite with Isabel. Women who do not make this effort to be with a man, and chooses to exert effort to be with a woman are given a miserable fate. Maxi has to murder a man who got in the way of her relationship with her girlfriend. Sylvia is insulted by a man because of her same-sex attraction. Upon Sylvia’s realization of her growing feelings for Isabel, she is also represented as someone who is always angry, sad and confused. In *T-bird at Ako*, women who love women are given two paths:

1. Act on her feelings and pursue a woman.
 - Result: Considered negative.
 - Maxi is represented as a murderer. She is taunted and then arrested.
 - Sylvia is rejected and humiliated. She always feels miserable.
 - Such women are seen as the *other* and as ‘victims’ of a disease.
 - Such women are disobeying God’s words and society’s norms.

2. Suppress feelings for a woman and/or realize that she is in love with a man after all.
 - Considered positive.
 - Each woman enjoys a happy ending with her man.
 - Sylvia is finally labelled as a *real woman*.
 - Isabel is reunited with the father of her son, together they can get their son back.
 - She pleases both society's and God's expectations.

These two paths are also observed in the films that Cantor (2003) studied in her essay. Cantor observed that lesbian characters usually get married to a man and leave their *lesbian past* in order to have a happy ending. The second path, the less popular choice, is for them to pursue a same-sex relationship. The consequence of this choice is for them to end up with a terminal illness (i.e., Juliet's car accident and coma), get killed or suffer from various complications. In the film, it seems that women who love women are headed toward miserable fates, as opposed to women who love men who are headed toward normal and peaceful lives. It imagines a woman's life as either truthful but miserable, or as dishonest but peaceful. Indeed, an oxymoron. It suggests that for a woman to live a happy life, she must lie about her true feelings and desires. The film implies that loving a woman is not worth the risk.

B. Paths of women who love women in *Rome & Juliet*

Rome & Juliet also seems to suggest that women who love women who suppress their true feelings are bound to a somewhat similar kind of fate as those who choose to pursue their feelings. These are the two paths women who love women seem to have in *Rome & Juliet*:

1. Those who pursue their true feelings.
 - Result: Negative to Positive.
 - The women will face discrimination, but in the end they will still be together.
 - One of them will be involved in an accident, but in the end she will survive. The accident will help her family accept who she really is.
 - The women are at risk of losing their jobs once their relationship is revealed.
 - They suffer along the process, but in the end, they get their happy ending.

2. Those who suppress their true feelings.
 - Positive to Negative.
 - At first, they seem to have made the right decision, they please their loved ones. But in the end, they realize that their decision is only forced.
 - They will live a life of secrecy and dishonesty.
 - They suffer from sadness and engage in irresponsible acts (i.e., Rome drinks alcohol to overcome her sadness).
 - Sooner or later, they will admit to themselves and to others about their true feelings. This will upset her loved ones, causing her to be discriminated and hated (i.e., Juliet's family situation).

This seems to be another positive change in the representation of women who love women in films. In *T-bird at Ako*, the representation of woman-to-woman relationships seems to imply that women who pursue such relationships will experience short-term joy, but long-term sorrow; while women who suppress their same-sex desires and exchange them for a heterosexual relationship will experience short-term sorrow, but long-term joy. However, in *Rome & Juliet*, there seems to be an opposite implication –

the women who suppress their true feelings are the ones to suffer in the long run; while the women who acknowledge and pursue their same-sex desires are those who will face conflicts in the beginning, in exchange for a happy ending. The implied message inspires people to be true to themselves and to their loved ones. It may also help people get rid of their self-inflicted homophobias.

Everything will be okay at the brink of death

Rome & Juliet makes the most out of Juliet's role as a *victim* by making sure that she suffers as much as she can so that she receives as much sympathy as she can. The car accident is used as a device which maximizes the *victimization* of women who love women – the car accident which led to Juliet's 3-week coma (Fig. 59) is made to appear justified and necessary because it is the key factor that allows the two women to be together by allowing Marc and Juliet's mother to accept Rome and Juliet's relationship. This is problematic because the film opts an easy way out of the dilemma instead of letting its characters face the dilemma with logic and reason rather than with emotion (in this case, sympathy).

The accident is used as an instant resolution to all other conflicts. It minimizes the issue at hand and sends a wrong message that conflicts may be solved through such violent and tragic situations.

Fig. 59. Girlfriend in a coma: Juliet after the car accident



Direct consequences/Indirect consequences

The miserable fates in *T-bird at Ako* are represented as *direct consequences* of the characters' same-sex love; Maxi murdered a man because of her jealousy issues with her girlfriend Rubia, and Sylvia is discriminated because of her love for Isabel. But in *Rome & Juliet*, it seems that Juliet's miserable fate is not even related to her love for Rome. Although she also suffers from discrimination from the people around her, the main event that marks her miserable fate is the car accident. Even though it is an accident, which is completely unrelated to her relationship with Rome, it is made to appear that her accident is an *indirect consequence* of her same-sex love. The film's use of the accident seems to imply that bad things do happen to women who love women. The randomness of the tragedy further implies that women who love women are destined to miserable fates which they cannot control or prevent.

Aside from the accident, the two women lose their jobs because of their same-sex relationship. Rome gets fired as a wedding planner and Juliet is at risk of losing her job as a teacher. The school principals said that Juliet's dismissal is on the grounds of "immoral behavior." This is another form of discrimination which needs to be addressed; a person's sexual orientation must not be used against her or him.

Women who love women, in both films, are made to suffer miserable fates. Sylvia is ridiculed, Rome is depressed and Juliet falls into a coma because of an accident. In *T-bird at Ako*, it is implied that if a woman acts on her same-sex desire, she will suffer. However, if the woman suppresses her same-sex desire, she will be saved from having a miserable fate. The conditions are reversed in *Rome & Juliet*: if a woman pursues her same-sex desire, she will be happier; however, if a woman suppresses her same-sex desire, she will suffer from regret. The second film's representation gives an encouraging message for women who love women. However, *Rome & Juliet* chose to solve the women's problems through a car accident. After the accident, all of Juliet's loved ones suddenly come together and finally accept her same-sex relationship with Rome. The conflict is represented as an indirect consequence of her same-sex desire and is represented as a quick solution to all of her problems. The whole dilemma is resolved in a rather hasty and unexplained way. This dismisses the women's capacity to face and solve problems on their own.

CHAPTER XI

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATION

“‘Mahal kita,’ I whisper in her ear in my mind’s language, unafraid of the chaos, because there’s only past and future and I’m falling in between, in the great chasm we call present, and this moment will be gone forever.”

– Lani T. Montreal, *The Smell of Sleep*, 1998: 25.

Summary

This study explores the discourse of love in Filipino society by analyzing how women who love women are represented in Filipino films. Through textual analysis, I identified and critiqued certain misrepresentations which I call *myths*. Such myths about women who love women are either supported or destroyed by the films *T-bird at Ako* (1982) and *Rome & Juliet* (2006). These myths resulted from decades’ worth of misunderstanding, sexism, homophobia and fear – of change, diversity and equality. These myths are a combination of local and foreign views on women and sexuality throughout history.

The study explored Sylvia and Isabel’s world in *T-bird at Ako* – the Philippines during the 1980s. This is then compared with Rome and Juliet’s world – the Philippines in the mid-2000s. These two worlds see and treat its women very differently; the second world allowed what the first one forbade – for two women to be in love with each other. The decade that separates these two worlds is hailed as the start of the Filipino struggle for lesbian visibility. The study focuses on how women who love women are represented in films before and after the active struggle for lesbian visibility began.

The study identified the following myths:

1. The myth of masculinization and feminization
2. The myth of women’s spaces
3. The myth of gazes
4. The myth of villains and victims
5. The myth of miserable fates

The myth of masculinization and feminization

The myth of masculinization and feminization is religiously followed by *T-bird at Ako*. This shows how the Philippines viewed women and men in the 1980s; gender roles were strictly followed. Sylvia's desire for another woman is not recognized as a legitimate female desire, but only as an imitation of male desire. Hence Sylvia's entire character becomes an imitation of man. Sylvia is forced to view herself as *lalaking-lalaki* in order to verify her attraction towards Isabel. Upon her masculinization, Sylvia suddenly transforms into a more aggressive character. It also seems that her attraction towards Isabel is centered solely on physical desire. The masculinized women (Sylvia and Maxi) are given more economic power, but are given less luck in the context of love and relationships (myth of miserable fates).

In the end, Sylvia undergoes a rather hasty and unexplained transformation into a *real woman* which is a feminized woman. This transformation is demanded and verified by a man. Sylvia's admiration for Isabel shifts from desire to imitation.

The film paired man with woman, and woman with man. This pairing is then challenged by *Rome & Juliet* (2006). The second film broke this myth by allowing both women to experience female desire without patterning it from its male counterpart. This change in the representation of women who love women may suggest that people's views on woman-to-woman attraction are starting to become less patriarchal. It shows that there are at least some efforts being done to counter the male-centric interpretation of woman-to-woman love. The second film also started to explore issues which were previously dismissed (i.e., sexual fluidity, physical intimacy between two women, diversity in terms of gender and religious beliefs).

The myth of women's spaces and gazes

Although Sylvia and Isabel, and Rome and Juliet are separated by more than two decades, all four women have shared and experienced a common space – the Catholic church. Religious images are both present in Sylvia's house and Rome and Juliet's church. *T-bird at Ako*'s version of the church is used as a surveillance device and an omnipresent dictator; however, *Rome & Juliet*'s version of the church is used as the women's rendezvous. Rome and Juliet's version does not impose restrictions on them as

women, as lovers and as churchgoers. Instead of using the church as an image of restriction, *Rome & Juliet's* version reincarnated the church as a space of acceptance.

The use of the nightclub as the first space shared by Sylvia and Isabel may imply that *T-bird at Ako* confines women who love women in hidden and illegitimate spaces. This is in contrast with how *Rome & Juliet* places women who love women in a more open and public space.

Sylvia's house is a space where women are not entirely free to act as they please. The two women are in the constant watch of religious images. The two houses may be interpreted as two different versions of Filipino society. Sylvia's house (1982) is full of respect for religion and yet short of respect for diversity, while Rome's house (2006) allows more freedom. In *T-bird at Ako*, the two women did not have to go to church to be surrounded by images of God, since several religious images already penetrated the house. In *Rome & Juliet*, there is a clear separation between the church and the women's personal space. The two women go to church together, but they also share an intimate space once they go home. We are given much access to Rome and Juliet's intimate moments. This may be interpreted as *Rome & Juliet's* attempt to provide women with more autonomy. This suggests that it is possible for same-sex love to exist and to continue to exist alongside religion; these two do not have to cancel each other out.

The dominant types of gaze present in *T-bird at Ako* are God's gaze and the male gaze. The former is used to guard and limit women's desires and actions, while the latter is used in viewing women. However, in *Rome & Juliet*, there is an attempt to create its own version of a female gaze. The authenticity of a female desire is not questioned in the second film, unlike how the first film did. Although most of Rome and Juliet's interactions occur inside the church, God's gaze seems to be less intrusive in this setting compared to how it was used inside Sylvia's house in *T-bird at Ako*.

The myth of villains and victims

Another significant shift is observed in the roles of women and men. *T-bird at Ako* assigns women as villains, and men as victims. *Rome & Juliet* rearranged this pattern. The first film remained faithful to the views spurred by patriarchy, while the second film attempted to expose how patriarchy is dictating our gender roles.

In *T-bird at Ako*, Sylvia undergoes two processes: masculinization and feminization. Upon her masculinization, she is given the villain role. She starts to manipulate people to get what she wants. However, after her feminization, Sylvia's villain role is lifted. Meanwhile, the men in *T-bird at Ako* are represented as faultless victims. Both Jake and Dante are shown to be kindhearted men who are deceived and hurt by women who love women. Dante wants Isabel, but Sylvia steals Isabel from him. Jake wants Sylvia, but Isabel unknowingly steals Sylvia from him. A woman is represented as a villain who thwarts a heterosexual couple from being together. In the end, the men finally get what they want at the expense of Sylvia's identity as a woman.

In *Rome & Juliet*, women are represented as victims of men and of circumstances. When their woman-to-woman relationship was revealed, both women began to experience a series of dilemmas. They are in danger of losing their jobs, their families and even their lives. In this setting, it is the men who are represented as villains who prevent the two women from being together. It is good that *Rome & Juliet* tries to clear women who love women from their villain stereotype; however, the women are only given another stereotype as passive victims. The focus is on the helplessness and the victimization of women who love women, instead of their empowerment.

The myth of miserable fates

Both films gave women who love women miserable fates. *T-bird at Ako* represents a woman's miserable fate as a direct consequence of her same-sex desire. *T-bird at Ako* shows that a woman who pursues her same-sex desire will have momentary joy, but will suffer in the long run. Meanwhile, a woman who suppresses her same-sex desire will suffer in the short term, but will eventually get a happy ending. This negative portrayal of same-sex desire is reversed in *Rome & Juliet*.

Rome & Juliet shows that a woman who pursues her same-sex desire will struggle with momentary woes, but will achieve joy in the end. Meanwhile, a woman who suppresses her same-sex desire will have momentary peace, but will regret it in the end.

The problem with *Rome & Juliet* is how it represents a woman's miserable fate as an indirect consequence of her same-sex desire. Juliet falls into a coma because of a car accident which is not even related to her relationship with Rome. Juliet's near-death

experience then magically solves all of her problems. After waking up from her coma, all of Juliet's loved ones began to accept her same-sex relationship. It appears that the car accident is used as a device to solve Rome and Juliet's problems. The accident is used as an instant resolution to all other conflicts. It minimizes the issue at hand and hints that conflicts may be solved through more conflicts. It also minimizes a woman's capacity to face issues on her own. Juliet's miraculous recovery may also imply that divine intervention is needed for a woman-to-woman relationship to function.

Conclusion

There have been many remarkable changes in the representation of women who love women since the struggle for lesbian visibility began. However, the struggle has not been completely won; the struggle for the visibility of women who love women is an ongoing battle. There is a need not only for more visibility, but also for fairer representation. This may be achieved through better written scripts, better funding for such projects and a greater attempt at introducing such themes to the Filipino audience. To do this, both the audience and the media practitioner must first become aware of the often misunderstood concepts of gender, sexuality and women's oppression.

For future filmmakers and media practitioners, the challenge is for you to not only destroy these myths, but also to enlighten the public on how wrong these myths are.

1. A woman does not have to be masculinized to love another woman.
2. Same-sex love is possible even in the holiest places.
3. Woman and men are neither villains nor victims.
4. Miserable fate does not await those who fall in love with the same sex.

It is encouraging to see the positive changes in the representation of women who love women in Filipino films. Comparing the representations of women in *T-bird at Ako* (1982) and in *Rome & Juliet* (2006), we see that we have come a long way in the understanding of gender and sexuality. The 1982 film makes us realize our mistakes; it shows us how patriarchy produced biases and misrepresentations. Meanwhile, the 2006 film reminds us of our victory in attempting to correct our wrongs. However, it also reminds us that myths about women who love women still exist even today. Hence there

is a greater need for us to continue our struggle against the invisibility and the misrepresentation of women who love women in Philippine media.

Perhaps it will be difficult to completely end media stereotypes, but we can start by empowering ourselves as critical media consumers who are capable of distinguishing myths from reality.

Recommendation

For future research, I recommend a more extensive archiving and analysis of Filipino video materials depicting love and/or desire shared by two women. It may also be useful, if possible, to explore the political economy and power relations behind the production of such materials in order to study the actual reasons on why there is a shortage of materials representing women who love women.

The struggle is not yet over.

We are all capable of winning this fight.

Let's make herstory!

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NOTES

- ¹ *Cinema One* is a Filipino cable T.V. network which shows local and foreign films.
- ² I made this summary based on my understanding of Eviota's text. Summary is not non-verbatim.
- ³ I made this summary based on my understanding of Cantor's text. Summary is non-verbatim.
- ⁴ *Seiko* films is a Philippine film company which earned popularity for its bold movies in the 1990s.
- ⁵ Merriam-Webster defines *deus ex machina* as "a person or thing (as in fiction or drama) that appears or is introduced suddenly and unexpectedly and provides a contrived solution to an apparently insoluble difficulty."