

**STAGNANT REPRESENTATIONS:**  
A FEMINIST READING  
OF MIGUEL SYJUCO'S *ILUSTRADO*

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*Ilustrado* is Miguel Syjuco's novel which won the grand prize in the Don Carlos Memorial Awards for Literature and the Man Asia Literary Prize. The word *ilustrado*<sup>1</sup> means "enlightened" in Spanish and it was used to describe European-educated and landed Filipinos during the Spanish Colonial Period. Indeed, it is a very apt title for a novel narrating the intertwined lives of two male characters coming from that social class. The novel covered 150 years of Philippine history from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century up to present.

The narrative starts with the death of prominent Filipino writer Crispin Salvador. His student Miguel Syjuco decides to investigate and retrace his mentor's life for two reasons: to get clues whether the death was indeed caused by suicide or by murder, and to honor his mentor by writing his biography. Miguel set out to return to Manila (where he used to live prior to moving to New York to stay away from his family) to do research and interviews about his professor. The discoveries and revelations of Crispin Salvador's life ( as well as Miguel's) are uncovered through interviews, emails, letters, and excerpts from novels, short stories, new reports, footnotes, graphic texts and blog entries.

These different settings and expository modes significantly highlight the "hybridity" of the narrative style. In addition, the

novel is a metafiction – a writer is writing about the biography of fictional character inspired by a real person. It is not an accident that one of the main protagonists is named Miguel Syjuco, the name of the author himself. The ending of the novel further complicates the plot because it reveals that it was actually Crispin Salvador who invented the Miguel character in his story. It was the name of his dead student.

From the possibilities, a story was selected, unfolded. The world losing that boy through complicated mechanics began to hint at parallels, at symmetries, perhaps because telling of a story imbibes chaos of our own days with certain elegance, a comprehensible beauty. When you're old and lost, is it really pathetic to search for connections to explain our choices to ourselves?

The boy became a man, a young man – a description that encompasses all the promises of living. When I finished writing, spent, after four seasons at the typewriter, I had knotted his being forever with mine. And with fiction of possibilities, entwined with possibilities of fiction, I've woven in my own un-lived life. (Syjuco, 303)

The postmodern characteristics of this novel are seen in the way it uses historically "verifiable" facts in conjunction with fictitious events, personages and records.

It is part of the postmodernist stand to confront paradoxes of fictive versus historical representation, the particular versus the general, and the present versus the past. And the confrontation is itself contradictory, for it refuses to recuperate or dissolve either side of the dichotomy, yet it is willing to exploit them. (Hutcheon, 277)

Some examples of historical events mentioned are the following: Spanish Colonization, the Second World War, the Martial Law Era and the EDSA Revolution alongside fictional events such as EDSA4 and the siege of Malacañang to oust President Estregan. The author also used fictional interviews and footnotes to further blur the "truth" in historical claims and challenge the veracity of a "singular" history. Below is fictional interview of Crispin Salvador in *The Paris Review*.

INTERVIEWER: You wrote in the late 1960's, "Filipino writing must be conquest of our collective self divorced from those we fear are watching." Do you still think it is true?

CS: I used to believe that authenticity could be achieved solely by describing in our own words, one's own fragment of experience. This was of course predicated on the complete intellectual and aesthetic independence of the "I". One eventually realizes such intellectual isolationism promotes style, ego, and awards. But not change. You see, I toiled but saw so little improving around me. What were we sowing? I grew impatient with the social politics that literature could address and alter but had until that time been insufficient in so doing. I decided to actively solicit participation – you know, incite readers to action through my work. I think of the effect of Jose Rizal's books in our own revolution against Spain a century ago. I think of the poetry of Eman Lacaba, who traded his pen for a gun and lived and died in the jungles with the communists in the seventies. "The barefoot army in the wilderness", his famous poem called them. The epigraph of that piece was wonderful. Ho Chi Minh. "A poet must also learn how to lead an attack."

INTERVIEWER: Was there something that made you want to lead an attack?

CS: Pride and fear of death. Truly. You smile but I  
kid you not.

- from 1988 interview  
in *The Paris Review*  
(quoted in Syjuco, 20-21)

Linda Hutcheon named this type of narrative as historiographic metafiction. "The novels are intensely self-reflective but also both re-introduce historical context into metafiction and problematize the entire question of historical knowledge" (275). These forms of postmodern fiction "suggest that to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological. The historical reconstruction is presented in the metafictional consciousness (280).

This re-appropriation or re-writing of history according to the observations, files and interviews done by Miguel is also the same narrative style employed by the author himself – hence the metafictional consciousness. It is in this deliberate retelling and "re-presentation" of "history" that I want to focus on primarily because the women in the novel – although inside a postmodern narrative that challenges the "truth" found in history – remained "unliberated" from their "historical" and traditional representations.

I want to focus on what the novel *did not say* about women. Pierre Macherey said:

For there to be a critical discourse which is more than superficial and futile reprise of the work, the speech stored in the book must be incomplete; because it has not said everything, there remains the possibility of saying something else, *after another fashion*. The recognition of the area of shadow in or around the work is the initial moment of criticism (703).

This shadow or gap is what I will try to expose in my paper because “we can see that meaning is in the *relation* between the implicit and the explicit” (Macherey,706). Language exposes and hides. The neutrality of language has long been debunked by many scholars.

Language is not a mirror which reflects an independent object world ('reality'), but a resource in 'lending' form to ourselves and our world out of the contingent and disorderly flow of every talk and practice (Barker quoting Shotter, 173).

Literature is a site of ideological interpellation because it subjects its readers to the “realities” it presents. We must keep in mind that there is no “natural” relationship between our lived experience and the discursive representations – it is always mediated by ideology. There is no neutral or unbiased representation of reality or of any concepts.

What is represented in ideology is therefore not the system of real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the *imaginary* relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live (Althusser, 695).

With this view of ideology, I begin my analysis of the traditional depictions and women stereotypes found in *Ilustrado*. The lived experiences of women do not always correspond to the representations “allotted” to them by the usual male authors. In this novel, the author and the two main characters are male – the point of view is undeniably *male*. This is one of subject-positions which will be explored later as feminist readings are “centrally concerned with sex as an organizing principle of social life which is thoroughly saturated with power relations subordinating women to man” (Barker, 172). In the case of this novel, sex was an organizing principle in the (mis)representations of women.

The "subordinate" position has become the "identity" of women. Years of interpellation and hailing has been done to legitimize the male-dominated (patriarchal) society and to make "natural" the subjugation of women. But identity is not fixed – it is culturally determined which is why feminist readings are necessary to expose the "misrepresentations" of women in literature and to undermine the "defining" power of "male authorial voice".

Identity is not a fixed, eternal thing, nor an inner essence of a person to which words refer, but a regulated way of 'speaking' about persons. The idea that identities are discursive constructions is underpinned by a view of language in which there are no essences to which language refers and therefore no essential identities. That is, representation does not 'picture' the world but constitutes it for us (Barker, 173).

#### **WOMEN'S BODY AS AN ABSTRACTION**

The first issue I would like to discuss is the commodification of women's body. In the novel, the main protagonist Miguel often views the body of women he encounters as mere abstraction – detached from the person and often sexualized. The male gaze is very evident in the descriptions. Here are some samples of his description of Sadie, the girl he flirted with right after he came back to Manila.

My eyes linger on her foot. Her toenails are carefully painted in bubble-gum pink. Her foot is slender. Rabbitlike. Not at all like Madison's. I'm lost for words (Syjuco,173)

—  
"Sadie bends down to search a desk drawer, exposing her red thong panties and the light crack of her plumber's butt. (177)"  
—

"I can imagine Sadie naked in the water, lily pads brushing the undersides of her upturned breast, a yellow flower in her hair, delicious arms reaching as I bring my amphora to take the slake of my thirst.(250)".

—

"Give me one good reason not to dance with me," she puts her hands on her hips, inadvertently tightening her shirt against her chest. Her nipples are impertinent through the fabric. Or maybe impetuous. Likely both. (258)

The abstraction of women's bodies is a form of commodification (Irigaray, 801). And "commodities thus share in the cult of the father, and never stop striving to resemble, to copy, the one who is his representative" (803). Thus, "properties of a woman's body have to be suppressed and subordinated to the exigencies of its transformation into an object of circulation among men" (808).

The bodies of women have "exchange value" – like how Vita, a starlet in the novel, is tagged as the prized mistress of the President thereby improving her "status" among men. When Miguel sees her inside the disco bar, he views the body of Vita in the same light as Sadie's.

Vita has her eyes shut and is doing this repetitive move where her face goes one way while her hips swing out in the opposite direction. Like a snake. With a killer rack and bodacious ass. The very snake who gave Eve that apple she gave Adam. The man with a funeral voice calls out happiness: "...But I'd give away fames of a hundred Henry James..." Vita throws her arms above her head in ecstatic display of *who she has become*. (emphasis mine) (Syjuco, 257)

The excerpt even alludes to the story of Adam and Eve – Eve being the "symbol" of temptation and sin.

There are other men aside from Miguel who sexualized women's body in the novel. In an over heard conversation between two rich businessmen inside a plane – the topic circulates around politics and a blonde prostitute.

“Almost six-feet tall, Russian blondie. Pink nipples, Jake! Pink. No bigger than a peso coin” (67).

The words used to describe the women are very limiting in the sense that they are always “acted upon” by the men. They do not define themselves. Simone de Beauvoir describes the “she” in her germinal work, *The Second Sex*, as “simply what man decrees; thus she is called “the second sex”, by which is meant that she appears to the male as a sexual being” (676) because “humanity is male and man defines woman not as herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being.

Men are considered “essential” subjects (independent agents with free will), while women are considered contingent beings – dependent and controlled by circumstances created by men. A good example from the text is this:

“We take your chopper to your beach house. *You bring the girls*. But not that one with the bleach hair. I prefer the charming student from AMA. We'll help pay her tuition” (emphasis mine) (68).

One of the (unnamed) rich businessmen I've mentioned above said that line. In analyzing that sentence, we can see that women are treated as passive objects waiting to be “acted upon” by men. Men can bring “girls” and they can be bought as commodities in exchange for the men's protection or patronage.

If we are going to look closely at the descriptions cited above – the “material” body of a woman and her “experience” of it is based on the expectations set by men. This “postmodern” novel just recirculated the patriarchal values and beliefs about women.

Our conceptions of our bodies, whether material, or important, or neither, come to us through language; the belief in a preculturally material body as the ultimate ground of identity itself depends on the circulation of meanings in a culture. (Oksala quoting Turner, 103)

The novel's language and descriptions of women's bodies further the disparaging representations of women. This is quite problematic for women because "we can only understand as well as experience our bodies through culturally mediated representations" (Oksala, 104) which brings to mind Foucault's take on discourse as the primary influence of gendering.

In Foucault's thought, we cannot assume to have knowledge of what is natural and what is culturally variable in our bodies. This distinction between nature and culture should itself be understood as an effect of a certain discourse that produces the idea of natural body. (103)

### **GENDERING THE CONSCIOUSNESS**

The novel offers a glimpse how young men are interpellated and "gendered" by society. Here are two excerpts showing Miguel as a young boy at the height of puberty.

Then, puberty: the first odd hair, the unfathomable urges; the relentless turgidity; the desperate experiments against the wall or within cardboard toilet paper rolls; stealing Mario's lemon-fresh Right Guard deodorant to slick down the new fuzz in my armpits; *breathlessly molesting with my eyes the perfectly drawn European girls* in Heavy Metal comics Jesu kept beneath his bed... (emphasis mine) (Syjuco, 84)

Mario and Jesu are the older brothers of Miguel. His knowledge about how to “become” a man was greatly influenced by his brothers and, to a large extent, by his society’s expectations of what it means to “behave” like a man. He even stealthily took cutouts from his sister’s magazines – and hid it because he must have felt something was *not proper*.

I went through her Elle magazines, cutting out all the photographs of girls in swimsuits, keeping them under my shirt to later hide away between the pages of my bible (102).

Here we see the start of his “gendering” simultaneously juxtaposed with his initial view of women as objects of desire which he obviously carried until adulthood. His gender has become “fixed” through constant hailing and “performing” of the assigned behavior. But like any other identity “genders are not universal and eternal categories but discursive constructions”. (Barker, 173)

“[Gender] is in no way stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through stylized repetition of acts” (Butler, 900).

#### **TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES**

The next issue I will analyze are the other traditional portrayals of women in the novel. The depiction of women did not veer away from the traditional roles and perception of our patriarchal society. There is even a reproachful and sarcastic portrayal of feminists and feminism.

Crispin Salvador during the early part of his career wrote an essay entitled “It’s Hard to Love a Feminist” which provoked a big controversy.

To his own surprise, the attention thrust him into the consciousness of the Philippine pop culture... He energetically debated with feminists on the television and radio, delivering froths of invectives that at times required intervention by the host (Syjuco, 8).

His student Miguel also manifests this negative perception of feminists when he described a woman he saw at Balay Kalinaw during his visit.

*The woman looks like an ugly version of Alice B. Toklas. She wears a white shirt with a stylized Philippine flag and **AFEMASIAN** silkscreened on it. Shrugging off a backpack made of rattan, she takes out a notebook. She regales us with verse, every word spoken slowly and dragged out at the end, as if the incantation was truly alchemical (emphasis mine) (162).*

This is very reminiscent of his mentor's description of feminists as "*thick-waisted female activists*" (emphasis mine) (8). The stereotypical depiction of feminists as being "fat" and "ugly" and the way they were described show the subtle insults and misconception about the movement. The bodies of the feminists mentioned were also treated as an abstraction albeit this time not as objects of desire but disdain.

Now, I'll move on to "old representations". Let me provide some examples of how women supposedly behaved during the Spanish Colonial Period as seen in the text. When the mother of Crispin Salvador grew weary of her husband's philandering, she gave an ultimatum that made her husband return to Bacolod.

But when she was pregnant with Crispin, Leonora gave Junior an ultimatum: Leave his Manila mistress, a beautiful minor actress in the fledging Philippine film industry, and spend more time in Bacolod. (80)

But before this ultimatum happened, Leonora endured years of suffering due to her husband's cheating and his physical abuses. Women are interpellated by society to endure as much suffering as they can for the sake of keeping the marriage intact. Her daughter, Lena Salvador, recorded in her diary the abuses their whole family suffered because of her violent and overbearing (patriarchal) father.

Lena Salvador wrote, heard her father's breathing— "an unforgettable, savage sound"— and smelled the gin. Salvador described her as watching in both fear and relief as their father bypassed her to stand over the sleeping Narcisito. *Distant down the hall, their mother banged and screamed.* Then Lena saw her father "brandishing his rattan riding crop, saw it held high above his head, heard it come down repeated until poor Narcisito cried out for mercy, witnessed it strike again and again until our brother fell into whimpering silence. (emphasis mine) (81)

Leonora could not stop her husband. No one in the family could fight the "authority" of the father. Narcisito committed suicide in his adult life after years of trying to please his father but only getting disapproval and abuses in return.

What is interesting in this particular story is how Lena viewed the situation several years later. When she was interviewed by Miguel to share some information about his dead brother Crispin Salvador – she made sure to clarify that her father was not abusive and it was only Crispin's lies (he wrote extensively about their family history) even though it came right from her own diary. She even defended his father's philandering by saying "Papa was a *man*. Where else was he to find solace?" (92). Lena was fully subjugated by her father's authority – to the extent that she excused her father's infidelity because he was a *man*.

This is the double-standard of our patriarchal society. Men are allowed to be polygamous – mistresses are “open-secrets”. The dignity of a man will not be diminished by his cheating; in fact, it will increase his “macho-ness”. However, if it was a woman “cheater” – the whole society will rally against her “immoral” and “improper” behavior. It is the men who define our morality – our laws, religions and ethical beliefs are formulated by males in general – this world is constructed according to the words of “men”. It is not a wonder then that one of the characters in the novel was disowned by her father because she got pregnant out of wedlock.

The story of Sita was a very important part of the Salvador history. She was impregnated by the half-brother of Crispin Salvador’s father. He was priest – making the pregnancy of Sita all the more scandalous and “improper”. She was disowned by her own father and was left to give birth at a hospice. The child was taken away from her by the nuns after the birth.

She lost her mind and wandered the streets looking for her child. The fate and the fall from grace of Sita were very well depicted. However, the priest who got her pregnant, Fray Augustino Salvador, did not seem to suffer from any societal persecution. There was no mention of his life after Sita. It is always the women who suffer more when an illicit affair becomes public. In this kind of relationship, the women are the ones who take the heaviest blow when breaching the moral code of society because they are not the “law makers”

Their subject-positions as a “woman” contains a complex combination of historical context, social constructionism and biological “expectation”.

[To] be a woman is to have *become* a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of “woman”, to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to a historical delimited possibility, and to do this

as a sustained and repeated corporeal project  
(Butler, 902)

The boundaries set by the patriarchal society should be challenged and thoroughly analyzed if we are going to resist the interpellation and the continuous and sustained misrepresentation of women.

The historical possibilities materialized through various corporeal styles are nothing other than those punitively regulated cultural fictions that are alternatively embodied and disguised under duress (903).

We should also be wary of “accommodationist” representations of women. This is the last issue I will discuss. The narrative depicted women’s sexuality; however, the descriptions are often caricature-like, lacking in proper understanding of how women see themselves as sexual beings. The conversation below will show the stereotypical handling of female sexuality.

At the airport, two ladies in line wait to check in their golf bags:  
“Oh my Lord, I heard he is so handsome,” says the short woman with the big hair.  
“I don’t believe!” says the tall one wearing fake Gucci from head to foot.  
“Oh yes, like a matinee idol. Like young Fernando V. Estregan, but with great pecs. Why can’t *I have security guards who look like him?*”  
“They say he’s like a modern-day Limahong. But more of a Robin Hood!” They say he made some money as an overseas worker in Saudi, came home, and invested it, but was a victim of another one of those pyramid schemes. They say he might be the one behind all the bombing but I don’t believe. He just wants to get back at the Changco couple”.

"I know! Imagine? Out of love! His love made him totally loko!" (Syjuco, 65)

This is a conversation overheard by Miguel at the airport. The two women are talking about the handsome Wigberto Lakandula. He became famous for seeking revenge for his dead girlfriend whom the rich Changco couple killed indirectly. They asked her to drink a bleaching agent after they learned that their son died because of her negligence. Many women and young girls fell in love with him because of his undying love and loyalty to his dead girlfriend. They deemed him as a modern-day hero.

"One banner says: PYRAMID-SCHEME VICTIMS 4 LAKANDULA. Another: WIGGY: WE ♡ YOU, MARRY US!— ASSUMPTION H.S. CLASS OF 2004." (131)

While there is nothing wrong in depicting how women adore men – it should not be limited to a representation wherein they look too easily impressed and smitten by a "handsome" young lad. The way these women considered Lakandula as a hero might send a message that they were gullible human beings who were always ruled by their emotions and not by their reason. Bringing back the binary opposition where male represents reason; female, emotion.

## CONCLUSION

*Ilustrado* might be considered as historiographic metafiction with the challenges it raises about the intertextual nature of the past, the ideological implication of writing about history, the "factuality" of historical events and documents. However, the novel never questioned the historical representations of women. The content of this "postmodern" novel is still very traditional and patriarchal. It is only the narrative style that is postmodern and non-traditional. The novel did not critique "gender" concepts specifically "femininity" in its questioning of historical limitations and boundaries.

In fact, if the novel will not be thoroughly read and analyzed it will become part of the apparatus of the hegemonic patriarchal society. The survival of this oppressive ideology depends on the recirculation of its values. It is therefore necessary to expose and resist the images, the representations and the stereotypes that will help proliferate and sustain these traditional beliefs. A critical stance is necessary if we are going to look beyond what the text is saying and what it is *not* saying. This is the starting point of the feminist goal to restructure the social order so that people will be accorded equal rights, opportunities, and treatment.

I will end this paper with a line from the novel again to remind us not to be swayed by the seductiveness of the patriarchy—

I hold open the stall door. I may not be a lot of things, but one thing I am is a gentleman. The curve where Sadie's neck and shoulder meet looks damn delicious. (Syjuco, 253)

**NOTE**

<sup>1</sup> The definition came from: Glossary: Philippines, Area Handbook Series, Country Studies, Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, LOC.gov [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/philippines/h\\_glos.html](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/philippines/h_glos.html)

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