

**BEST FRIENDS FOREVER:  
FEMALE FRIENDSHIP AND GENDER PERFORMANCE  
AMONG ADOLESCENT CHARACTERS IN SHORT FICTION**

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This paper intends to examine how short fiction plays out the drama of gender identity-differentiation and formation in the imitative or exclusionary practices of female friendships. I would like to posit the idea that female friendships are indispensable to the gendered self because it functions as a site for the maintenance and reinforcement of gender. Women learn what it really means to be a “woman” in their relations with other women.

Using Judith Butler’s theory on gender performativity and Helena Mitchie’s notion of sororophobia as the space where women negotiate sameness and difference, I would like to analyze several short works by female Filipino writers using the following problematique:

- 1) How is gender performed through the relational ties of the female protagonists?
- 2) What measures do the educational institutions take to promote gender normativity and patriarchal values? How does the protagonist learn about gender roles/behavior in this setting?
- 3) How do the female characters negotiate differences among themselves within the Catholic school environment?
- 4) In what ways does female friendship in the texts become exclusionary or serve as a source of empowerment?

The texts selected for this paper—Rosario Lucero’s “Tales of a Catholic Girls’ School,” Andrea Pasion’s “Vanessa Calling,” Menchu Sarmiento’s “The Frog Princess,” and Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo’s “Patriciang Payatot,” “Magic Glasses,” and “Purita”—include a female adolescent protagonist who is either ridiculed or ridicules other girls for their failure to perform their gender adequately. The figure of the adolescent protagonist is particularly significant because she embodies the idea of the gendered identity-in-construction. Adolescence is not a clear denotation of any age, body, behavior, or identity, because it means the process of developing a self rather than any fixed definition of that self (Driscoll 6). Furthermore, the texts were selected because they are set against the backdrop of a private school. Beyond the family, the school apparatus is perhaps the most influential in transmitting heterosexual values, not so much through classroom learning but through other children, from whom they discover unwritten rules about social behavior and gender roles.

The figure of the female adolescent protagonist and her relational ties will be the primary focus of this paper, although the analysis will also include how the school environment and its authority figures regulate and enforce gendered behavior among the female characters.

### **MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL...**

It is commonly believed that what a woman needs is a man, but women are more dependent on other women than we think. Our friendship with other women functions as the source of our self-confidence and self-acceptance. From our female friends, we gain affirmation, approval, and a sense of security that love affairs and married relationships do not provide (Eichenbaum and Orbach 48).

Victoria Raymond’s notion of gyn/affection as a synonym for female friendship is particularly useful in understanding how the bond between women enables them to become strong, autonomous beings in a society where patriarchy is the norm. Gyn/affection connotes more than just feelings of fondness and

attraction; it is a movement of women towards each other, the state where women influence and act upon other women. Gyn/affection means a freely chosen bond that enables women to affect and stir each other into full power. The genuine friendship borne out of the self's relation to other selves in society is what allows the female self to flourish (Raymond 9).

The limitations of the idea of gyn/affection is that first, it presupposes an intrinsic "female self" that needs to be developed and fleshed out by society. Second, it seems to suggest that *all* friendships nurture and develop this self. Friendships do not nurture a self that is already there; it *creates* the "female self" through a process of imitation and exclusion. It is this exclusionary element that makes some female relations a site of conflict rather than a space for mutual support and empowerment.

The female gendered subject is a product of a mimetic process that begins in the family and is further developed within relational ties formed in apparatuses like the school. Psychoanalytic feminism points out that the girl begins to grasp her sense of self in the pre-Oedipal stage, where she struggles with her likeness or unlikeness to her mother (Mitchie 8). Through the figure of the mother, the girl learns how to behave in a gendered world as a female subject; she is taught that her sense of self is rooted in her gender. Gender, however, is not an essence. It is a social construct inscribed into our bodies in order to maintain the social order of reproductive heterosexuality. Since there is no such thing as someone who is "essentially female," we can only come to a close approximation of what it means to be a woman through mirroring the behavior of other women, their actions, and through recognizable gendered signs and practices.

In her book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues that the various acts of gender create the idea of gender; without these acts, there would be no gender at all (Butler 178). Thus, gendered construction of an individual needs to be enforced and reinforced through a series of actions and rituals that she has appropriately termed "gender performativity." Gender performance must be constantly repeated for the concept of gender to endure, and