

WOMEN AS ARTICULATIONS OF NATION-SPACE  
AND AN AGENCY OF INSULARITY  
An Analysis of Selected Films by Jeffrey Jeturian

**Katrina Ross A. Tan**

**Abstract**

This essay focuses on three of Jeffrey Jeturian's films: *Pila Balde* (1999), *Tuhog* (2001), and *Kubrador* (2006). It follows Roland Tolentino's analysis of the Brocka films but focuses on the trope of the female characters, as it suggests discussing the films as articulations of the nation-space in which women characters are the primary trope to map the discourse on nation; the analysis emphasizes the intersection of gender and nation.

Globalization has increasingly permeated and affected every facet of our life — be it economic, political, or cultural. Specifically, the rise of this economic order continuously affects how we construct notions of our nation and identities, rendering them constantly in flux. Film, as a cultural production and as a means by which to imagine the nation, has not been spared by the effects of globalization. Discussions have been initiated on film's relationship with globalization, national discourses, and national cinemas. Certainly, recent economic changes brought about by globalization affect how filmmakers create stories, how they produce them, and how audiences consume them.

Rolando Tolentino introduces the term 'transnationalism,' or the "cultural production involved in multinational capitalism" in his dissertation on the body of work of Lino Brocka (1996). He used Brocka's films to map out how the nation and its people were "(en)force[d]" by the Marcos regime into today's transnationalism. He added that in turn this introduction to

transnationalism affected how we understand and experience our lived and social realities (Tolentino 1996).

Aside from being a product of transnationalism itself, films can also become “cultural translations” in which to contest the construction of the nation and our identities. It then becomes our way (or the filmmakers’ way) to “construct newer modes of experiencing the everyday and the social” (Tolentino 1996). This illustrates the active role that the film medium can assume in the discourse of nation, transnationalism, and globalization.

One of the tropes in which the nation is articulated is the female character. This is not an uncommon trope in nationalist discourses, as what Tolentino suggested when he mentioned the Tagalog *sarsuelas* in 1903-1905 that used the *Inang Bayan* character, or “the female cultural representation that inspires people to nationalist thought and popular struggle” (Tolentino 1996).

Outside art forms, however, real life instances also point to illustrations of women figuring as representation of the nation and its ideals. At the tail-end of Martial Law in the country, Corazon Aquino was catapulted into fame when her husband was shot dead even before he stepped on Philippine soil upon his return from self-exile. Instantly, she became the symbol of hope to millions of Filipinos who stormed EDSA for what is now known as the People Power Revolution. Lacking political experience, she bravely challenged Marcos as the opposition presidential candidate during the 1986 snap election brought about by international pressure particularly by the United States. Expectedly, Marcos employed the three G’s—guns, goons, and gold—to win the election, and indeed he did win according to him. It seemed the population in general did not believe this, however, because they were convinced that Cory won. One by one, people gathered at EDSA to protest the rigged election results. Finally, after four days of peaceful protest and after top officials of the military defected, Marcos and his family flew to Hawai’i aboard a US helicopter and Cory was sworn in as the first woman president of the Philippines.

At that time, Cory was seen to embody the people’s hope for change after 14 years of dictatorship. It did not matter that she was politically inexperienced; what mattered was what she symbolized: a new beginning for the country, or more particularly, a return to democracy.

On August 5, 2009, her symbolic power once again shone when her funeral on Aug. 5 was attended by tens of thousands of Filipinos from all over the country. Many more who could not attend the funeral procession in Manila followed its live coverage on television and conducted tributes in their respective provinces and cities outside Metro Manila. Local and international observers were overwhelmed by such reactions. Filipinos suddenly remembered the “icon of democracy” and what she stood for during Martial Law, resulting to an awareness of what was going on in the country at present: massive corruption, ineffective leaders, and a desperately poor and hungry nation.

The second woman president of the country, however, did not and does not enjoy the same respect and admiration of the people. In no way do people think that Gloria Macapagal Arroyo represents the ideals of the nation. In fact, commentators suggested that she has more similarities with the late dictator than with the first woman president. Some would even argue that her presidency was worse than Marcos’.

What this reveals is that not all women, be it in art forms or real life, can represent or embody the nation. It is the people who designate such honor, they who give meaning to what Cory symbolizes; and the critics and scholars who read female characters in cultural texts, characters who embody the ideals of the nation.

Aside from political figures, however, *Inang Bayan* (Mother Land) can be represented by supernatural beings. One religious sect believes that their goddess is Inang Bayan. Nenita Pambid-Domingo (2006), in her essay “Dios Ina (God the Mother) and Philippine Nationalism,” stated that the Dios Ina of the millenarians, members of a religious sect, is actually the *Inang Pilipinas* or *Inang Bayan*. In her study, she traces the image of *Inang Bayan* throughout history, which was that of a helpless, suffering, pitiful mother, but she asserts that men manufactured this image: “the image of the nation as *Inang Bayan* was engineered by the men, who took advantage of the importance of the woman and specifically the mother as a Filipino cultural symbol that would rally the nation to overthrow the Spanish government” (Domingo 2006). The female figure back then was used to incite revolution against the colonizers. The nation was compared to a helpless woman who needed salvation. This reveals the gendered aspect of a national discourse.

However, Pambid-Domingo concluded that the image of *Inang*

*Bayan* that proliferated in the cultural texts throughout different periods of history—“a beautiful woman; virginal maiden; oppressed mother; Virgin Mary; pure, merciful, caring, self-sacrificing weeping Inang Bayan” for the revolutionaries and the Dios Ina or God the Mother for the millenarians—provided them with “very effective and affective metaphors for dissent and revolution” (2006). In this case, the woman as metaphor for the nation was used as an instrument to transform the nation, from an oppressed colony to a free and independent nation.

Going back to female characters in art forms, Tolentino said that films also use this character, such as in the social drama films of Lino Brocka: *Bayan Ko: Kapit sa Patalim*, and *Orapronobis* (Domingo 2006). The female character, then, is one way to map the nation. For Tolentino:

The female figure is posited as the personification of the nationalist discourse, simultaneously representing the condition of oppression and confirming the ideal of racial purity. Family-melodrama and social drama films are read as national allegory through the engendering of women as index of the relentless struggle toward an ideal nation (Tolentino 2001).

As mentioned, the female figure is one trope where the nation is articulated, constructed, and negotiated. That women are an “index of relentless struggle toward an ideal nation” suggests that women are agencies of how we construct our own idea[s] about the nation. As such, women, through the female characters in films, are agencies of our sense-making operations under the pervasive presence of transnationalism and globalization. Tolentino referred to this as insularity and explained the concept as such:

Insularity represents the interior’s sense-making operations to an outside intrusion and enforcement. Insularity refers not only on how the outside “insulates” the interior for its own imperial design, but, even more, how the interior resituates its own position for survival and emancipatory purposes (Tolentino 1996).

The ‘interior’ that Tolentino refers to is the people of the nation itself, while the ‘outside’ refers to, in general, the West or the First World with its imperialist ends. Women, as agents of insularity, are thus the embodiment of a national discourse that is aimed at “survival and emancipatory purposes” of the collective.

As agencies of insularity, women are also articulations of the nation-space. Tolentino (1996) also called this the insular plane which “locates and places the sense-making processes of those historically positioned in the margins.” The focus will be on the “tactics of everyday survival” or insularity; hence, by identifying the insularity of the women characters, the articulation of the nation-space is also mapped out.

### **‘Woman’ and Nation**

How did the female character get the part? What is with the female character that makes it possible to personify the nationalist discourse? Can this not be inscribed in the male figure? The essays referred to in the following provide explanations on how women came to represent the nation and embody its ideals.

In her essay “Representing Ourselves: Films and Videos by Asian American/Canadian Women,” Marina Heung (1995) cites Elspeth Robyn on how it is possible for the female’s body to inscribe discourses: “societal discourses come to be written almost exclusively on female bodies or those considered ‘other.’” In other words, the ‘otherness’ of the female, and for that matter of ‘woman,’ in its psychoanalytic terms, makes it possible to posit, not only nationalist discourse as what Tolentino said, but also racial, sexual, and class discourses.

In fact, Heung’s study is one of those that interrogate the meanings embodied by female representation in media. She, together with other Asian women, is studying Asian women representation in Western media to reveal racist and sexist ideologies that form a part of their construction of national (regional) identity. A survey of the representation of Asian women in Western mass media raises the point that women bodies are “shot through with meaning, riddled with definitions and qualities not of our own choosing” (Heung 1995). For Heung (1995), “...ideologies about gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality place [women’s] bodies under the burden of erasure while also mark them as receptacles of projected cultural meanings.”

In this study, however, the women characters are not taken as an Other or an object to articulate a discourse on nation because they are constructed as subjects in the films. While it is not their own choosing to embody such discourses, the analysis reveals that since they are constructed as subjects in the films, the meanings they embody may be utilized for a more

progressive end. In other words, the women in the three films in this study may be used for transformative purposes just like the Inang Bayan figure during the Spanish colonization. Women can thus embody discourses — political, racial, ethnic, sexual— not because they are an Other but precisely because they are Subjects.

However, most discourses embodied by women are not like this. As mentioned in the study of Cowie, women are taken as an Other in order to become ‘receptacles’ of meanings, but this becomes problematic since the woman’s body is presupposed as a given, as already an ‘unproblematic category’ in the signification process without interrogating how it is defined that way.

Elizabeth Cowie (2000), in her essay “Woman as Sign” questions this presupposition in relation to women’s representation in films. She says that the problem with feminist analysis of films (mostly on the representation and positioning of women in films) is its assumption that ‘woman’ is “an unproblematic category constituted through the definitions already produced in the society.” She analyzes Levi Strauss’ study on kinship to point out that there are already reserved meanings or ‘values’ for the category of woman; for example, they are regarded as valuables to be exchanged in a community in Levi-Strauss’ study. Her study reveals, however, that it is only women that are produced as sign in the exchange, and that “the position of women as *sign* in exchange has no relation to *why* women are exchanged [author’s emphasis]” (Cowie 2000). She concludes that this rests on the assumption that there must be a pre-given notion on sexual division for this to be possible. Sexual division here pertains to the different values assigned to men and women in the community that Strauss studied, which are solely based on sexual difference. According to Cowie, there is nothing inherent in the woman to be the valuable to be exchanged; it is pre-determined socially.

...sexual division must already exist in order for women to be available for men to exchange in an organized way, and for women to be ‘valued’ as an object of exchange. What remains problematic therefore is that the exchange of women, on which culture is based, is itself predicated on a pre-given *sexual division* which must already be social [author’s emphasis] (Cowie 2000).

In the present study, women characters are taken as signs with arbitrary meanings; however, they are not taken as an ‘unproblematic

category' already constituted by societal definitions since the analysis actually focuses on how their characters are constructed by the social environment in the films. Whatever political or cultural meanings projected in the women characters, as well as how they came to embody such meanings, in the study is examined. The study, moreover, asserts that there is a more important reason that women characters can become 'receptacles' of meanings that can be used to a more progressive end other than the pre-given sexual difference Cowie mentioned in the analysis of Levi-Strauss' study.

On another level, the woman is taken to represent the nation in films from the 'Third World' because of its colonial experience, while men represent 'First World.' Man conquering the woman is an allegory of the colonial experience of the First World colonizing the Third World, whether in the traditional sense of colonialism or neo-colonialism. A historical survey not only on film but also on theater, literature, and other visual arts will reveal that such assertion is true. In the analysis of the three films, it is asserted that women characters show an experience of a 'Third World' country through their narratives.

### **Cinema and Nation**

When Benedict Anderson said that a nation is an 'imagined community,' Partha Chatterjee, an Indian theorist, asked, "whose imagined community?" as a critique to the former's claim (Cowie 2000). This is because 'nation' is a Western conception brought about by the industrial revolution. It signalled the dawn of modernity. There is a question, therefore, on how Third World nations are "subjectivized" using this Western conception of the nation (Cowie 2000).

Nevertheless, Tolentino (1996) concedes that there is a general agreement on Anderson's theory and in contemporary cultural theory that,

the concept of nation is considered one of the most important signifying forces. A nation in the modern world functions as a unit of culture as well as economics and politics. It is formulated through an integrating, unifying, centripetal referential point of collective social experiences often called "history." The people of a nation who share the same historical experience form an "us" differentiated from other peoples (Min, Joo & Hun 2003).

These ‘collective social experiences’ are articulated in cultural forms such as films. According to Tolentino (1996), film is the medium or technology by which we can imagine the nation, taking over the print media as what Anderson originally suggested. He also said that the film’s content is premised on political consciousness which relates to the project of nationalism. But he further says that there is also a political unconsciousness involved in this project “because it is emotive and constituted on the individual level.” This means that in our everyday experiences, we may not know it but we are contributing to the construction of what our nation is.

In imagining the nation, therefore, film and the narratives inscribed in it are pertinent, for narratives inscribed in popular cultural form such as film, according to Eungjun, Jinsook, and Han in their book, *Korean Film: History, Resistance, and Democratic Imagination*, “represents our ideas about everyday life,” and this is important “because they provide crucial forms in which memories are made” (Min, Ju & Hun 2003). These memories are then shared by the people making it a collective imagining of the nation.

However, Andrew Higson (2002), in his essay “The Concept of National Cinema,” warns that cinema should not be taken to express an unproblematic national culture or identity, devoid of contradictions and differences. For him, cinema “privileges only a limited range of subject positioning,” which passes off as the official national discourse. Moreover, he discusses the relationship of national cinema and national identities. He provides another formulation of studying national cinema in his book, *Waving the Flag, Constructing a National Cinema in Britain*, asserting that national identities articulated in films are not fixed; so is the concept of national cinema.

Higson enumerates the different ways in which national cinema is “mobilized” in discourses. First is the definition of national cinema in economic terms. According to him, the focus of this kind of study is the film industry itself and not the film texts. Second, national cinema can also be discussed in terms of exhibition and audience consumption. In this case, the focus of the study would be on the films audiences watch—whether they prefer to watch Hollywood films over locally produced films. If such is the case, a discussion on the effect of Americanization is also in order. The third approach is selective: only certain films can be considered as part of the national cinema. In this formulation, mainstream cinema is taken as different from national cinema. The last one is defining national cinema in



terms of representation. Here, Higson suggests the use of genre analysis for a more “productive way of exploring national cinema from this perspective” (2002). In this fourth approach, it is assumed that the films produced by the nation reflect the nation itself, but Higson (2002) argues that “films will draw on identities and representations already in circulation—and often they will naturalize those identities. But films will also produce new representations of the nation.”

In addition to this, Higson also claims that films serve as “imaginary bonds” that hold people together by articulating their fears, anxieties, aspirations, etc. He says that it is the means by which people of the nation imagine it, following Benedict Anderson’s famous concept of the nation as an “imagined community.”

The fourth approach suggested by Higson is useful for the present study since all three films belong to the social realism genre, in which representation is based on the actual experiences of the people. It is the task then of the study to identify how these films reflect the nation and the representations (whether ‘new’ or not) inscribed in the films through the women characters. It must be noted, however, that such representations and identities identified in the films are not the only representation and identity of the nation. Filipino identities, just like other identities, are fluid.

With regard to the relationship between cinema and the nation, Valentina Vitali and Paul Willemen explained how films embody a national discourse:

...cinema can be thought of as pertaining to a national configuration because films, far from offering cinematic accounts of ‘the nation’ as seen by the coalition that sustains the forces of capital within any given nation, are clusters of historically specific cultural forms the semantic modulations of which are orchestrated and contended over by each of the forces at play in a given geographical territory (Vitali & Willemen 2006).

As ‘historically specific cultural forms,’ films are assumed to be grounded in the social realities from which they were produced and, at the same time, are assumed to reflect it in the final product. As such, it is important to include in the analysis a foregrounding of the historical contexts from which the films are produced. In relation to this, Vitali and Willemen (2006) mention that films “can be seen not to ‘reflect,’ but to ‘stage’ the historical

conditions that constitute ‘the national’ and, in the process, to ‘mediate’ the socio-economic dynamics that shape cinematic production....” In this sense, while “forces at play” pertaining to the state and the film industry, specifically the capitalist-producers, promote ideologies of the bourgeois class, this is not to say that there is no disjuncture in this discourse—films become the site of the struggle between the dominant and non-dominant ideologies in a given narrative.

### **Jeffrey Jeturian’s Films**

For this study, I chose three of Jeffrey Jeturian’s films: *Pila Balde* (1999), *Tuhog* (2001), and *Kubrador* (2006), all written by his long-time collaborator, Armando Lao. These social realist films were shown at international film festivals and received nominations and awards both from international and local award-giving bodies. Most recently, the Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino awarded *Tuhog* and *Kubrador* as part of the top ten films for the 2000 decade.

Selecting said films based on the above-mentioned descriptions is important in my attempt to discuss what images of the nation are consumed by both local and foreign audiences. Already articulations of the nation-space, the three films, however, were further elevated as national cultural texts to which the audience can ‘imagine’ the nation by the recognition given to them. They will also be discussed as a body of work of a rising auteur in Philippine cinema, and as such are assumed as having a commonality in terms of themes and treatment of characters. As social realist pieces, the films will be discussed as reflection of the national experience.

In this study, the analysis focuses on the women protagonists of the films, their characterization and social context. I analyze them in terms of their practices of insularity, which in turn determine how the nation-space is articulated through them. Specifically, the analysis takes off from the women protagonists’ characterization, which demonstrates their strategies in challenging and overcoming the difficulties in their social context.

This study hopes to usher in a perspective in analyzing women characters in films as central in the discussion of the interrelatedness of film, gender and nation. Moreover, it hopes to demonstrate how women characters are central in the exploration of subaltern identities in Philippine cinema, whether mainstream or independent, by looking into their roles

and representations. The women in the three films may portray the usual roles for women, such as mother, sexual object, etc., but relating these characterizations to the discourse on nation reveals the relationship between gender and politics, economics, and other cultural categories such as class, sexuality, race and ethnicity; all of which constitute the nation (Tolentino 1996). By analyzing these relationships, we can see that media's representations of women (those of films in particular) do not confine the discussion only with gender relations but that this has implications on the national economic and political discourses. Lastly, this study suggests the potential of the film medium to actively engage in the discursive formation about nation and identity formation, and to use the women characters as the trope in which to articulate its progressive discourse.

### **The Face of Urban Poverty**

#### ***Pila Balde (Fetch a Pail of Water, 1999)***

*This film won the Gold Award in the category of Independent Theatrical Feature Film (Mature) in the WorldFest Houston International Film Festival (2000) and a nomination for Best Film in the Bogota Film Festival (2001).*

In an interview with Jeturian, he narrated that the story of this film came from a drama anthology on GMA 7 and that he took note of *Pila Balde's* story because it interested him. He said it was unlike the usual plot of melodrama dominating the local television programming. He saw a potential in the story because of the realistic portrayal that Joel Lamangan, then resident director of GMA 7, employed which made it powerful for him. "Before you know it, you get struck by what it has to say," said Jeturian.

When he got the chance to direct a film years later, he pursued this story. The script was written by Lao, who also wrote the script for his first film, *Sana Pag-ibig na* (1998). *Pila Balde* was filmed with a meager budget (\$50,000 or roughly P2 million in today's currency exchange, according to Jeturian in one of his interviews) and was considered a *pito-pito* film, or a film shot and edited in seven days, much the same as the current practice in independent filmmaking today. *Pito-pito* films, which literally means "seven-each," are films that have proliferated during the late 90s, which are made within seven days with a budget of 2.5 million pesos or less. Another feature of this kind of film is the lack of bankable stars. *Good Harvest* under Mother Lily Monteverde of *Regal Films* was well-known to produce this kind of film.

In Bliss Cua Lim's article (2000), she cites Lav Diaz, director of the *pito-pito* film *Hubad sa Ilalim ng Buwan*, who says that this system of filmmaking is "exploitative." He said that the crew is given salaries of P100-150 a day.

Released in 1999, *Pila Balde* is included in the "short-lived rebirth" of Philippine cinema after the 1997-98 Asian crisis, the country being the fourth largest film producer in the world at this time. Film production, however, dwindled in numbers in the following years (Lent, John. "Contemporary Film"). *Pila Balde* borrows elements from the neo-realist style of filmmaking. Neorealism emerged from the filmmaking styles of Italian directors during the postwar period. It is characterized by filmmaking techniques that defy Hollywood filmmaking—use of non-professional actors, natural setting, natural sound, natural lighting. Most importantly, the narrative structure of a neorealist film lacks the fantasy and spectacle that Hollywood films provide. Speaking about Italian neorealism, film theorist Andre Bazin (2004) says that its narrative structure "reflect[s] the duration of the event." He adds that it "knows only immanence. It is from appearance only the simple appearance of beings and of the world, that it knows how to deduce the ideas that it unearths."

*Pila Balde* tells the story of Gina (Ana Capri), her neighbors in the slums, and their middle-class neighbors in a compound of middle-class condominiums called Bliss. The lower class provides services to the middle class by fetching water, laundry and ironing services, and, at times, even sexual services. The film shows Gina's struggle to survive everyday living in the slums, but until the end of the film she is left to endure urban poverty.

The central female character in the film is Gina, a 20-something single breadwinner of her family who sells *maruya*—fried banana coated in flour—and helps in laundry and ironing jobs of her grandmother to support her family of four: her grandmother, younger brother Boyet, younger sister Maria and herself. Her father is in prison serving time for robbery. It was mentioned in the film that he joined an Akyat-Bahay Gang and was caught by authorities. Gina did not finish formal schooling, which explains why she has to take menial jobs as sources of income. She believed, however, in education's importance when she told Boyet that should she have money, she will pay for his college tuition.

As a sister to her siblings, she shows them tough love, the kind of love demanded by their condition, requiring a tough spirit. When Boyet, rumored

to have been selling sexual favors to gay men at the park, returns after leaving home, Gina smiles upon seeing him, feeling glad that her brother returned and that the rumors may not be true at all. Then, she suddenly hits her brother in the head and tells him to help her carry a pail of water. This is not to say, however, that Gina is incapable to show a more affectionate kind of love to her siblings. When Maria asks for *maruya* because she is hungry, Gina, mimicking Maria's voice, gives the latter money to buy something to eat from the store since the *maruya* has been sold out. It is a treat for Maria, something that is rarely experienced if one is living in such conditions.

In addition, even though her father is a convicted criminal and her grandmother is addicted to small-time gambling (betting on numbers game, buying raffle tickets, playing card games such as *tong-its*), Gina respects them because they are her family. The film does not show her judging what they have done or are doing, but it shows Gina disappointed over irresponsible acts. To illustrate, there is a scene in the film where Lola Flor plays the card game *tong-its* with neighbors and buys raffle tickets for herself and for her co-players. She uses the payment for their electricity sourced from their neighbor's illegal electricity connection. All Gina could do is ask her grandmother why she used the money for gambling; Lola Flor assured her that she would replace it by accepting laundry from one of her clients, but does not answer Gina's question, probably because she thinks that Gina already knows the answer.

From this instance, Gina's disappointment is understandable because she has worked hard to pay for their two months' worth of electricity. She is characterized as hardworking, which is another necessary trait in order to survive living in the slums every day. She is contrasted to other characters who also work hard, such as Noy and Shirley, but who use illegal means to earn money. Aside from fetching water for Bliss tenants, Noy sells marijuana to Jimboy, sells sexual favors to gay men and brings underaged women aspiring to become film actresses to Kuya Rick, a lesbian known to be a pimp. Shirley, on the other hand, works in a night club and always encourages Gina to work in the bar. The latter, however, does not react whenever Shirley brings it up. Dismissing such suggestion, Gina is shown to be defying the common practice of succumbing to desperate acts of selling one's body in order to put food on the table. This is also evident in a lovemaking scene with Noy when she says to him, "*huwag mo akong gagawing puta*" [Don't treat me like a prostitute].

Earlier in the film, however, she mentions to her friend that when

she was younger she met an Australian and went out with him because he promised to marry her and bring her to Australia. She almost sold herself to a stranger. But this did not happen. She says that the Australian brought her to a resort, had sex with her, and gave her money. The mention of an Australian looking for a Filipino bride in the film raises the issue on international mail-order brides, many of whom are Filipinas. Typing “Filipina” in an Internet search would result to a list of websites pertaining to mail-order bride services. Filipino women’s bodies have become a commodity to be purchased in the Internet-enabled transnational market. It is not surprising that the women vulnerable to being peddled as goods to foreigners are those that come from poor families. Just like Gina, they hope to overcome poverty and leave their poor country by marrying a rich foreigner who will bring them to Australia, Germany, or the United States.

In the film, Gina insists that she will not marry a slum-dweller like her and believes that the only way out of the slums is to marry a rich man, or someone who is better in life than her. She desires Jimboy, the son of Mrs. Alano, her middle-class client living at the topmost floor in Bliss. She sees in him a way out of poverty by marrying him. However, after Jimboy gets her pregnant, he avoids her and doubts that the child is his. She is furious when Jimboy asks who the father of her child is. She then goes to Shirley, the bar girl, and asks how to abort a baby. Later on in the film, Gina is confined in a hospital for miscarriage. Noy, who wants Gina from the start, avenges her by beating Jimboy. Gina and Noy end up together and share the only passionate sex shown in the film.

### **Slum Culture**

The film’s backdrop is an urban slum in Manggahan peopled with individuals who are drug users and dealers, thieves, prostitutes, call boys, and gamblers. Although they are uneducated and unemployed, they are not shown to be idle and lazy; they find all sorts of informal work to survive like running sari-sari stores, collecting bets, bringing appliances to pawnshops, and organizing a raffle draw for the community (where the winner gets a P1000 worth of grocery).

Moreover, since the illegal settlers do not abide by the law (they actually break some of it), they are considered unruly and a social problem. In the film, Mrs. Alano and Professor Ocampo, Bliss’ building administrator, discuss how they will act on the complaints against Manggahan residents who

are suspected of stealing the water pipes of Bliss, the reason the compound has no water. At the end of the conversation, Mrs. Alano delegates the task of solving their problem to Professor Ocampo since he is the building administrator. It is not shown in the film whether the solution that the professor thinks of is the fire that engulfs the slums one night, but it is possible to suggest so. The fire that razes Gina's community leaves houses in rubbles and the residents homeless, but after the fire, the slum dwellers are back, ready to rebuild their lives. Gina and other residents are shown lining up to fetch a pail of water, as if to say that life goes on whatever happens to them and that they cannot be shooed away that easily.

The characterization of slums as unruly, uncontrollable, and unproductive (in capitalist sense) is seen by the State as opposing law, order, authority, and a bourgeois lifestyle that it promotes. Seeing them as a "refuse" (Tolentino 1996), the State demolishes illegal settlers but seldom relocates them in nearby provinces. Those relocated, however, go back to the city to squat again because their source of living is there, and they cannot afford to pay for the daily transportation costs. By doing these, the State does not really respond to the root of the slum problem, which is lack of opportunities to attend school and have jobs available to poor slum dwellers. In a sense, the State itself is partly to blame for the existence of slums.

In another perspective, the slums and slum-dwellers are considered not only as a problem but also as a fearsome lot that should be avoided or guarded against or eliminated by force. According to Tolentino (1996), the State depicts them as a "menace," and as such they are policed and disciplined. In short, only two images of the slums exist, both of which are demonizing depictions: "the squatter is demonized in the hegemonic culture's popular constructions, depicting the figure as a refuse or a menace" (Tolentino 1996).

But in spite of these depictions, they play an important role in the lives of those who seek their service. In the film, they deliver water to the middle-class residents of Bliss and wash and iron their laundry, all for a small wage. For example, Mrs. Alano pays Noy sixty pesos for fetching four containers of water and bringing them up to her house at the topmost floor. She even questions Noy why she has to pay so much since she has learned that the residents in the lower floors pay less. Noy tells her that it is precisely the reason that she has to pay a higher price: she lives at the topmost floor of Bliss.

Mrs. Alano's character symbolizes the exploitation of cheap labor

provided by the slum dwellers. This is illustrated once again in a scene where she pays Lola Flor less than what is due for doing her laundry despite the latter's complaint. Another is when Mrs. Alano gives a donation to Gina when Lola Flor died. Mrs. Alano says that she has included in the donation her payment for their last service and that she has not deducted the amount of the shirt Lola Flor had damaged while ironing. In short, Mrs. Alano does not really give anything more than the payment she owes the two.

On the national level, Tolentino (1996) says that the "squatter's surplus bodies ensure a steady supply of cheap labor." Moreover, he writes that, although a menial job, scavenging or collecting trash, the common source of income of the poor, is very important in local and international businesses in the city; transnational and national corporations benefit from them, which explains why they are in silent agreement with the government's lack of developmental programs to actually improve their lives.

The slums are also depicted to be going against societal beliefs and values and middle-class lifestyle which the State promotes, although at times they also fall into the mistake of purchasing unnecessary goods to make them experience "high-class" living just like the middle-class, such as when Noy's alcoholic father won a bet in cockfighting and bought Noy a bottle of the expensive liquor Johnny Walker because it was the latter's birthday. With the slum dwellers' grinding poverty, they do not care what the larger society thinks about them. Their survival is their central concern, and this opens up a potential site for subversion. For Tolentino (1996) the squatter colonies "present an antithesis to the official discourse of transnational development," a development that is merely lip service to the poor. As such, they challenge the State's notion of development which does not actually provide genuine improvement of their welfare.

Given this social context, Gina is the embodiment of a people who rely on themselves in order to survive everyday living. Even though most of the poor are not employed in the formal sector, they have informal means of living, which show their self-reliance important to their survival. As observed by Tolentino (1996), "self-reliance is the emblematic feature of the squatter community." Like her neighbors, Gina endures the poor condition in the slums through hard work and determination. As such, it cannot be said that hopelessness is present in this hopeless situation because of the poor's determination to survive.



Although Gina relies mostly on herself to survive, her neighbors also offer help in times of need, such as when Noy pays for her family's electricity bill when it was cut off. This point is further highlighted in the scene between the two when Noy asks her, "*akala mo ba makakasandal ka kay Jimboy?*" [Did you think you can rely on Jimboy?] Gina, of course, already knows the answer. This suggests that the poor can only depend on one another because of their common experience. The sense of community is strong in the slums; and this is shown in their solidarity as in the last scene of the film when Gina was serving coffee and biscuits to her neighbors after the fire. Seeing this scene in another way, I find a very strong message here of calling unity among the poor that could probably translate into a progressive act of seeking genuine development programs from the government that would truly benefit them.

In the end, no matter how Gina tries to internalize the hegemonic idea of development—erasure of poverty and promotion of middle-class lifestyle—societal forces transpose her back to the slums. This impossibility of social movement is a clear indication of the failure of the kind of development that the State promotes.

***Tuhog (Larger Than Life, 2001)***

*This film was awarded in May 2011 by the Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino as one of the top ten films of the 2000-2009 decade. It was screened at the Singapore International Film Festival (2002), New York Asian American International Film Festival (2002), and Cinemanila Film Festival (2003).*

Watching this film gives one a feeling of how much the director must have enjoyed filming this parodic presentation of sex films and the movie industry in general in the country. In an interview, Jeturian says that Lao's script, which won a screenwriting contest sponsored by the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines during Martial Law, was originally written 13 years prior to the filming. He said, however, that the film is different from the original script. What Lao had written 13 years ago, according to Jeturian, was based on his imagined reality of the film industry. By the time *Tuhog* was ready to be filmed, both of them had an entirely different outlook on the industry.

Jeturian shares that this film is his take on the exploitation done by some filmmakers and the media in general for commercial ends. According to him, *Tuhog* was made when the censors were relatively "liberal" and the

filmmakers abused this by producing sex films that obviously were meant only to rake in money in the box office. As an example, he cites *Burlesk Queen Ngayon* (1999), a remake of Celso Ad Castillo's *Burlesk Queen* (1977), starring Ina Raymundo, one of the main characters in *Tuhog*. He feels sorry for Raymundo when in the last scene the credits rolled against her naked body in freeze frame. He considers *Tuhog* as one of his inspired works, perhaps because of his conscious effort to critique the industry of which he is a part.

A film within a film type of movie, *Tuhog* tells the story of numerous instances of incestuous rape of Perla (Irma Adlawan) and her daughter Floring (Ina Raymundo) by Amang, the former's father and the latter's grandfather. Eventually, however, the two seek justice and Amang is sentenced to life imprisonment. Their story, bannered in a tabloid newspaper with the headline, "*Lolo, tinurbo ang apo,*" [Grandfather rapes granddaughter] attracts the interest of a certain movie director. After agreeing to the request of his boss—the producer—to turn it into a "bold" or sexually explicit movie, the director films it after interviewing the two victims and those who know their story. The result, however, is a distorted version of the story, capitalizing on the sexual relations among the three characters, ensuring box office success. Sex sells, as the saying goes.

Although Jeturian's film focuses on the mother and daughter characters, it is with Perla (mother) that we identify an active agency. She is the one who reports to the police what happened to her daughter, which leads to Amang's life imprisonment. Although she remained silent throughout the period she was violated by her father, she breaks her silence when Amang rapes Floring, her 16-year old daughter. She does this despite societal expectations to do otherwise. As much as incest is taboo in society, filing a rape case against one's own father is seen as worse—betrayal at its worst since it causes her father's incarceration. In this instance, Perla's character (and Floring's as well) is subversive to the patriarchal society.

Perla is characterized as flawed, someone who commits mistakes, but when it comes to protecting her daughter, she does it right. An example of her mistake suggested by the movies is marrying an irresponsible man and getting pregnant. She goes to Manila to escape Amang, but she is forced to return to him in Bulacan because she got pregnant. After she gives birth, she is raped by Amang every time he gets drunk. Another mistake is agreeing to have their story filmed in exchange for a payment of P100,000 for the story rights. Initially, she declines the offer and tells the director and the writer

to look for other stories. When the filmmakers insist, she states the obvious reason for her refusal: “*Ayaw na nga naming maalala ang nangyari gagawan niyo pa ng pelikula.*” [We don’t wish to remember what happened, so why make a movie out of it.] By this time, Floring is already married to Oca; this suggests that several years had passed after the rape incidents and they have somehow already moved on. But, as mentioned, Perla eventually agrees because she needs the money to buy a second-hand truck for their business of selling *chicharon* (cracklings).

Unlike what is suggested in the film version of their rape story titled, *Hayok sa Laman*, Perla and Floring are not rivals over Amang. Instead, Perla is protective of her daughter. She never leaves her alone in their house, fearing that Amang would rape Floring. When they watch the movie in Manila, she is the only one who could calm Floring down after the latter walks out of the movie house during her rape scene in the film. Not even Oca, Floring’s husband, can comfort her. This shows the strong bond between the two rape victims who are doubly victimized by media exploitation.

Floring’s character, on the other hand, may not be where the insular agency is embodied because she is a passive character in the film. She is described by her teacher as having an “inferiority complex.” She does not have many friends; actually, in the film there is only one shown. Moreover, she is silent about what happened to her and opens up only to her mother. When she is interviewed for the filming of their story, she could not answer the writer’s questions about the rape, saying that she had already forgotten about it. However, with Jeturian’s use of non-linear editing, the rape incident is shown in flashbacks, and one can infer that it is as fresh in Floring’s mind as though it only happened yesterday and not years ago. It can be said then that her silence can either be her strength or her weakness; strength because the people could not judge her if they do not know what happened to her, and weakness because passivity entails suffering that would haunt her while she remains silent. Fortunately, she has her mother who is her source of strength and support.

### **Depoliticization of Gender-related Issues in Media**

According to the findings of the National Statistics Office on the exposure of Filipinos to mass media in 1994 (the latest study on this which desperately needs to be updated), a large number of the population are tuned in to radio (8 out of 10), television (6 out of 10), and are reading books

(4 out of 10) and newspapers (3 out of 10). Only 7.2 percent are exposed to movies, probably because of the rising cost of movie tickets when movie houses migrated to malls. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, the data may no longer be accurate 17 years after the study was conducted, but this is cited to illustrate the pervasiveness of media in our society; we are a country glued to mass media forms that most of us take what is seen in television and films or heard on radio as real.

This illusion of rendering the real into the reel is seen in Perla and Floring's story being filmed. The director and writer market their sex film as one based on a true story. Because it is a sex film, ordinary viewers are assumed to be interested only in the titillating sex scenes and are not critical about the truthfulness of what is presented. The problem, however, is that in the film version of Perla and Floring's story, the distortions in the story made by the director to sensationalize the movie to intrigue more moviegoers, depoliticized the issue of incestuous rape. What are left in the audience's mind, even to those who are with Perla and Floring when they watch the film in Manila, are precisely these distortions and not the fact that they were violated by Amang. Commercial interests reign over *Hayok's* director, which is characteristic of the actual media industry in the country as well as in global media systems.

Moreover, the media in Jeturian's reflexive film is seen to be a part of Althusser's Ideological Repressive Apparatuses (ISAs) because of the false ideologies they perpetuate. In *Hayok*, for example, even though Violeta (Perla's character in the movie) stabs Amang many times and dumps his body into a deep well, he remains alive. Adan, Hasmin's (Floring's character in the movie) lover, is the one who finally kills him with just one hit. He is indeed a knight in shining armor for both the damsels in distress. Such depiction suggests that women cannot defeat patriarchy without the help of men themselves. To further argue, it promotes the idea that men are the only ones capable to defeat their own kind, their equal, as seen in this scene.

Perla may be characterized as a victim, first of incestuous rape, and second of media exploitation, but her agency is shown in her search for justice, an act of courage given that she was fighting against his father. In addition, it was the only remaining choice for her because her acquiescence at the start did not protect Floring from being raped. Seeking justice from authority suggests that the State could still dispense justice, even if long-delayed. However, although Perla receives justice from the State because of the life sentence

imposed on Amang, the media as represented by the director, writer, and producer of *Hayok*, steals it from her by overseeing the horrendous incestuous rape sequence and highlighting the sex scenes to attract more moviegoers. This translates into bigger returns on the movie investment. Film's potential to be a medium of politicization of personal issues is rendered useless by such exploitative practices.

***Kubrador (The Bet Collector, 2006)***

*Like 'Tuhog', the film was also one of the top ten films of the 2000-2009 decade chosen by the Manunuri. Winner of two FIPRESCI (The International Federation of Film Critics) awards; Best Picture, New Delhi Film Festival and Cinemanila International Film Festival; Best Actress for Gina Pareño in Amiens International Film Festival, Brussels International Independent Film Festival and New Delhi Film Festival. Screened in over 20 international film festivals.*

Produced five years after *Pila Balde*, this film tackles the same themes discussed in the former: poverty in urban slums, the struggle to survive, and the strong woman character. As an independent production, *Kubrador* shares the same fate of *Pila Balde* in terms of budget constraints. But while *Pila Balde* became a success in the box-office, *Kubrador* did not. It was—and still is—however, a critically-acclaimed and award-winning film.

According to Jeturian, Amy's character (played by Gina Pareño) is based on a research conducted by Ralston Jover, writer of the screenplay. Jeturian and Lao, script supervisor for this film, says that a bet collector is typically a middle-aged woman who is credible and trusted by the community.

This one-to-one correspondence of film and social reality strengthens the role of film in articulating the nation-space and illustrates Higson's claim that films reflect the nation. As Jeturian would have it, Amy is the representation of every Filipino, her character representing our sense-making experiences of insularity. The neorealist approach employed in the film also helps in giving the feeling that the audience indeed is watching the daily grind of the nation.

As the film follows three days in the life of Amy, the audience gets acquainted with the slums, with its claustrophobic labyrinth of alleys and houses very close to each other. We get to see how she and the rest of the slum dwellers living in poverty survive everyday; Amy has a small sari-sari

store which her husband tends while she collects bets; other slum dwellers sell newspapers, drive tricycles, collect *jueteng* (illegal numbers game) bets as well, but most are jobless. Interestingly, professionals such as a teacher and a nurse are shown to be living in their neighborhood, which can either mean that the slums are getting better because it is shown that they now have access to college education that can ensure them formal jobs, or the national situation is getting worse because even professionals are forced to live in depressed areas.

Amy, a middle-aged bet collector, is known in her urban slum community for two things: collecting bets and collecting donations for the dead, both of which require trustworthiness and persuasion skills. She is wife to Eli, who suffers from a disability, and a mother to an Overseas Filipino Worker in Hongkong, a dead soldier, and a pregnant daughter whose husband's source of income is selling newspapers. As an individual, she is a strong, independent person, refusing to be dictated on by her husband. Once, she goes to collect bets in spite of Eli's pleading that she stay home. In another scene, Amy tells Eli to leave her alone and Eli yields. Amy is also shrewd and sharp. For example, when she senses that "enemies" or police officers are nearby, she pretends to be just walking along the street and collecting alms instead of bets. When Eli forgets to give Amy their neighbor's bet because he was glued to the television watching "Pera o Bayong," she pays the winning bet herself; she nags Eli but she focuses on solving the problem. She assures the bettor that he will get his jackpot prize no matter what.

Amy's humor softens her tough exterior as shown in a dramatic scene where Lolo Nick, her neighbor, laments the loss of his grandchild, Otep. Although she commiserates with Lolo Nick, she excuses herself and thinks of the number 13-29, corresponding to "mourning" and "death." Another example is 3-7, corresponding to a frog and a coward child. The number combination refers to Baste, who is frightened upon seeing a frog, which he mistakes for a snake while they are on their way to where the winning numbers will be selected.

More than humor, however, Amy's penchant for relating incidents with *jueteng* numbers shows the almost mythical element of the game. There is no logic in to the connection of the incidents and the numbers, but such a ritual is done in the belief that it will bring luck. Besides, to win the game, luck is needed, and the sources of what one considers luck varies; for Amy, it is the everyday events she witnesses; for one of her neighbors, the birthday of

his rooster or the birthday of a family member.

Even though Amy earns less than a hundred pesos for a whole day of collecting bets, she does not complain; in one scene, she is shown as excited to receive a commission of fifty-seven pesos and fifteen centavos from the bets she collected the whole day. What she complains about, however, is the continued dependence of her pregnant daughter on her even though she already has her own family. She also complains about her son-in-law's lack of a stable job. Simply put, what she complains about is the lack of hard work among those who need it in order to survive.

Amy's trustworthiness and persuasive skills are not only used for personal purposes; she is willing to suspend collecting bets to collect donations for Otep's funeral. She volunteers to collect from people at the market armed with Otep's picture, the priest's letter asking for donations, and a signature sheet for donors. Amazingly, market vendors give donations even if they do not know Otep. This illustrates the solidarity in their community, which could symbolize a source for progressive collective action.

### **'Jueteng Republic'**

Although *jueteng* has been around for decades (Coronel 2005), it was in 2000 when it was put in the limelight because of the involvement of former President Joseph Estrada, who was found guilty of plunder, receiving millions of payoffs from *jueteng* operators all over the country. In her article, "Jueteng Republic," Sheila Coronel writes that according to whistleblower Chavit Singson, Estrada pocketed five hundred million pesos in only a couple of years in power. Because of this, he was ousted from the presidency; then-Vice President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo took her oath as the new president of the country. Ironically, she and her relatives are also accused of receiving *jueteng* payoffs. This was exposed a few months after she was elected in 2004, an election not without allegations of cheating. Coronel (2005) reports that GMA and her relatives allegedly received almost two million pesos from one province alone in Luzon, presumably Pampanga, where *jueteng* lord Bong Pineda resides and which is Arroyo's home province.

In this popular numbers game, bets are placed on numbers ranging from 1-37. The more bettors, the bigger the potential jackpot prize is. Bets can be as low as P1 or as high as thousands. The winning numbers are selected from two sets of 37 numbered balls. At times, there is no draw at all; in the

film, the *jueteng* big boss can just text the winning numbers based on the number combination with the least bettors.

As shown in the film also, the police have full knowledge of its operation—they even bet secretly!—but once in a while they need to raid *jueteng* operations and imprison small-time bet collectors and *cabos* or headmen to provide an illusion that they are doing their job. This is almost the same scenario during the *jueteng* controversy in 2005: allegations against Arroyo resulted to numerous police raids to curtail *jueteng*'s operation, but it remained to be operational. According to Coronel (2005), cases were even filed in court against operators, most notably Bong Pineda, considered to be the *jueteng* lord of Central Luzon, but the cases did not prosper. The raids were a national spectacle, official statements a lip service; the key actors and actresses knew already how to act, and the audience had been conditioned how to react.

Aside from politicians, the film also shows priests benefitting from *jueteng*. Coronel (2005) is correct in pointing out that for *jueteng* to be operational in a certain area, the local officials, police, and even the Church protect the operators in exchange for a weekly “*intelihensiya*” (a play on the word “*indulgencia*,” referring to donations to the Church) or bribe money.

This is one demonstration of the point raised earlier about the dependence of the upper class on the lower class for the former's survival. In this case, the financial gain of the upper class is dependent on the capacity of the lower class to collect bets at a low labor cost. Without the latter, the former cannot amass big money from the illegal operations. But while it seems that everybody—the poor and the operators, politicians, police, and clergy—wins in this scenario, Coronel (2005) believes otherwise saying that, “...in the end, everybody loses.” In this intricate web of dependencies, one thing is clear: *jueteng* is a clear indication of the massive corruption in the society, not only by the already powerful but also by the powerless. In Coronel's words: *Jueteng* indeed, is the best metaphor for the persistence of corruption in this country and for the complicity not only of the most powerful, but also the poor and powerless, in an elaborate network of corruption where it seems everybody gains but everybody, in the end, also loses.

In all these, Amy represents a nation whose people are forced to rest their fate in probabilities and luck and, if these fail, in credit because of the lack of better job opportunities. *Jueteng* seduces them to earn money easily



from commissions in collecting bets and from winning bettors. Though armed with hard work, perseverance, shrewdness, and sharpness, Amy is still trapped in her situation.

Unlike Gina in *Pila Balde*, Amy did not explicitly express her desire for social mobility. She works merely to survive. This could mean a resignation to her lot, but on another note, it could also mean her hopelessness in the capacity of the State to help the poor like her in transcending poverty. Following the latter note, Amy's character is a testament to the incapacity and corruption of State institutions. Thus, her character registers a critic of the State. It challenges the State discourse on poverty alleviation and development.

### **Women as Articulators of Nation-space and Agency of Insularity**

As articulations of the nation-space by being agents of insularity, the three characters created by Lao and given life by Jeturian picture women who are entrapped in their conditions of poverty and violence (although poverty may also be argued as a form of violence). Nevertheless, they have their own ways in weathering everyday difficulties by relying on themselves. Although Perla and Floring seek justice from the State for the violence committed against them, it would not have been possible had Perla not decided to end her silence.

In all three films, the women protagonists embody the different narratives of the nation with their experiences of poverty and violence and how they make sense of it. They embody multiple stories of survival and of attempts to overcome such difficulties. All are hardworking, persevering, determined, and strong. However, as Lao said, society will always present them with obstacles, preventing them from fully emancipating themselves. Forces in society—politics, economy, culture—maintain the hegemonic binaries of center/periphery, powerful/powerless, rich/poor for their own benefit. On a positive note, however, we can be assured that we can, at the least, survive these obstacles because we have the agency of insularity, just like what the strength of the women characters implies.

In terms of filmic techniques, Jeturian's films have traces of neorealist influences because all of them contain some of its conventions, most notably the open-ended ending that could be attributed to Lao's writing. This type of ending leaves one speculating if the women characters are triumphant in

the films or not. Jeturian and Lao say, however, that it is enough that they have shown the women characters' capacity and ability to survive. Thus, it assures us that the insularity practiced by the women characters, who are marginalized because of their economic situation and, it can be argued, their gender, can be channelled to create disjunctures in the discourses to challenge the center.

Moreover, Jeturian's use of neorealist conventions gives a feeling of 'truth' in the depictions of the characters' lives. The films, by using this style of filmmaking, also politicized their private lives since these are tied to external social factors.

According to Tolentino (2005), the neo-realist style was the first to discuss stories of the masses. Tolentino quoted Kolker on neo-realism:

The fact is that by consciously choosing to concentrate upon a socially and economically defined entity, the neo-realists politicized their images and narratives. They replaced psychological inquiry with depictions of external struggle with social environment, the government, the economic and the political state... (Tolentino 2005).

Moreover, the three films fall under the genre of social realism which usually has poverty as its subject. Jeturian says that his films depicting poverty reflect Philippine social reality, which should make people examine their own beliefs. He wants the audience to understand not only the story of the characters, but the characters themselves.

However, social realism has a more important role than just reflecting what happens in actuality. As observed by Shirlita Espinosa in her comparative study of Wong Kar Wai's use of time in his films and that in contemporary Filipino films, social realism is the predominant genre in the country because of its politicizing nature. According to Espinosa,

the cultural production of this nation as predominantly social realist is not because of the poverty of our imagination but due to the necessity for a kind of radicalizing cultural critique. Social realism is a direct confrontation against the underlying commodification of visually attractive films ala-Wong Kar-wai (Espinosa 2005).

Following this claim then, Jeturian and Lao's films are cultural critiques

and not merely a reflection of social realities. In fact, by reflecting reality, the two are actually criticizing it through their manner of representations. Hence, the women characters and the film medium itself can be read as a powerful cultural critique by investigating the “everyday tactics of survival” or insularity.

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