

## ***Bayan ng mga Bangkay* by Chuckberry Pascual (2022)**

**Honeylet L. Alerta**

University of the Philippines Diliman

Chuckberry Pascual's *Bayan ng mga Bangkay* (2022) is a work from popular literature with strong folklore elements. Published by the University of the Philippines Press, the book is a collection of ten horror tales that interrogate the notion of crime, oral lore, mystery, and horror witnessed and experienced by the *bakla* in present Philippine society. These tales are contextualized within 'normalized' killings, abuse of power, acts of violence, mythical creatures from Philippine folktales, and popular culture. This book depicts the lives led by gay men, and the crimes to which they always become victims or suspects of. Set in Manila, each story is narrated by a gay man who witnesses the surreal yet tragic implication of terrifying incidents lurking within Metro Manila and that slowly permeate the consciousness of an individual devoured by social media, politics, the war on drugs, and the physical, psychological, economic, and sociological effects of community lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Aside from tracing the portrayal of the gay experience and its contemporary crisis at the height of a sociopolitical and economic disturbance, the book also presents notions of gay experience and intimacy in Metropolitan Manila.

*Bayan ng mga Bangkay* highlights the relevance of the gay character's *loob* or coreness when he is marginalized and regarded as a 'temporal' figure – easily loved, yet easily discarded. This book could also lead to a better understanding of the behavior and expression of the *bakla* identity as they respond to the injustices, deaths, and horrors at the time of extrajudicial killings and the COVID-19 pandemic. The book's rendition of Metropolitan Manila that challenges hetero-patriarchal notions of sexual behaviors, allows for the expression of queer identity that live, love, get hurt, and survive amidst being politically marginalized (Diaz 9).

In rendering the gay experience from the Marcos dictatorship until the authoritarian rule of Duterte, *Bayan ng mga Bangkay* breaks notions of queerness. In particular, although urban spaces and people strictly followed a community lockdown, the circumstances also fostered queerness that allowed other versions of the city to exist and other modalities of intimacy to proliferate (Diaz 10). Perhaps this politics of a queer past could enlighten us, particularly as victims of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As Maynard Manansala's introduction asserts, "queerness is a significant element of cultures of and against dictatorship" (Bayan ng mga Bangkay, v).

Since March 2020, news on television and social media has reminded us that our lives are constantly in danger. The pandemic highlighted social inequalities among those who could protect themselves and those who could not, those who did not have a home, were laid off from work, fell ill, or were financially incapable of accessing proper healthcare services. In *Bayan ng mga Bangkay* (2022), Pascual interchanges the ten short stories with narratives that allude to imagined horror tales, from the absurdity of characters and situations to mythical creatures in folklore, to the new horrors resulting from the material realities that plague Philippine society. This section focuses on the stories paired according to the contemporary issues they cover and the new world of horror and folklore created by community lockdowns, continuous killings, and sudden deaths due to the pandemic.

### **"Sasaeng" and "Room 202"**

The sudden immobility of people due to the government's implementation of community lockdowns and their mental and economic consequences plague unemployed Filipinos in urban cities. These conditions are pronounced in the stories "Sasaeng," (generally defined as a K-Pop fan who stalks and harasses their idols) and *Room 202*. Jed of "Sasaeng" and Santi of "Room 202" move in a community dominated by extra-judicial killings or EJK. Although characters in these stories hear gunshots and smell the stench of blood, they are separated by their socioeconomic circumstances. Educated yet inexperienced, Jed lives in a nice home listening to K-Pop, while street-smart but apathetic Santi stays in a shabby motel room. Jed is among those threatened by killings he sees on social media, while Santi goes viral for instilling fear in the common folk. The stories show that virtual space, mainly social media, is equally dangerous for it dictates who or what is popular. People consume its content without realizing that it permeates their consciousness, manipulating their minds and even their movements. Social media is like a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it could lead people to think that they will never witness violence and killings in their own space—that crime will never happen within their territory. On the other hand, news on social media could make us feel how close we are to these crimes, while being able to dismiss these social realities as we use the same virtual space to amuse ourselves.

The two stories show the tendency of crime witnesses to treat killing as a spectacle, and to view violence as normal, thereby raising these societal concerns: In what way are these characters complicit in the injustices surrounded by stories of death occurring in a community lockdown? More importantly, who is the real monster in times of extra-judicial killings and the coronavirus pandemic?

## “Aswang as You Love Me” and “Bigote”

Since Pascual challenges the limits of horror in his short stories, these narratives also break free from the usual formula. Hence, horror tales meant to scare also become a source of humor. The protagonist in “Aswang as You Love Me” claims that whoever wrote Philippine history lacks imagination because humor and humanity are more palpable in a family of *aswang* whose members risk themselves being seen by people in their true form to feed their family than in a “regular family”. One may also say that the dilemma in coming out as an *aswang* is akin to that of coming out as a gay man.

These stories also use the point of view of mythical creatures to expose corruption in the Philippines, especially during the election period. In these stories, disturbances in an orderly local economy and society influence the symbolic manifestations of viscera-sucking creature, permeating the gay experience of the characters. For instance, the protagonist in “Aswang as You Love Me” goes through ‘double anonymity’ when interacting with humans—hiding his gender identity and supernatural nature to escape the fate of those considered monsters lurking at night. In this case, the protagonist is both gay and *aswang*. Both gender and supernatural identities coexist harmoniously in the world of *aswang*, unless he interacts with a world bound by social norms. This understanding of the world of *aswangs* is challenged in *Bayan ng mga Bangkay*, in the portrayal of *aswangs* as gay men. “Aswang as You Love Me” shows that the *aswang* tales are influential in instilling fear and manipulating the masses’ behavior. The repetitive passing of tales about these creatures in the book makes it easier for the government to immobilize the community so that the government’s misdeeds would not be exposed.

*Bayan ng mga Bangkay*’s aim of telling horror tales is represented by peculiar characters. In “Bigote” (Mustache), Gary is introduced as an overt gay man who traces the path taken by gay men like him portrayed in his favorite Boys’ Love (BL) series: to become a rich, handsome guy with a well-toned body, and thus respected because he acts like a man. This ideal portrayal of how gay men should be/come is ironic considering the present efforts promoting the rights of the LGBTQ community such as the Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and (Gender) Expression (SOGIE) bill. Another issue explored in “Bigote” is its representation of the LGBTQIA+ spectrum. Gary briefly ponders if Bigote, a male or a female neighbor with a thick beard is non-binary. In the end, Gary confirms the gender when he saves Bigote from the *manananggal*.

If Gary is a closeted gay man, the unnamed viscera-sucker protagonist in “Aswang as You Love Me” is unabashedly gay. The latter makes the reader reflect on whether

coming out as gay and being accepted is easier than being an *aswang*, since the conventions of the common folk do not seemingly apply to the latter. The readers would think that gay men live freely in the world of *aswangs*—until the protagonist shares a personal sentiment: that as the youngest child—all his siblings already have a family of their own—he is responsible for taking care of his parents. “Aswang as You Love Me” and “Bigote” emphasize that gay men, whether closeted or not, are still bound to fulfill the conventions and traditions of society.

### **“Puno ng Luha” and “Bayan ng mga Bangkay”**

The political dispositions of each gay character in the collection are also revealed based on their views on EJK. In “Puno ng Luha”, the protagonist, Jonas, favors killing those suspected of drug abuse since illegal drug users killed his parents. In contrast, Gabriel, in the story “Bayan ng mga Bangkay”, is against the government’s program of exterminating the innocent corpses-turned-zombies. Set during a postapocalyptic Philippines plagued by zombies (in our context, zombies could be attributed to drug addicts), the story unpacks the Filipinos’ moral dilemma in exterminating corpses which transform into the following kinds: a killer zombie that attacks people and eats their brain; a vegetarian zombie that only eats plants; or an ascetic zombie that only roams the road and does not harm anyone. An interesting point of view is expressed by Gabriel, who believes that zombies still have the right to live and should not be exterminated like pests. Yet, Gabriel is pro-zombie not because he loves humanity equally, but because of personal interest—he fantasizes to live happily with his sick partner Teddy, and keep him from being tracked by the government once Teddy passes on.

“Puno ng Luha” and “Bayan ng mga Bangkay” blur the line that separates reality from imagination, resulting in a sense of a familiar social condition. Thus, they are sources of critical discussion. While the figure of the zombie has dominated popular culture through TV, social media, and entertainment, and is used in Filipino horror tales, it is localized in Pascual’s narratives showing what Filipinos go through amidst the war against drugs and community lockdowns. The relationship Pascual establishes between the text and its readers enables them to determine the “folklore”—of the ongoing stories of victims and witnesses of murder—and the social reality this presents and represents.

### **“Gardo” and “Lockdown”**

At the height of the COVID19 pandemic, the community lockdowns confined people and this somehow unleashed certain “basic” or “natural” instincts similar to those in *Lord of the Flies*. The stories “Gardo” and “Lockdown” serve as commentaries on the alarming destruction of moral compass brought by the coronavirus and lockdown.

More than a place of momentary and earthly pleasure, the Lovelies motel is also a space where horror stories come alive: tales about chop-chop gays, missing gay couples, a gay ghost who sleeps with a gay mortal, and gay men who either hanged or poisoned themselves. These tales beg the question: why do gay men always end up as victims in stories? In “Lockdown”, the consequence and immediate response of the government to the COVID-19 pandemic is creatively rendered. The narrative is comparable to the reality of employment setup in various industries, much like how employed individuals have experienced working from home and their ways of balancing a routine that mimics a life free from mobility restrictions, even if this means obsessively stalking their neighbors as a way of distracting themselves from the fact of their immobility.

These stories raise the issue of how a confined space disorients not only the physical, emotional, and social functions of individuals but also their sanity. Gardo tells stories of gay men being brutally murdered in the Lovelies motel while waiting for the curfew to be lifted, and how Rick became a voyeur who violates the rules of community lockdown. However, the irony is that while this confinement is enforced by law, it is also in this *loob*, a confined space, where the protagonists/antagonists operate in lawlessness. These narratives illustrate the complexities of dealing with the lockdown as a result of marginalization, with little to no aid from the Philippine government.

### **“Pusang Itim” and “Matandang Binata”**

In the Philippine context, it is usually believed that the greatest fear of a gay man is to fulfill his filial duty as a caring, submissive, and upright son. Such was the fate of Gabriel in “Pusang Itim.” His recollection of his childhood, reveals that while his father had no protestations when he came out as gay, the former started physically abusing him for no reason. So violent was his childhood that Gabriel wished to be a cat to escape his fate. “Pusang Itim” limns the formation of empathy among queer people towards those who are weak; the story revises the reader’s perception of what is commonly believed to bring misfortune (i.e., a black cat).

Meanwhile, “Matandang Binata” presents another usual fear of gay men—to grow old alone. The story centers around Rhey, an old gay man, who was in a long-term relationship with his transgender partner, Dee, who eventually succumbed to cancer. This story triggers one’s imagination to think about what death really means—the physical absence or the resignation to remember the departed. “Pusang Itim” and “Matandang Binata” confront death and rebirth through inner and outer transformation, challenging the duality of lives of gay men. Both stories also illustrate the fear of loneliness and isolation, here embodied by characters tending to pets and finding an escape from the mundane reality of their lives

because society does allow gay people to have a sense of sanctioned presence, influence, and intimate relationships.

The tales about the virus are social commentaries, for the pandemic did not only affect people's physical and mental states but also how they perceive meaning in their lives. Indeed, a new world of horror was created by the lockdowns, experienced by everyone, not just by queer people and the victims of unjust killings. These stories remind us to remember, record, and be vigilant of the past's implications on present Philippine society.

Ultimately, the book shows that Philippine lore continues to haunt contemporary society. *Bayan ng mga Bangkay* can be read as a potential material showing how Philippine folklore could be revisited and read with a different lens. Examining *Bayan ng mga Bangkay* illustrates that folklore is more than just a well of local materials for film and other media, and shows that folklore also indexes the lived relationship between people and technological media. The lived experience of gay characters in these stories as well as the effect of social media and the changing city-scape obscured the understanding of folklore as timeless, traditional, and technophobic. In a way, Pascual's replacement of the female *manananggal* and *aswang* with the *bakla* is a move with two risks. In terms of visibility, reappropriating misogynist folkloric figures that lend themselves to homophobia or transphobia could have backfired. Likewise, drawing an equivalence between pre-colonial shamans and contemporary queer formations could also be a problem since the *bakla* is presently dismissed as embodying anachronistic, pre-modern forms of sexual subjectivity eclipsed by overtly masculine styles of present-day gay globality (Lim 178). Yet, this reimagination of Philippine folklore that dismisses gender inequality calls attention to the need to rethink the prejudice and marginalization experienced by queer people in the Philippines.

The queer horror tales in *Bayan ng mga Bangkay* against the background of the extrajudicial killings, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the heightened presence of social media which controls people's physical, social, emotional, and psychological states point to the possible birth of a Philippine folklore that recognizes the queer as folk, and, by extension, their experiences as shared beliefs, and popular knowledge, mediatized experience, gendered embodiment, and sexual practice in the metropolitan as lore. *Bayan ng mga Bangkay* explores the queer experience by examining the *loob* or coreness of gender identity, expression, and the *bakla*'s moral response to social issues surrounding them. This, in turn, could become a significant element of a culture against authoritarianism and dictatorship.

## WORKS CITED

- Diaz, Robert. "Queer Love and Urban Intimacies in Martial Law Manila." *Plaridel: A Philippine Journal of Communication, Media and Society*, 9 (2012): 1-19.
- Lim, Bliss Cua. "Queer Aswang Transmedia: Folklore as Camp." *Kritika Kultura*, 24 (2015): 178-225.
- Pascual, Chuckberry, J. *Bayan ng mga Bangkay*. Quezon City, The University of the Philippines Press, 2022.

---

**Honeylet L. Alerta** (halerta@up.edu.ph) teaches English and literature courses to university students. She develops instructional materials using the multiliteracy pedagogy in teaching literature. Her research interests include mobility politics and justice, digital humanities, multiliteracy pedagogy, and Philippine novels in English. Currently, she is a teaching fellow at the Department of English and Comparative Literature of the University of the Philippines Diliman, where she is finishing her doctorate degree in Comparative Literature.