

## Research in Progress:

# A Feminist Reading of Filipina Sexuality in LitErotika Novels

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This paper conducts a feminist reading of Filipina sexuality, specifically in the erotica novel genre that produces explicit representations of women and sexuality. Three Tagalog LitErotika novels are analyzed and a reflection and deflection of society have become apparent. Contrary to pornography's misogynistic and deceptive nature, the three novels embody the Filipina sexuality in a more appreciative and honest sense. As an added force in the creation of power-knowledge on Filipina sexuality, the ephemeral nature of discourse gives hope for a reconstruction of the realities the Filipino people inherit and take for granted. In using an untapped source of the representation of Filipina sexuality, this study hopes to contribute to future studies on similar topics.

*Keywords: feminism, sexuality, LitErotika novels, "chic lit," popular culture*

## INTRODUCTION

The representation of women is said to be another tool in the promotion and sustainment of inequality and discrimination (Deabanico 2003). And this phenomenon is entrenched in the modern locus of pervasive signs and symbols more commonly known as popular culture. Among its other means to one end on female sexuality, popular culture produces and reproduces an

'eroticized' representation of women. As a result, only false official versions of female sexuality are found in popular culture:

"Popular culture shows almost none of female sexuality. It censors representations of women's bodies so that only the official versions are visible. Rather than seeing images of female desire or that cater to female desire, we see little about true female sexuality. Women rarely—and almost never outside a competitive context—see what other women look like naked; we see identical humanoid products based loosely on women's bodies" (Wolf 1992).

The representation of women by and in society emphasized in prominent feminist works, in conjunction with the consequent responses of feminist movements over time, shows that this monolithic capitalist and patriarchal institution—a socioeconomic political enterprise consisting of veiled omnipresent structures—constantly reinvents itself to keep a stronghold of its influence on the imposed sexuality of women.

In 1792, philosopher and feminist Mary Wollstonecraft (2004) wrote in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* on the dehumanization of women through their roles as properties traded in marriage or as mere ornaments. Wollstonecraft has been a large source of inspiration for first wave feminists in their advocacy for suffrage (Art and Popular Culture n.d.). In 1963, activist and feminist writer Betty Friedan (1983) wrote in *The Feminine Mystique*<sup>1</sup> about the dehumanization of women through their representation as frigid housewives. Friedan is considered the 'Mother of the Movement' of second wave feminists in their advocacy for civic and economic equality (Boucher 2003). In 1992, political consultant and feminist writer, Naomi Wolf (1992) wrote in *The Beauty Myth* about the dehumanization of women through their representation as the bruised and elegant Iron Maiden. Wolf is the leading spokesperson of the third wave of the feminist movement in their use and critique of media and popular culture (Heywood 2006).

It seems that the prevailing underlying issue, encompassing the advocacies of the first, second and third waves of the feminist movements, as a consequence of the operations of the prevailing societal institutions, is this: 'Why is the nature of women's desire perceived to pose a threat to society?' And equally important, as a result, 'Why do representations of women by and in society focus on their sexuality?' If sex is often understood as the hidden truth of who we are (Foucault 1978), and if society is in a constant state of denial of women's sexuality, then can we also infer a willful denial of their own being?

These are looming questions. Although post-feminism became a buzz word since the twentieth century, there still are beliefs on the existence of new traditionalism where stereotypes of women are embodied in new and yet strangely familiar forms. Wolf's (1992) examples of beauty pornography and beauty sadomasochism discredit the claims of post-feminism.

Although there is a vast number of scholarly studies in the Philippines on the representations of women in different mediums of popular culture, it is surprising and disappointing to note that there is a serious lack of research on Filipina sexuality (Tan 1998; Estrada-Claudio 1996). In hopes of making a significant contribution to the discourse on Filipina sexuality, an exploratory analysis of a largely untapped source – LitErotika novels, a relatively new publication in the erotica genre, provides a wellspring of representations of Filipinas and their sexualities by and in the context of Philippine popular culture. If Wolf wrote that popular culture shows almost none of female sexuality, then how does erotica, as a form of popular culture, qualify in its explicit representation of female sexuality? However, due to the limited number of published LitErotika novels during the time the research is carried out, only three LitErotika novels are explored and analyzed: *One Night Stand*, *Mingaw* and *Foursome*.

This paper presents the initial findings of the analysis comprising the LitErotika novels' reflection and deflection of society. Towards the end, a dereification of institutionalized Filipina sexuality is called for in the exploration of erotica as an added force in the creation of power-knowledge in the unraveling of a free Filipina in popular culture.

#### FILIPINA SEXUALITY IN LITEROTIKA NOVELS: A REFLECTION AND DEFLECTION OF SOCIETY

The three LitErotika novels are found to widely contain terms commonly used by and in Philippine popular culture. This literary device helps equip the stories, much like any fiction, with a realistic account of the characters and their experiences. But more importantly, whose accounts do the novels attempt to reflect, and, if any, deflect; in accordance to, or in contrast with, society in their representation of Filipina sexuality?

The main characters of the stories personify 'single young middle class women,' and a breakdown of this construct shows an emergence of the following factors pertinent in the novels' representation of Filipina sexuality: class, age, appearance, attitude on sex and sexuality, and relationships with the opposite sex.

The characters in the novels are women in their late teens and early 20s and all are understood to possess beauty that is either noticeable or concealed. They have 'sexy' figures despite some who have already given birth and some who are not as obvious because of the preference to wear less revealing clothes. This age group, aside from being commonly associated with youthfulness and an active sex life; is likely to have an independent and indulgent lifestyle which boils down to purchasing power. It is therefore clear that those who are casted in the stories are the target market. This representation is at the same time an absence of those who do not meet these qualifications, they become invisible in the novels. In the same way that poor and older women are never identified with their sexual nature in society, they are singled out with their wrinkled faces, unfashionable clothes, worn-out bodies, wailing children and never ending drudgeries of housework. On the other hand, those who were taken into account as represented in the female characters of the LitErotika novels are shown to be in control of their own bodies. These single young middle class women have brown complexion, petite figures and average cup sizes that do not deter them from exploring and defining their sexuality and ultimately themselves.

On attitude towards sex and sexuality, the female characters attribute the loss of virginity to becoming a complete woman. The context of losing their virginity is also alluded to romantic or ideal love. Moreover, the female characters carry the burden of contraception during sex and female masturbation in itself is mostly described as less satisfying compared to genital penetration. Nonetheless, the LitErotika novels do not portray the female characters as victims in their first sexual encounters. The glorious discovery of orgasm supplants the mournful loss of virginity. In fact, the female characters play active roles during sex, are promiscuous, oftentimes play more straightforward roles than the male characters, and their pleasure is given importance by their male partners. They are very much inclined to pursue pleasure for themselves, with the common repressive guilt among women nowhere to be found.

In relationships with the opposite sex, reversed gender roles are also featured in the novels but not without attempts to stabilize this gender trouble through instances of 'rape' or rough sex, devirginization, a female character foregoing her own orgasm, etc. One metaphor of a female character 'developing her own penis' during sex even becomes a testament to penis envy.

In the context of heterosexual love, female characters initially depicted as strong and independent become soft and conventional. In an extreme sense, heterosexual love is regarded as the ultimate chance for a new lease in life. *“Sex with Paolo is like crying after ‘City of Angels,’ and then being given the chance to change the ending...Like watching ‘Sweet November,’ and hearing the news that love can cure any terminal illness”* (English translation). LitErotika novels illustrate the female characters’ dependence on men to the point that they find their identities only when they fall in love. Furthermore, it is only in the context of a monogamous and romantic relationship that sex and orgasm are most pleasurable in the stories. Monogamy then becomes a way to control the female characters’ bodies just as much as their lust needed to be punished and contained by wearing tight or skinny jeans; except when the time comes that the right man is there to unzip it. Interestingly, a PMA-er becomes a symbol of the state in degrading the promiscuity of one female character. Moreover, a portrayal of the insatiable cunt is depicted in a male character’s day dream of sewing on penises all over his body to stop a female character, his girlfriend, from cheating on him. Then again, the novels do not imply that these female characters want penises only in their promiscuous lifestyles. Those who did not end up with their fairy tale endings, chose to leave their relationships, not yielding to the confines of heterosexual love, and retaining their strength and independence in solitude.

Lastly, the LitErotika novels attempt to engage readers on the issues of sexuality and morality. One female character challenges the stereotype on promiscuous women by saying: *“People say I am out of control, but from what? From good manners, from moral lessons, or from being a woman? Is there an encompassing, single definition for a woman except for the fact that they all have vaginas? And because I have been called a slut, I no longer belong to this definition? For me, I see women as different individuals. A single definition cannot define every woman. For me, what is important is I am free in being a woman and I am not boxed by a single definition of what it is to be a woman in the society I belong to”* (English translation). In addition, a debate takes place between two female characters, the promiscuous one accorded the title of a philosopher and the virginal best friend accorded the title of a student. The philosopher describes society’s restrictions on women and the need to break free from them. She looks at the question of morality as just another manacle society places on women and lets her inner self dictate her actions towards happiness, even if it means

sleeping around with different men. Seemingly, in hopes of a self-fulfilling prophecy to the dialogue's impact on readers, the student later on becomes the philosopher's prodigy.

#### A CALL FOR AN ALL-ENCOMPASSING POSITIVE SEXUAL CULTURE

In conclusion, the LitErotika novels, as a form of Philippine popular culture; represent Filipina sexuality in an appreciative and honest sense. Contrary to Wolf's idea, the female experience is not incidental relative to men's; it is in fact the center in which the LitErotika novels revolve in.

As 'chic lit,' a literature genre aimed at young single women, readers are able to see themselves in the stories that cater to their own desire, and not a man-pleasing model perfected according to foreign standards. In the LitErotika novels, young women can express their desires of sex and love freely. They listen to their inner selves and not to the dictates of society. In other words, women in lust can be women in love; and this is not considered a threat to society. Moreover, women's lust is equal to, if not stronger than, men's. Their sexuality is not denied but is given the same nuances found in men's, it is not double-edged but an innate quality that empowers them. What's more, the women are not bounded by fabricated happy endings; they create their own unraveling in love with a worthy partner or on the path to solitude where they know they can find contentment by themselves.

Nonetheless, LitErotika has little cause for celebration. It has only garnered limited success with its partial account of the experiences of Filipino women. Although LitErotika seems to be on the right track in inciting discourse on Filipina sexuality in a predominantly Catholic state, there is a fervent need to go beyond the confines of chic lit. LitErotika Editor-in-Chief Obie Obias' interview statement (Lim 2008) of a steadily increasing patronage shows that the readers are open to what LitErotika has to offer. Through LitErotika's creative license, it can participate in the creation of power-knowledge in the representation of Filipina sexuality. This can be done by widening the spectrum of representation in the LitErotika novels, by making the absent present – those who have become others in the process. Maybe someday the LGBTQI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning and Intersex) will also find themselves basking in the literary space of the novels. But ultimately, this would open up the possibility of beginning the nullification of popular culture's false official version of female sexuality.

Finally, LitErotika has implicated itself in starting a chain reaction which should be sustained, if it is to be a powerful force in the representation of Filipina sexuality in popular culture. In doing so, it has the potential to start the creation of a positive sexual culture if it is not to be dictated by profit alone; where women can turn to for sexual exploration untainted by capitalistic and patriarchal practices where “both women and men eroticize only the woman’s body and the man’s desire.” In this possibility, women will be free to explore what they want to desire and express what they do desire, instead of confusing “sexual looking with being looked at sexually, confusing sexually feeling with being sexually felt, and confusing desiring with being desirable.” In the long run, a sexual reality with “a full spectrum of erotic images of uncoerced real women...in contexts of sexual trust” (Wolf 1992) will have the power to collapse the status quo and recreate an authentic representation of Filipina sexuality in popular culture marking the emergence of a free Filipina in popular culture. I challenge LitErotika to go beyond chic lit, in its claim to “elevate the depiction of eroticism and lovemaking in literature,” and own up to its potential to create and sustain a positive sexual culture for all Filipino women. Otherwise, its potential would only be claimed by the capitalistic and patriarchal system as its own in the perpetuation of its ingenious schemes of new traditionalism disguised as promising change.

#### NOTE

- 1 However, Friedan had been criticized for her self-indulgence in excluding poor, working non-white women in her analysis. See Joanne Boucher 2003.

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