

## SAVORING ROMANCE PINOY STYLE IN FOREIGN CLIMES: Why Women Migrants Love Reading Tagalog Romance Novels

Georgina R. Encanto

Filipino overseas workers, particularly women, have been a significant target market of Tagalog romance novels ever since these started to appear in 1984. According to Benjy Ocampo (personal communication, April 3, 1992), editor of Books for Pleasure which published Valentine Romances, then the series which dominated the commercial romances in the mid-1980s, informal surveys based on ocular inspection or reports of field agents of Valentine Romances had identified its readers as high school students, housewives, office personnel like clerks and secretaries, department store salesgirls and *despatsadoras*, *lavanderas*, *yayas*, *masahistas*, and overseas domestic workers.

The migration of Filipino women to seek employment opportunities in other countries is a phenomenon which dates back to the 1970s. According to Danilo Arao, the migration of Filipino women to other countries belongs to the third wave of migration which started in the 1970s, during the martial law years, the first two waves being in the 1900s to 1935, when farmers and plantation workers migrated to the United States (US) and from 1946 to the 1960s, as war brides, nurses, dentists, medical technicians, and scabs, also went to the US. During the martial law years, because of the growing inability of the country's economy to generate enough jobs, a growing number of Filipino women started to seek jobs in other countries like the Middle East, and then, Asia, Africa and Europe, mostly as domestic helpers and entertainers (Arao, 2008).

The migration of Filipino women markedly increased when the Philippines, along with other countries, was badly affected by the Asian financial crisis in 1997 and Filipino women felt compelled to seek jobs abroad in order to earn salaries that could enable their families in the Philippines to survive. According to the Survey on Overseas Filipino Workers conducted by the

National Statistics Office (NSO), there were more male (52.5%) than female (47.5%) overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) (Kanlungan Center Foundation, Inc. [from now on referred to as Kanlungan], 2001).

The Commission on Filipino Overseas Workers claims that as of December 2001, a total of 7.4 million Filipinos were overseas – 3.1 million as migrant workers, 2.7 million as permanent residents, and 1.6 million as irregular aliens. A majority (63%) of these were women, of whom 45 percent were in domestic service and 33 percent were professionals, mostly as entertainers bound for Japan (Kanlungan 2001, 10).

This same survey said that almost one in every four (22.7%) female OFWs were in Hongkong, while 13.1 percent were in Saudi Arabia, 9.4 percent were in Singapore, and 9.2 percent were in Japan. On the other hand, the majority of male OFWs were in Saudi Arabia (37%), Japan (7.4%), and USA (7.4%).

In 2002, the same survey said that one in three deployed female OFWs were domestic helpers. Two in ten were composers, musicians and singers, choreographers and dancers (15.8%) while nurses accounted for 5.2 percent of the total deployed workers.

Women who migrated abroad were relatively younger than male workers. More women than men OFWs were below 35 years old while more men than women overseas contract workers (OCWs) were 35 years old and below (Kanlungan 2001, 10).

In 2006, Kanlungan reported that about 1,062,567 OFWs were deployed, surpassing the one million mark. Three fourths (75%) of these OFWs were women migrant workers (Kanlungan 2001). For every one male migrant, there are now three women migrants.

The changes in the numbers of overseas Filipino workers are indicative of the “growing trend of feminization of migration.” In 1980, women only constituted less than 20 percent of OFWs. This was during the exodus of OFWs triggered by the worsening economic condition of the country. This percentage rose to 36 percent in 1987, reached 56 percent a decade after, and became 70 percent in 2000 (Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) in Kanlungan 2007, 15).

Several factors account for this trend of feminization, among which are the lack of economic opportunities and low social status of women in the Philippines. Numerous women remain trapped in low paying jobs and their reproductive work has not been given due recognition. In addition to that, there is the lack of social services which makes women’s roles as nurturers of their family a bigger burden. Women are also conditioned to do anything for the survival of their families even if it means having to leave their families and being separated from their loved ones (Kanlungan 2007, 15).

The trend toward feminization is also market driven, as industrialization creates a greater demand for caregivers and domestic workers in developed countries. Industrialization in these countries has given women more opportunities to work and participate in economic development.

According to the NSO SOFW survey, the remittances of male overseas workers were still much higher than the female OFWs' monthly remittances. From April to September 2002, the average cash remittance of male OFWs was P92,061 while for female OFWs, it was only P53,520.

Women migrants remain a very vulnerable sector of the population whose welfare and rights need to be addressed. Even before they leave the country, they already experience human and labor rights violations by illegal recruiters and while abroad, they experience all forms of discrimination, human rights violations such as maltreatment, rape and sexual harassment, health problems, and even death.

A study commissioned by Kanlungan in 2006 revealed that women aged 18 to 40 years old who had worked in the Middle East and Asia as domestic workers had the most number of recorded health problems. In addition, 91.17 percent of OFWs with health problems were women. The study also cited the high incidence of violence against women in the form of maltreatment, rape and sexual harassment. Of the 102 OFWs studied, the most common health problem was maltreatment (62.74%) with 64 cases reported. This was followed by rape with maltreatment (19.78%) with 11 cases reported. The third most common health problem was fractures (6.86%) with seven cases reported (4 women and 3 men) (Kanlungan 2007, 20).

Given this demographic profile of women migrant workers, it is not surprising that Tagalog romance novels have become such a popular form of entertainment among OFWs and that some of them actually become addicted to reading them. Driven by the need to seek more lucrative job opportunities which could ensure the survival of their families in the Philippines in economically uncertain times or to help send siblings to school, or care for their parents in their old age, women migrants have become a huge target market for the paperback romances which peddle romance in stock plots and characters that are endlessly churned out by seasoned romance writers, most of whom were former writers for the *komiks* and therefore have mastered the formulas for appealing to the *masa*, especially those who are homesick and often stricken by loneliness. They are among the hundreds of thousands of women readers of the Tagalog romance novels who have sustained the continued publication of Tagalog romance novels for almost 25 years. In fact, although the once popular Valentine Romances have been discontinued, many other series with colorful names like Precious Heart, Kristine, Sweetheart, Valentine/M Valentine, Montejero Brothers, Clan Hacienda, Fuentebella,

Roberta, Bachelorette, Best Friend, I Always Love You, Knight Society Series, Paula's Lullaby and The More You Hate, The More You Love have sprouted like mushrooms. There are romances for the very young, like Chicklit, and Literotica for the more liberated readers. There are now family sagas complete with family trees of characters in the inside front and back pages which have become very popular.

A feminist series published by Anvil Publishing in the 1990s, which experimented with the romance form by injecting serious feminist and progressive themes into the romance like "mail-order brides," the oppressive US-Philippines bases agreement, battered wives, and other forms of violence against women as well as the conventional happy ending (some had tragic or ambivalent endings) had to be discontinued because the romance readers of commercial romances rejected them as they seemed to be more of "socially realistic novels masquerading as romances" (Encanto 1996). The failure of the feminist line of romances suggests that there are certain conventions of the romance, like the happy ending, which cannot be tampered with, for it is that convention that women readers relish when they read romances, which by definition, present an ideal world that is different, if not diametrically opposed to the real world.

Clearly, publishing romance novels has become a highly competitive and lucrative industry with a highly segmented market and publishing firms have to aggressively market them to the women migrants in other countries. The romance novels deceptively resemble the Mills and Boon novels but a closer examination of them would show that they are modern rehashed prose forms that belong to the indigenous romantic didactic tradition whose literary ancestors are the folk tale, the *awit* and *corrido*, the serialized Tagalog novels which used to be published in popular vernacular magazines like *Liwayway*, and the *komiks* which have directly influenced and shaped their sensibility.

The Tagalog paperback romances, along with DVDs of Tagalog movies and telenovelas along with Wowowee, have become a ubiquitous sight in countries like Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Hongkong, Macau, Japan and Singapore where there are a sizeable number of women migrants. They are sold in news and magazine stands, *tiangges* or local markets or Filipino stores or stores that cater to migrant workers, in *talipapas* near the areas where there are communities of migrant workers. In Macao they are sold in the Red Market. They can also be bought from women migrants who bring them from the Philippines when they go home for visits and peddle them in their shopping bags to their homesick *kababayans*.

They are sold more openly in Hongkong and Macau than in the Middle East countries like Kuwait and Saudi Arabia where they are sometimes banned because of the sexual suggestiveness of the covers. In other countries,

they are confiscated by the local customs or post offices if they were sent by mail.

Locally sold at 3 for P100 or only P30 each, they are sold for 15 HK dollars or P90 which is three times higher than their price in the Philippines. Women migrants thus prefer to borrow pocketbooks from other *kababayans*, like relatives and friends, rather than to buy paperback romance novels for themselves.

### 2008 Survey of Returned Women Migrants

The Kanlungan Center Foundation conducted a survey from June to October 2008. There were 60 respondents, chosen through purposive random sampling. Survey results reveal some demographic data about migrant women readers and insights into their reading habits and reasons that could account for the appeal of Tagalog romance novels among women migrants.

The respondents were women who worked as migrant workers in countries like Hongkong, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Japan, and Singapore in the 1980s, 1990s or 2000 onwards and who have returned to the Philippines. The respondents were aged between from 16 to 66, with the majority (36.7%) belonging to the 41-50 year-old category, followed by those in the 51-60 year-old category (26.7%) and those in the 31-40 year-old category (15%). Only six respondents (10%) were aged 60 and above while only two were aged between the 21-30 years old (3.3%) (Table 1).

Of the 60 respondents, 58 (96.7%) were women while only two (3.3%) were male (Table 2).

Majority of the respondents were married (66.7%). Eight of them were single (13.3%), seven were widows/widowers (11.7%) while four were separated (6.7%) (Table 3).

Two-thirds of the respondents (66.7%) came from La Union, where the Kanlungan Centre Foundation has an office and there were also respondents from Quezon City (15%) and Caloocan City (8.3%), while Navotas City, Malabon City, Manila, and Nueva Ecija had one respondent each (Table 4).

With respect to educational attainment, 20 (33.3%) finished high school; 15 (25%) finished college; 11 (18.3%) had vocational education; seven (11.7%) obtained some college education; and the rest had some high school education (Table 5). Majority of the migrant women respondents were high school graduates followed by those who had graduated with a college degree.

The monthly income of the 60 respondents ranged from P3000 a month to P20,000 a month. These incomes were those which they had at the time of the interview. [According to Kanlungan's Imelda Rebate, women migrant workers usually have salaries of \$300 to \$400 although in some cases

they are only paid \$150 a month (personal communication, October 20, 2008).]

Of the 24 respondents who said that they were working (Table 6), six said they were self-employed, three were farmers, vendors, or volunteers for Bannuar TI, an organization which attends to the welfare of families of returned migrant workers. The others worked as a beautician, an insurance underwriter, a *modista* or sewer, a domestic helper, a barangay health worker, a saleslady, and a barangay council member (Table 7). The respondents did not indicate what their jobs were in the countries to which they migrated.

Only 12 of the 60 respondents (20%) answered questions regarding the countries where they worked, when they worked in these countries, their occupations, and salaries. Six of the 12 said they worked in the Middle East (Dubai, Sultanate of Oman, Qatar, Jeddah and Riyadh), two worked in Japan, one in Singapore and another one in Hongkong (Table 24). Six of the 12 worked abroad in 2000 and later, three in the 1990s, and one in the 1980s (Table 25). Of the 12, five were domestic helpers, two were choreographers, singers, and entertainers, and two were cooks (Table 26). Their salaries ranged from 700 Qatar Riyals to P12,000 a month. This explains the disparity between the Kanlungan data based on POEA figures which state that 75 percent of the women migrants abroad are domestic workers and the data obtained from this 2008 survey.

Of the 60 respondents, 27 (45%) said they used to read Tagalog romance novels but no longer did. Eighteen respondents (30%) said they never read Tagalog romance novels while 15 (25%) said they still read Tagalog romance novels (Table 9).

When asked for their reasons for not reading Tagalog romance novels, the 27 respondents cited the following: lack of interest (40.9%), no time or busy (31.8%), preference for English pocketbooks (9.1%), preference for reading the Bible instead (4.5%), poor eyesight (4.5%), and reading causes headaches (4.5%) (Table 10).

Of the 27 respondents who said they used to read Tagalog romance novels but no longer did, 11 (40.7%) said they last read a Tagalog romance novel between 1 and 5 years ago, six (22.2%) said they last read a Tagalog romance novel more than 10 years ago, and four (14.8%) said they had read a Tagalog romance novel between 6 and 10 years ago (Table 11).

To the question of why they had stopped reading Tagalog romance novels, 12 (40%) said they had no time or were too busy to read them, seven (23.3%) said that they stopped because of poor eyesight, three (10%) said that they had no money, and two (6.7%) said that they had other interests like cross-stitching or doing volunteer work. One respondent said the Tagalog romance novels were too expensive while another said that she would rather

read the Bible instead (Table 12).

But to the question of whether they would read Tagalog romance novels again, more than half (59.3%) of the 27 respondents said yes while eight (29.6%) said no (Table 13). Almost half (47.1%) of those who said yes to reading Tagalog romance novels again said that they would do so if they had free time (47.1%). Other reasons cited were: because it is entertaining and or relaxing (17.6%), for additional knowledge (17%), if an interesting one is published (11.8%), and if the pocketbooks are free (5.9%) (Table 14).

On the other hand, of the eight respondents who said that they would not read Tagalog romance novels again, two respondents said that it was because they had no time or were busy. Another two said that they would rather read the Bible. One respondent said that it was because of her old age, another said that romance novels lack good values, another cited her poor eyesight and still another said that she simply does not like to read anymore (Table 15).

Fifteen or one fourth (25%) of the 60 respondents said they still read Tagalog romance novels. Of this number, four (26.7%) said that they were reading romance novels for the last five years. The same number said that they were Tagalog romance novel readers for more than 10 years. On the other hand, three respondents said that they started reading less than a year ago (Table 16).

The number of novels that these 15 respondents said they had read ranged from at least one a month to 150. Four (26.7%) said they read 1 to 5 Tagalog romance novels a month, three (20%) said they had read between 6 to 10 Tagalog romance novels a month, while two (40%) said they had read more than 10 novels a month (Table 17). The respondent who said she had read about 150 Tagalog romance novels a month may have counted all those she had read from the start. According to Mel, women migrant workers on the average read one Tagalog romance novel a week while some take a month to finish reading a Tagalog romance novel.

When asked if the respondents have a favorite series, majority of them (60%) said yes while the rest (40%) said no. Those who said yes cited GP Nepomuceno Ent., Sweetheart Love Turns Romance, Sweetheart Romance, Twin Sweetheart Love Romance as their favorite series. There were also those who listed generic topics such as romance/love, anger/vengeance, marital separation, and self-dedication as their favorites (Table 18).

To the question of whether these 15 respondents have a favorite writer, eight (53.3%) said yes while six (40%) said no (Table 19). Among their favorite writers were Gilda Olvidado, Nerissa Cabral, Pablo Gomez, and Helen Meriz. These writers used to be *komiks* writers, the most dominant form of popular entertainment in print which used to be read by millions of readers until the nineties when the popularity of *komiks* began to wane because a lot of the

graphic artists for *komiks* were pirated by foreign, mostly American companies, and other forms of entertainment like the Tagalog romance novel, the anime and telenovelas on TV became increasingly popular. Meriz is already deceased but her Tagalog romance novels are so popular, they have been reprinted and continue to be sold.

Because they are former *komiks* writers, these writers apparently have mastered the formulas and skills that could be counted on to titillate their readers and ensure the marketability of the romance novels they churn out.

Of these 15 romance novel readers, nine (60%) said they had a favorite story while three (20%) said they did not (Table 20). Those who said they had favorite stories mentioned titles like *Mark/Hello Mark*; *Ang Pagbabalik ni Ursula*, *Villa Cristina*, *The Sisters*, *Babae sa Gulod*, and *My Sweet Teacher* while others mentioned general themes like “love story” and “tungkol sa pagaasawa at pagpapayaman” (about getting married and getting rich).

Asked how they acquired copies of Tagalog romance novels, eight of the 15 respondents (38.1%) said they borrowed them, while six each (28.6%) said they either bought or rented them (Table 21).

As to their monthly budget for Tagalog romance novels, four (26.7%) said they spend between P101 to P150. Two (13.3%) respondents each said that they spend less than P100 or between P151 to P200 or more than P200 for the novels (Table 22). The lowest monthly budget for Tagalog romance novels was P40 while the highest was P240.

The survey findings show that Tagalog romance novels are read by the respondents primarily for entertainment, with 10 out of 60 respondents citing this as their main reason for reading them. The same number of respondents said that they also read Tagalog romance novels because of the values that can be derived from reading them. These two reasons were followed by the stories’ capacity to make readers understand themselves and others; for relaxation; because the stories are exciting and titillating; to get tips on boy-girl relationships; because the readers can relate with the stories/plots; and because reading has become a habit. Other reasons given were that reading Tagalog romance novels sharpens the mind and helps the readers understand the emotions of lovers (*nakakapagpaantig ng damdamin ng magsing-irog*) (Table 23).

Based on the results of this survey, it is evident that women migrants read Tagalog romance novels because they are a very engaging form of entertainment which can afford them relaxation and allow them to retreat into an ideal world where lovers, usually from different social classes, ultimately prevail after struggling and surmounting all kinds of obstacles. Significantly, the readers of Tagalog romance novels gave the greatest importance to the exciting, action-filled convoluted plots, usually revolving around familiar



domestic themes which are the staple of sentimental melodramas.

The readers apparently derive a lot of enjoyment from following the plight of lovers unfolding in the very convoluted plots that are almost incredulous and tax the imagination. Stories about class-divided lovers, such as a vacationing caregiver meeting a wealthy businessman while vacationing in Palawan; an office worker falling in love with the janitor who turns out to be the son of the owner of the corporation; a heroine who experiences romance while mountain climbing; a young heroine meeting a former classmate who can help her attain her dream of becoming a successful pop singer so she can help support her sibling's schooling; a TV scriptwriter who is supposed to be introduced to a man who has been busted in his previous attempts to court women that he is reluctant to fall in love again; and family sagas that tackle problems of wealthy families unfolding in *haciendas* in the provinces, such as illegitimate children demanding their inheritance or the brother of a widow's husband trying to court the heroine who is still supposedly a virgin, are typical plots of the Tagalog romance novels. As in the *komiks*, there are a lot of coincidences, mistaken identity, minor characters who do nothing much except to further complicate the plot, and funny twists and turns that make the novels vicariously thrilling and exciting to read.

These stock plots, along with the stereotyped characters, coincidences, mistaken identities, love triangles and happy endings account for the appeal of the Tagalog romance novels whose literary ancestors are the folk tales, *awits* and *corridos*, serialized Tagalog novels and most of all, the *komiks* which women readers, particularly from the low income groups, have always found very engaging.

The 15 respondents in the survey conducted by Kanlungan who said they still read Tagalog romance novels mentioned that they had a favorite series because they found them “makabuluhan” (relevant), “nakakainlove ang nilalaman nito” (their content make you imagine that you are in love), “Masaya” (happy), “nakakakilig” and excited sa ending (thrilling and suspenseful), “nakakaantig ng damdamin” (arouses your feelings); while at the same time, conveying moral lessons drawn from life, or “naglalaman ito ng hango sa tunay na buhay at kapupulutan ng aral.” They also said that they had a favorite story because these stories were “nakakabaliw/nakakakilig” (exciting, thrilling), and “nakakaaliw” (more exciting). There was even one respondent who liked reading novels on anger, vengeance and “paghihiganti” (revenge) because these relate to her personal experience.

The vicarious thrill or excitement which readers of the Tagalog romances say they get from reading romances clearly suggests that romance reading provides women migrants – 75 percent of whom are domestic workers, caregivers, waitresses, or maintenance workers – temporary escape or respite

from the drudgery and monotony of their jobs, which consist mainly of serving or catering to the needs of others. In the romance novels, for a change, women migrant readers can imagine themselves at the center of colorful adventures where heroines from the lower class can meet and get married to wealthy, handsome executives or scions of elite landed families.

In these pocketbooks which can be read during breaks from work, at night or during weekends which are the only opportunities for them to relax and restore their weary spirits, the women migrants can imagine a social order that is diametrically opposed to the inequitable, unjust, and oppressive real world where they are exposed to so much danger and discrimination. Thus, reading Tagalog romance novels while providing entertainment and relaxation, gives the readers hope and assurance that somehow, the same romantic adventure which the heroines experience could also happen to them. These, they need to survive and cope with their own convoluted problems in their real, daily, monotonous lives devoted to repetitive chores consisting of household tasks, caring for and nurturing others, who are not even their own kin or *kababayan*.

The predictable happy endings of highly convoluted stories of lovers' problems are uplifting to women migrants, with their simplistic, even strained resolution of conflicts or differences that crop up before the lovers can be reconciled in the end —whether these are class differences, or caused by intrigues, meddling relatives, a third party, or even misunderstanding of one another. Somehow, the formulaic or repetitive romances, which ultimately get resolved in happy endings provide the women readers assurance that the conflicts or problems which they have to contend with, such as discrimination in the workplace, oppression, violence and maltreatment, class divisions, male and female relationships, can somehow still be resolved even in the world of the imagination, and even temporarily, and that they can still make sense of their lives when given a sense of order and harmony.

Aside from being entertained by these Tagalog romance novels, women migrants also appreciate the values and lessons that are conveyed by them, especially those that give them more understanding of themselves and of others, tips on male-female relationships, and the golden rule.

Ensuring reader identification with the heroines of the romance novels is facilitated by the choice of heroines who are usually from the middle or lower class, the use of familiar modern settings like Internet cafés, well-known resorts, allusions to modern landmarks or places to give the Tagalog romance novels a deceptively modern veneer, colloquial Taglish spiced with expressions like “damn it” or “love ‘em or leave ‘em.”

Queen Lee-Chua (2007), in her article entitled “Do Pinoys Read at All?,” cited the findings of the 2007 National Book Development Board

(NBDB) Readership Survey on what Filipinos read. Survey results show that 67 percent of respondents across the country read the Bible the most, followed by romance or love novels (33%), cookbooks (28%), comic books (26%), and religious or inspirational works (20%).

This suggests that the women migrant readers place a lot of value on the capacity of the romance novels, like the Bible, to provide them hope and assurance for a better a life, a more equitable and just social order. They can be, like the Bible, a popular “opiate of the people” which propagates acceptance and resignation to earthly suffering or assures their readers of rewards that await them in the afterlife.

A study of what broadsheets could learn from reading Tagalog romance novels (Encanto 2007) attributes the appeal of Tagalog romance novels to their content, clear-cut, predictable happy endings, racy style and use of colloquial Taglish which make them very different from the broadsheets’ preoccupation with “bad news,” vague resolutions of issues or problems tackled in newspapers that are overtaken by other events and end in ambivalent ways or just not ever resolved. According to this study, the decline of readership of newspapers since 2003 vis a vis the unabated popularity of romance novels could suggest that Filipino readers prefer to read print materials that are not preoccupied with negative news but that tackle more pleasant topics and are uplifting.

### **Feminist Approaches to Romance Reading**

Traditional critical approaches to the study of romance novels claim that readers are masochists who read mass-produced popular fiction which emphasize female subservience to a patriarchal social order. Critics of romances have a dismissive attitude toward romances which condemn them as cheap, mass-produced escapist entertainment forms, bereft of any liberative or redemptive potential and say that the readers are passive. Ann Snitow, for example, claims that romances feed “certain regressive elements in female experience” while Rosalind Coward contends that women’s romantic fiction “restores the childhood world of sexual relations and suppresses criticism of the inadequacy of men, the suffocation of the family, or the damage inflicted by patriarchal power” (Franco in Modleski 1986, 125).

Feminist critical theories, particularly those that apply psychoanalytical and sociological approaches to the romance, have yielded deeper and more exciting interpretations of romance novels, their social and psychological functions. These approaches emphasize the reading process itself and how readers are not a passive homogeneous group but actually participate in generating the meanings, including contradictory meanings of these romance novels, and how they gratify certain deep-seated emotional and psychological

needs of women that the patriarchal or male-dominated social order represses or will not allow to be articulated.

For example, the reading habits of women migrant readers, like their preference to borrow rather than buy romance novels can be attributed to their lack of funds and the importance they give to the endorsement of certain love stories by their close friends and relatives. But it could also show their belief that romance reading is a fleeting and temporary imaginative process, after which the readers have to return to and confront the real world with all its complications and conflicts that cannot ever be resolved.

Significantly, the lack of time which was the major reason for discontinuing their reading romance novels cited by the 27 respondents who said they used to read Tagalog romance novels can be interpreted to be an indicator of how the demands of household chores as well as of the responsibility to care for and nurture the members of the family, prevent women from indulging in a pleasurable activity which requires considerable attentiveness and personal time.

Being mostly domestic helpers and caregivers whose workday is devoted to caring and attending to the needs of others, the women migrant workers hardly have any time to attend to their own physical, emotional and psychological needs, which romance reading could gratify. In her seminal study *Reading the Romance* (1984), Janet Radway made an ethnographic study of a community of female romance readers in an imagined place called Smithton and came to the conclusion that women readers turned to romances “to escape from family and everyday routines and to enter a private world.” These women, most of whose time was spent responding to the needs of their families, engaged in reading romances because it was an assertion of their own desire to claim some private time for themselves, and therefore was an empowering activity which fulfills their personal deep-seated and often unarticulated emotional and psychological needs in a way that the institutions of marriage and the family do not. According to Tania Modleski, “these romance readers seemed to share the Freudian view that the subject seeks to avoid painful tensions and if a direct satisfaction of desire is not possible then a more circuitous route to satisfaction will be taken” (Franco in Modleski 1986, 125).

Thus, far from being a masochistic or escapist activity, romance reading is a necessary and compulsive activity because of its Utopian elements which enable it to project an alternative social order that is a more just, harmonious and equitable one than the real world which is filled with conflicts, that these romance readers live in. It is precisely for this reason that women readers get addicted to romances, despite the fact that these are formulaic and repetitive, for at the same time that they allow women to temporarily escape from their mundane, repetitive, daily lives, they also provide, as Modleski says, “a

considerable amount of reading pleasure—a pleasure which she, in common with other feminist critics, recognizes as utopian—that is, promising to fulfill desires that come from society itself” (Franco in Modleski 1986, 126).

Applying this to the women migrant readers leads to the observation that Filipino women migrant readers, whose work in foreign countries consists mainly of responding to the constant demands for care and nurturing of others who are not even their families or *kababayans*, have been conditioned to be so self-sacrificing and to subordinate their own personal needs and desires to those of their foreign employers or their families, that they are not as assertive in carving out some private time for themselves so that they can engage in the individualistic act of romance reading as Western women.

All their lives, women migrant readers have been taught to place their families’ interests above themselves and to sacrifice for the sake of the needs of their elderly parents, siblings, husbands, and children. For this reason, they leave their homeland to earn better salaries and thus ensure the survival of their families or even to attain a higher standard of living for them. The remittances of migrant women are religiously sent home to build comfortable houses for their own families or for their parents and siblings, or to purchase refrigerators, TVs, DVD players, washing machines, and other modern appliances which are considered external signs of affluence or a measure of the success of these migrant women – the “heroines” of the “underground economy.”

In the countries they have migrated to, they bring these same qualities of dedicated service, subservience, and self-effacement, which, with their acquired skills for their respective tasks as domestic helpers, caregivers, nurses, or maintenance workers, make them greatly in demand and competitive.

Modleski (1982) has also offered a feminist perspective to romances by explaining the appeal of romance novels in terms of their capacity to help women “manage” their deep-seated anger toward the inequities and injustices that they experience in the patriarchal or male-dominated social order. These formulaic, commercially produced romance novels, in a sense, have an important social and psychological function because reading them expresses or articulates women readers’ pent up anger and frustration over the contradictions and conflicts in the real world. Reading them thus dissipates or dispels the pent-up emotions that cannot be openly expressed and that might manifest themselves in more destructive way, through the imaginative “happy endings” or reconciliations of all the tensions or conflicts which couples in love have to undergo.

Still another interpretation which Modleski (1982) also posited is the presence of a “revenge motif” in these mass-produced commercial romances. According to her, women readers who are always subjugated in a male-dominated society, derive so much pleasure from being heroines who can cause their male lovers to “grovel, grovel, grovel” while they, for a change, are able to

wield tremendous power over them, even temporarily, for in the end, they also ultimately surrender to them. This could be true as one of the 60 respondents mentioned “paghihiganti” (revenge) as a reason for finding the love stories in Tagalog romance novels very appealing.

Still another psychoanalytical approach to romance novels is Alison Light’s contention (in *Encanto* 1996) “that the popularity of romances may be attributed to their capacity to respond to women’s emotional and psychological needs.” According to her, the fact that women read romances compulsively indicates women’s dissatisfaction with their heterosexual relations in life. The appeal of romances lies in their capacity to provide simplistic resolutions to all these problems while at the same time providing the women pleasure in reading them:

Romance offers us relations impossibly harmonized; it gives unequal heterosexuality as a dream of equality and gives women uncomplicated access to a subjectivity which is unified and coherent and still operating within the field of pleasure.” (*Encanto* 1996, 39)

This initial attempt to study the demographic profile of the women migrants who are readers of Tagalog romance novels as well as to account for the continued appeal of these paperback romances points to the need for more research into the capacity of these mass-produced commercial romances to address the deep-seated emotional and psychological needs of women migrants which Tagalog romances are able to gratify as well as into the oppressive conditions and problems involving male-female relationships, discrimination in so many forms, oppression and violence against women that these Tagalog romance novels are actually an indictment of and which by their very persistence and proliferation, they expose.

## TABLES

## Readership of Tagalog Novels Survey

Table 1: Age of Respondents

Age Range	N	Percentage
Below 20 years old	1	1.7
21-30 years old	2	3.3
31-40 years old	9	15.0
41-50 years old	22	36.7
51-60 years old	16	26.7
Above 60 years old	6	10.0
No Answer	4	6.7
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>100</b>

Youngest = 16

Oldest = 66

Table 2: Gender of Respondents

Gender	N	Percentage
Male	2	3.3
Female	58	96.7
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 3: Civil Status of Respondents

Civil Status	N	Percentage
Single	8	13.3
Married	40	66.7
Separated	4	6.7
Widow/Widower	7	11.7
No Answer	1	1.7
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 4: Location of Respondents

Location	N	Percentage
Caloocan City	5	8.3
Navotas City	1	1.7
Malabon City	1	1.7
Quezon City	9	15.0
Manila	1	1.7
Nueva Ecija	1	1.7
La Union	40	66.7
No Answer	2	3.3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 5: Highest Educational Attainment of Respondents

Response	N	Percentage
No Formal Education	0	0.0
Some elementary	0	0.0
Elementary	0	0.0
Some High School	2	3.3
High School	20	33.3
Vocational	11	18.3
Some College	7	11.7
College	15	25.0
Post-Graduate	0	0.0
No Answer	5	8.3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 6: Whether or Not Respondents were Working

Response	N	Percentage
Working	24	40.0
Not Working	29	48.3
No Answer	7	11.7
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>100.0</b>



Table 7: Type of Work of Respondents

Response	N	Percentage
Bannuar Volunteer	3	12.5
Barangay Council Member	1	4.2
Barangay Health Worker	1	4.2
Beautician	1	4.2
Domestic Helper	1	4.2
Farmer	3	12.5
Insurance Underwriter	1	4.2
Livelihood	1	4.2
Modiste	1	4.2
Saleslady	1	4.2
Self-Employed	6	25.0
Teacher	1	4.2
Vendor	3	12.5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 8: Monthly Household Income of Respondents

Income Range	N	Percentage
Below P5,000	12	20.0
P5,001 to P10,000	11	18.3
P10,001 to P15,000	0	0.0
P15,001 to P20,000	2	3.3
Above P20,000	0	0.0
None/No Answer	35	58.3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Lowest = P 3,000/month

Highest = P 20,000/month

Table 9: Whether or Not Respondents Read Tagalog Romance Novels

Response	N	Percentage
Hindi kailanman (Not ever)	18	30.0
Dati, pero ngayon hindi na (Before yes, but now no more)	27	45.0
Nagbabasa pa rin (Yes, until now)	15	25.0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>100.0</b>

For those who answered “Hindi Kailanman” in Q. 9

Table 10: Reasons for Not Reading Tagalog Romance Novels\*

Response	N	Percentage
Not interested/Not a habit	9	40.9
No time/Busy	7	31.8
Preference for English pocketbooks	2	9.1
Preference for reading the Bible instead	1	4.5
Poor eyesight	1	4.5
Reading makes my head and eyes ache	1	4.5
No answer	1	4.5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>100</b>

\*multiple responses

For those who answered “Dati, Pero Ngayon Hindi Na” in Q. 9

Table 11: Last Time that Respondents Read a Pocketbook (N=27)

Response	N	Percentage
Less than a year ago	1	3.7
1-5 years ago	11	40.7
6-10 years ago	4	14.8
More than 10 years ago	6	22.2
No Answer/Unspecified	5	18.5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Longest = 30 years

Latest = Last year

Table 12: Reasons for Stopping\*

Response	N	Percentage
No time/Busy	12	40.0
Poor eyesight	7	23.3
No money/Not in budget	3	10.0
Had other interests (e.g., being a Bannuar Volunteer, cross-stitching)	2	6.7
Would rather read the Bible	1	3.3
Expensive	1	3.3
No answer	4	13.3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100.0</b>

\* Multiple response

Table 13: Whether or Not Respondents Would Again Read Tagalog Romance Novels (N=27)

Response	N	Percentage
Yes	16	59.3
No	8	29.6
No Answer	3	11.1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 14: Reasons for Reading Tagalog Romance Novels Again\*

Response	N	Percentage
If I have free time	8	47.1
If an interesting one is published	2	11.8
Because it is entertaining/relaxing	3	17.6
For additional knowledge	3	17.6
If the pocketbooks are free	1	5.9
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>100.0</b>

\* Multiple response

Table 15: Reasons for Not Reading Tagalog Romance Novels Again (N=8)

Response	N	Percentage
Less than a year	3	20.0
1-5 years	4	26.7
6-10 years	0	0.0
More than 10 years	4	26.7
Unspecified/No answer	4	26.7
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>100.0</b>

For those who answered “Nagbabasa Pa Rin” in Q. 9

Table 16: Length of Readership (N=15)

Response	N	Percentage
Less than a year	3	20.0
1-5 years	4	26.7
6-10 years	0	0.0
More than 10 years	4	26.7
Unspecified/No answer	4	26.7
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Longest = 20 years  
 Shortest = 1 month

Table 17: Number of Tagalog Romance Novels in a Month (N=15)

Response	N	Percentage
1-5	4	26.7
6-10	3	20.0
More than 10	2	13.3
Unspecified/No answer	6	40.0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Least = 1  
 Most = more than 10 (although one answered 150, but maybe she thought the question was how many she has read from the start)

Table 18: Whether or Not the Respondents Have a Favorite Series  
(N=15)

Response	N	Percentage
Yes	9	60.0
No	6	40.0
No answer	0	100.0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>60.0</b>

Favorite series:

GP Nepomuceno Ent. = 2  
 Sweetheart Love Turns Romance Series = 1  
 Sweetheart Romance Novel = 1  
 Twin Sweetheart Love Romance = 1  
 Romance/Love = 3  
 Anger/Vengeance = 2  
 Marital Separation = 1  
 Self-dedication=1

Why:

- Makabulhan
- Nakaka-in-love ang nilalaman nito
- Naglalaman ito ng hango sa tunay na buhay at kapupulutan ng aral
- Nakakaantig ng damdamin
- Dedikasyon sa sariling personal na buhay
- Paghihiganti
- Masaya
- Interesting
- Nakakakiling, excited sa ending

Table 19: Whether or Not the Respondents Have a Favorite Writer  
(N=15)

Response	N	Percentage
Yes	8	53.3
No	6	40.0
No answer	1	6.7
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Favorite writers (multiple responses):

Gilda Olvidado – 5  
 Nerissa Cabral – 2  
 Pablo C. Gomez - 1  
 Helen Merez – 1  
 Unspecified - 1

Why:

- Magaling/mahusay siya – 3
- Mahusay ang kanyang pagdedetalye – 1
- Nakakakilig at suspense – 1
- May kapupulutang aral - 1

Table 20: Whether or Not the Respondents Have a Favorite Story  
(N=15)

Response	N	Percentage
Yes	9	60.0
No	3	20.0
No answer	3	20.0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Favorite stories (multiple responses):

Love Story – 2  
 Mark/Hello Mark – 2  
 Ang Pagbabalik ni Ursula – 2  
 Villa Cristina – 1  
 The Sisters – 1  
 Babae sa Gulod – 1  
 My Sweet Teacher - 1  
 Tungkol sa pag-aasawa at pagpapayaman – 1  
 Unspecified - 1

Why:

- Nakakabaliw/nakakakilig – 1
- Nahahango sa tunay na buhay – 1
- Nakakaaliw – 1
- May climax – 1
- Kapupuluran ng aral – 1
- More exciting - 1

Table 21: Mode of Acquisition\*

Response	N	Percentage
Bought	6	28.6
Rented	6	28.6
Borrowed	8	38.1
No Answer	1	4.8
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>100.0</b>

\* Multiple response

Table 22: Monthly Expenses for Tagalog Romance Novels (N=15)

Response	N	Percentage
Less than P100	2	13.3
P101 to P150	4	26.7
P151 to P200	2	13.3
More than P200	2	13.3
No Answer/Unspecified	5	33.3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Lowest = P 40

Highest = P 240

Table 23: Reasons for Reading Tagalog Romance Novels

Response	N
Because they are entertaining	10
For relaxation	6
Because there is nothing else to do	3
So my friends and I will have something to talk about	2
To get tips on boy-girl relationships	5
Because there are a lot of values from the stories	10
To have other diversions from work/school	3
Because I can relate with the stories/plots	5
Because I can relate with the characters	3
Because the stories are exciting/titillating	6
Because it helps me understand myself and others	7
Because reading them has become a habit	5
So I could have something to laugh about	1
Other reasons: <i>Nakakahasa ng isip</i> <i>Nakakapagpaantig ng damdamin ng magsing-irog</i>	2
No Answer	2

Only Twelve Respondents Answered these Questions.

Table 24: Country Where Respondents are Working or Worked

Response	N	Percentage
Japan	2	16.7
Singapore	1	8.3
Middle East (e.g., Dubai, Sultanate of Oman, Qatar, Jeddah, Riyadh)	6	50.0
Hong Kong	1	8.3
No Answer	2	16.7
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 25: Year Started Working Abroad

Response	N	Percentage
1980s (e.g., 1989)	1	8.3
1990s (e.g., 1991, 1993, 1996)	3	25.0
2000s (e.g., 2002, 2006, 2007, 2008)	6	50.0
No Answer	2	16.7
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 26: Occupation Abroad

Response	N	Percentage
Choreographer/Singer/Entertainer	2	16.7
All-around household help/ Domestic Helper	5	41.7
Chief Cook/Cook	2	16.7
No Answer	3	25.0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>100.0</b>



Table 27: Monthly Income\*

Response	N	Percentage
Saudi Riyal 750 (P12,000)	1	8.3
US Dollar 160 (P7,000)	1	8.3
Japanese Yen 1,000	1	8.3
Qatar Riyals 700	1	8.3
No Answer/Unspecified	8	66.7
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>100.0</b>

\* The Respondents were the ones who gave the peso equivalents of their stated monthly incomes.

References

- Arao, D.A. "Political and Cultural Economy of Filipino Migration." A Powerpoint presentation at a study session of the Amado V. Hernandez Resource Center (AVHRC) held at the Balay Kalinaw, University of the Philippines (UP) Diliman, Quezon City, 01 July 2008.
- Chua, Q.L. "Do Pinoys read at all?" *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. 25 November 2007.
- Encanto, G.R. "The development of the Filipino romance novel as written by women (1922-1992)." Unpublished dissertation, University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication, 1996.
- Encanto, G.R. "Romancing newspaper readers." In *Philippine Journalism Review* 1 (June 2007). Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility.
- Franco, J. "The incorporation of women: A comparison of North American and Mexican popular narrative." In Modleski, T. (Ed.). *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986.
- Kanlungan Center Foundation, Inc. "Fast Facts on Filipino Labor Migration." Kanlungan Center Foundation, Inc. Center for Migrant Workers, 2001.
- Kanlungan Center Foundation, Inc. "Fast Facts on Filipino Labor Migration." Kanlungan Center Foundation, Inc. Center for Migrant Workers, 2007.
- Modleski, T. *Loving with a vengeance: Mass-produced fantasies for women*. New York: Routledge, 1982.
- Modleski, T. (Ed.). *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986.
- Radway, J. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. USA: University of North Carolina Press, 1984.