

WOMEN IN FILIPINO RELIGION-THEMED FILMS

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Abstract

This study looks at four Filipino films—*Mga Mata ni Angelita*, *Himala*, *Ang Huling Birhen sa Lupa*, *Santa Santita*—that are focused on the discourse of religiosity and featured a female protagonist who imbibes the image and role of a female deity. Using a feminist framework, it analyzes the subgenre's connection and significance to the Filipino consciousness of a female God, and the imaging of the Filipino woman in the context of a hybrid religion. The study determines how religion is used in Philippine cinema, and whether or not it promotes enlightenment. The films' heavy reference to religious and biblical images is also examined as strategies for myth-building.

This study looks at the existence of Filipino films that are focused on the discourse of religiosity, featuring a female protagonist who imbibes the image and assumes the role of a female deity. The films included are *Mga Mata ni Angelita* (The Eyes of Angelita, 1978, Lauro Pacheco), *Himala* (Miracle, 1982, Ishmael Bernal), *Ang Huling Birhen sa Lupa* (The Last Virgin, 2002, Joel Lamangan) and *Santa Santita* (Magdalena, 2004, Laurice Guillen). In the four narratives, the female protagonists eventually incur supernatural powers after a perceived apparition of the Virgin Mary or the image of the Virgin Mary, and incurring stigmata or the wounds of Christ.

Using a feminist framework, this paper through textual analysis looks at the Filipino woman in this subgenre, as well as those images' connection and significance to the Filipino consciousness of a female God. The study also describes how how religion in Philippine cinema is used to either promote or

eradicate gender stereotypes.

This study is limited in terms of filmography. There are other religion-themed local films featuring female characters in the narrative include *Fe, Esperanza, Caridad* (1975, Gerardo de Leon), *Kakabakaba Ka Ba?* (1980, Mike de Leon), *Sister Stella L.* (1984, Mike de Leon), *Divine Mercy sa Buhay ni Sister Faustina* (1993, Ben Yalung), *Mother Ignacia, Ang Ulihan* (Nick Deocampo, 1998), *Tatarin* (2001, Tikoy Aguiluz), and *Birhen ng Manaoag* (Ben Yalung, 2005). The films included in the study are those that have been cited through awards and nominations, and enjoyed popularity with the Filipino audience. The selected films have a woman as the main character, a fictional narrative, and a miracle or supernatural event occurring in the narrative.

The study shows that Filipino religion-themed films reflect the mystical and ironic quality of the Filipino hybrid religion which is characterized by Mary worship, idolatry, and the schism between truth and falsehood, as well as the image of a subversive supernatural woman who personifies the Filipino priestess and the lost female deity.

Filipino Religion-Themed Films

In Cine: Spanish Influences on Early Cinema in the Philippines, filmmaker Nick Deocampo says that “religious imagery and references to religious matters are an aesthetic hallmark of many Tagalog movies,” even in scenes showing graphic sex (Deocampo, 2007). This is most evident in the Filipino religion-themed film which use religion as a topic, be it for a social realist drama or biographical narratives. The films use heavy reference to religious and biblical images to move the narrative forward.

While some were filmed for the purpose of screening during the Lenten season, there are those which were meant to be mainstream films. These went on to become both critical and commercial successes, carrying controversial topics which challenge the Filipino audience’s notion of religiosity and spirituality.

Mga Mata ni Angelita, from which Julie Vega rose to fame, features a star-studded cast, including Vilma Santos, Nora Aunor, Dolphy, German Moreno, Boots Anson-Roa, Helen Gamboa and Fernando Poe, Jr. who shared very little screen time with the well-loved child star of the 80s.

Himala is an Experimental Cinema of the Philippines project which won Best Picture at the 1982 Metro Manila Film Festival and the 1983 Catholic Mass Media Awards. It was also an official selection nominee (Best Actress for Nora Aunor) of the Golden Bear Award at the 1983 Berlin International Film Festival, and won the Bronze Hugo Prize at the 1983 Chicago International Film Festival. It was named as one of the best films of the 1980s by the Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino, and was recently awarded the Viewers Choice Award for Best Asia-Pacific Film of All Time by CNN and the Asia Pacific Screen Awards (Mackay 2008).

Even without citing these awards, most Filipinos would remember the film by Nora Aunor's immortal line, "*Walang himala!*" (There are no miracles!) and proved themselves to be fans of the movie when it became a box office success.

Ang Huling Birhen sa Lupa won Best Picture at the 2002 Metro Manila Film Festival, including Best Actress (Ara Mina, also at FAMAS), Best Actor (Jay Manalo), Best Director (Joel Lamangan) and Best Supporting Actress (Maui Taylor).

Santa Santita won Best Production Design and Best Supporting Actor at the 2005 Golden Screen Awards. It also received Best Cinematography from both the Golden Awards and Star Award for Movies. The film used Jerry Gracio's prize-winning script, while articles from 2004 and 2005 reflect the industry's and the critics' praise of Angelica Panganiban's performance (Star Studio 2004).

As a sub-genre of the Filipino melodramatic film, the Filipino religion-themed films also have female leads, but this time they are dealing with religious or spiritual dilemmas, and supernatural events which are linked with religious personas. These films also follow the conventions of the melodramatic film. Arminda M. Vallejo-Santiago in her dissertation examines the imaging of women in six melodramatic films, namely: *Dahil Mahal Kita: The Dolzura Cortez Story* (1993, Laurice Guillen), *Ika-11 Utos Mahalin Mo Asawa Mo* (1994, Marilou Diaz-Abaya), *Madrasta* (1996, Olivia Lamasan), *Babae* (1997, Lupita Aquino-Kashiwahara), *Dahil May Isang Ikaw* (1999, Joyce Bernal) and *Anak* (2000, Rory B. Quintos). She says:

In the Filipino melodrama film, the protagonist is a woman and her travails are articulated as various struggles with herself, her husband or

lover, her family, her community and the patriarchy represented by the male protagonist (Santiago 2006).

Santiago (2006) quotes Roland Tolentino: “the female viewer reads and understands the image or text of the woman protagonist as a cultural text being the source from which meanings are created and circulated,” which supports her discourse analysis:

The Filipino female audience is confronted with images of herself as assuming traditional roles as a mother, martyr, nurturer, saint, sacrificial lamb and even as form of debt payment to save her family from ruin. Other images that loom larger than life for the Filipino female audience are: the object of men’s desire, sexual object, commodified body and the source of evil and destruction of a family or community.

If subjected to a male audience, it is said that Filipino melodrama films encourage a male viewer to derive pleasure from watching a woman’s suffering. This pleasure only serves to reaffirm in their macho psyche the woman’s “low status” in relation to men in Filipino society (Santiago 2006).

Santiago also looks at the dichotomy of female strength and subservience which is manifested through class and work issues, among others (Santiago 2006). While the films in Santiago’s studies were directed by female Filipino directors, religion-themed films are mostly honed by male directors. This study attempts to identify what images confront the female audience in the religion-themed film given the characteristics of this sub-genre.

The Religious Experience in the Philippines

There is an irony in the concept and practice of the dominant religion, Roman Catholicism, in the Philippines. Religious Education Professor Carmen Gaerlan uses the term “folk Catholicism” to refer to a hybrid religion – there is a blurring of lines between the Filipino practice and the established practice of Catholicism. The woman or the female deity, however, is associated with a pre-colonial, folk religion in the Philippines.

Jaime Belita in “And God said: Hala!” says the Filipino consciousness of religion includes fear. There is a certain level of mysticism, but rather than understanding the mystery, or seeking God outside of social or traditional

constructs, Philippine society is somewhat paralyzed in this fear of God, spirits and the unknown (Belita 1991). Belita (1991) says the implications of the word “hala!” both warns and scares the Filipino child to respect spirits and not to antagonize the spiritual world. The word has what Belita calls a “supernatural sanction” and he ventures into the possibility that “people’s religiosity has been shaped by their response to the *hala* experience” (1991).

But religion also plays other roles in the Philippine society. It is seen as a catalyst for a better future society (Gonzalez 1991), as a key to “change and development” for ethnic minorities (Javier 1991) and as adaptation of Western “cultural diffusion” (Gonzalez 1991).

Carmen Gaerlan in *Hidden from the Clever: An Initial Study of Selected Religious Beliefs and Practices of Filipino Popular Catholicism* (1991) posits that religious images in this hybrid religion contribute to myth-building. Her surveys show certain worship trends and attitude towards religious images and figures, and their connection to the Filipino consciousness of religion. Most notably, the study shows that the Filipino’s top preferred image of the Virgin Mary is the Lady of Perpetual Help, followed by the Immaculate Conception, and the Lady of Lourdes. The survey also shows that the Virgin Mary is perceived to be an inspiration, a parent, and a guide or teacher (Gaerlan 1991). The Virgin Mary only ranked third as an object of prayer (Gaerlan 1991), but the Holy Rosary, which is associated with her, ranked first as the most popular religious object carried by the respondents (Gaerlan 1991). The survey also revealed that majority of the respondents had special places for devotion or prayer, and that they have altars or religious images at home (Gaerlan 1991).

Stories of ordinary people witnessing apparitions, experiencing miracles or gaining powers associated with religious personas are familiar with Filipinos. There are ordinary people who reportedly exhibit stigmata, religious ministers who display miraculous healing powers (PinoyWired 2008) or personalities who claim to be psychic (Florentino V. Floro 2009). (Examples of Filipinos who display healing powers are Father Corsie Legaspi and Father Fernando Suarez, well-known healing priests who regularly conduct healing masses in churches and other venues. Another example of a Filipino psychic is Judge Florentino Floro who in his website refers to himself as the “Angel of Death” and claims to be a prophet and healer. He consults with three imaginary dwarves, Armand, Luis and Angel, and was eventually removed from the Supreme Court. Another personality is Jojo Acuin, dubbed

the “Nostradamus of Asia” by the media, who predicted some famous events in the Philippines including the victory of Fidel V. Ramos as president, and the Mount Pinatubo eruption in 1991. He died in 2010. [GMA News.TV 2010).

There are also stories of Marian apparitions in various locales in the country. One such story is that of Judiel Nieva who claimed to have started witnessing apparitions since he was 10 years old (Catholic Revelations). Associated with Nieva is the miraculous Virgin Mary statue which wept tears of blood. The miraculous event occurred in Agoo, La Union on March 1993, drawing millions of people, including devotees, the media and even Catholic Bishops. However, this miracle was discredited by Bishop Salvador Lazo through a theological commission which pronounced that the event was *Constat de Non Supernaturalitate* or “clearly evident to be not supernatural” (The Miracle Hunter).

Hundreds of years before this contemporary religious landscape was formed, early religions in the country promoted a different kind of religious practice and belief system. An important figure in Philippine history is the priestess, called the *babaylan* in the Visayan dialect, or the *catalonan* in the Tagalog dialect. The anthology *Readings on Babaylan Feminism in the Philippines* shows that in early societies, the *babaylan* was at par with male authorities such as the *datu* or the war leader and the *panday* or the blacksmith (Mangahas, 2006). Nenita Pambid-Domingo (2006) in *Dios Ina (God the Mother)* and *Philippine Nationalism* describes the *babaylan* or *catalonan* as a “shaman who took care of the spiritual and physical health and cultural life of the community...(a) nurturer, preserver and diviner of omens.” They are associated with the Animistic and pre-Hispanic Filipino religions. As these religions were transplanted by Catholicism, the priestesses were also replaced with the priest, the bishop, and other members of the Catholic religious order. The man became the religious authority, while the woman was pushed aside.

Today, the existence of nativist groups continues the legacy of worship to a female God through the leadership of female leaders. One such group is the Suprema de la Iglesia del Ciudad Mística de Dios, which is based in Mount Banahaw, Rizal. Considered millenarian and Rizalian, these kinds of groups reside literally in the outskirts of mainstream society, becoming “women at the fringes,” as Domingo (2006) calls them.

Asian Studies Professor Carolyn Brewer (2001) in her book *Holy Confrontation: Religion, Gender and Sexuality in the Philippines, 1521-1685* shares findings from her study on the concept of female priesthood in the Philippines:

Even though there is no evidence linguistically to link babae/woman with babaylan, some women...in the Philippines are not constrained by such discursive conventions. Their transgression allows them to conceptualize femaleness with the priestly function. For these women, sensitized to the way Roman Catholicism has consigned them, by their biology, to the silent side of the altar as far as formal teaching, authority and administration are concerned, babaylan represents a subversive, power-full, and inextricable entanglement of woman with religious leadership (Babaylan Files 2004).

This shows that the female figure in religion is associated with pre-colonial Philippines, and that its continuous emergence in cultural products and social practices is an important aspect of Filipino spirituality, religiosity and identity.

Feminism, Religion and Media

Sr. Mary John Mananzan, OSB (1988) in “Women and Religion: A Collection of Essays, Personal Histories, and Contextualized Liturgies” looks at issues such as the “goddess cult;” the Christian Bible which was “used to justify the subordination and discrimination of women”; and the treatment of women throughout church history. She looks at the problem of the “prevailing male notion of a God” which manifests itself in the oppression of women in religious societies. Mananzan mentions here the concept (as popularized by bestselling novelists Paulo Coelho and Dan Brown) of the original God, the female God, who was replaced and forgotten when the patriarchal society took shape (Mananzan 1988). Mananzan makes the most interesting historical insight here:

In Philippine history there are no traditions of women goddesses. However, it is significant to note that the word for God, *Bathala*, does not have a sexist connotation. In the primitive Tagalog script, the word “god” is made up of three consonants *Ba-Tha-La*. The first consonant is the first syllable of the word *babae* (woman) which symbolizes generation. The third consonant is the first syllable of *lalake* (man)

which symbolizes potency. They are joined by the middle consonant, an aspirated H which means light or spirit. The word “god” therefore means the union of man and woman in light. And when one reads the word backwards, it reads *Lahatba*, meaning total generation, total creator (“to do,” “the creator”). In other words, the concept of god among the ancient Tagalog was more closely linked with woman; and, when linked with both the concepts of man and woman, there is a nuance of union and mutuality, not subordination (Mananzan 1988).

The pre-colonial Philippine ideology of a female God was eradicated with the installation of a patriarchal Christian ideology, but found its reincarnation in the worship of the Virgin Mary. Sr. Hilda Buhay, OSB in her essay “Who is Mary?” studies this national worship of and love for the Virgin Mary. She adds, however, that “Christian Filipinos must be liberated from the traditional stereo-typed images of Mary drawn from popular Marian piety” (Buhay 1988).

Mananzan (1988) also reflects on Jesus’ recognition of women as Others, as part of the marginalized societies in Biblical times. She says that in the Bible, Jesus reached out to them, regardless of their status in society. This kind of “abolition of social distinctions of class, religion, race and gender” was continued after the death of Jesus. This was eliminated, however, by “ecclesiastical patriarchalization” (Fiorenza 1979) which led to the subordination of women in patriarchal culture – a phenomenon opposite of what Jesus tried to do during his earthly ministry.

Mananzan (1988) notes that during the Spanish period, Filipino women were forced to embody the Spanish woman image – that of the “contemplative nun today.” This was further reinforced with the introduction of the Maria Clara image, although some women from that time “broke through the mold” and fought against colonial oppression (Mananzan 1988).

Arche L. Ligo in the essay “Women in Biblical Patriarchy” (1988) examines scriptural evidence that stereotypes women and promotes patriarchal ideology. However, Ligo also foregrounds strong women characters in the Bible whose stories exemplified triumph from oppression and revealed the “unexpected power of women over men.” She says that biblical texts actually critique slavery and patriarchy, and that:

There are...passages that uplift women’s positions and speak of women’s

roles to which we are unaccustomed today. But these messages of faith and liberation are crouched in images and symbols of patriarchal culture. Thus, distinction must be made between that culture and the message of the Book to provide a just account of women in Biblical patriarchy (Ligo 1988).

Santiago's doctoral dissertation entitled "Imaging the Filipino Woman: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Melodramatic Films Made By Filipino Mainstream Women Directors From 1990 to 2000" examined the image of the Filipino woman and their roles are studied in the context of melodrama (2006). Santiago acknowledges that there is a need to study the image of the Filipino woman in light of other film contexts and genres. Discoveries in the intersection of gender and religion would flesh out the imaging of the Filipina woman in cinematic texts and determine if the image has evolved.

Using Thelma B. Kintanar's guide for textual analysis (1999), this study uses cultural studies and feminist/feminist film theory as framework. Textual analysis, as defined by Kintanar, answers the following questions: (1) What is the purpose of the text? (2) What is the purpose of the author? (3) Who are the intended audience? and (4) What are the means by which the author persuades the readers to accept his/her views?

Cultural Studies is interested in ideologies that dominate a culture (Littlejohn & Foss 2005), and in mass communication and media as structures of power in capitalistic societies (Baran & Davis 1995). Cultural studies' focus on subcultures paved the way for marginalized concepts such as gender, race, class, age and sexuality to be subjects of contemporary scholarship (Littlejohn & Foss 2005).

Feminist theory, also hailing from the critical tradition, is focused on power relations between genders and is particularly concerned with the subjugation of women. Jacques Lacan theorizes that society is a Symbolic Order or a system of "signs, roles and rituals" which are essentially built on the "Law of the Father" (Tong 1989). Rosemarie Tong applies this to conclude that "women are repressed with the Symbolic Order" because the law and language used here are masculine, phallic and unable to represent or be used by women. Thus, says Lacan, "women are permanent outsiders" as long as the Symbolic Order exists (Tong 1989). Laura Mulvey further describes the condition of women in this Symbolic Order:

Women then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsession through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning (Mulvey 2003).

Simone de Beauvoir is concerned with the question “Why is the woman the Other?” and explores the “positive side of Otherness” and how women could use it to their advantage (Mulvey 2003). Julia Kristeva claims that, philosophically, women are “always becoming but never being” (Mulvey 2003). She links women with other marginalized sectors or groups in society – those who are repulsed because of abjection or “an irrational sense of disgust” (Mulvey 2003). Thus, women are also seen as abject. Helen Benedict (1992) in her study of the press coverage of sex crimes in the 1980s, identifies the binary opposition virgin/vamp – the good or meek female who is a victim, and the bad or ostentatious female as the victim who invited disaster upon herself. In effect, the virgin who is pure and innocent is to be excused or forgiven, while the wanton vamp who provoked the attack against her sexuality is to be blamed.

These four studies look at the imaging of women in media texts: as an object for the male gaze, an Other existing outside the Symbolic Order, an abject being that triggers jouissance, or a virgin/vamp.

The Woman in Filipino Religion-Themed Films

In Filipino religion-themed films, the woman is at the center of the socio-cultural and religious scene of the nation. The following discussion focuses on the film narratives, symbolic images, and gender representations of characters which make up the backdrop of the woman. The dialogues (in quotes) used here can either be direct quotes as they were spoken in the film, originally translated dialogues (from Tagalog to English), or dialogues that were written to the effect of how they were said in the film. The quoted dialogues are either transcribed from the films or quoted from English subtitles, and are not taken from official film scripts.

Finding the Lost Mother in *Mga Mata ni Angelita* (1978, Lauro Pacheco)

Angelita (Julie Vega), who is blind, poor, and treated rather harshly by the adults (noticeably women) in her world, incurs the gift of eyesight after venerating a statue of the Virgin Mary. This power, she claims, was given to her by the Virgin Mary as a gift. She then begins her journey to find her lost mother, Janet (Helen Gamboa). In the process, Angelita is able to do Mary's good works, as well as exhibit other gifts such the ability to "divine omens" (Domingo 2006) and to triumph over evil, otherworldly creatures. In the end, she is reunited with her mother. She is now somebody's daughter, or to be exact, her mother's daughter.

In one scene, Angelita uses her eyes to drive away a snake, which figures in the Genesis story of Eve as the serpent. In another scene, Angelita asks a laundry woman for a drink. This is reminiscent of biblical narratives where Jesus and other characters ask for a drink from the well which, in the Biblical context, is regarded as a signal or sign from God.

At Janet's house, we are introduced to Conrado (Fernando Poe, Jr.). He was temporarily set free from prison by Janet's father, Don Gonzalo (Tony Carrion), who also put him there. At first he is a mysterious character who watches the mother and daughter reunion from afar. Eventually, he becomes aggressive, seeking revenge for the injustice done to him. But when Don Gonzalo offers him money in exchange for never coming back, Conrado accepts the offer, and disappears.

The text only hints that Conrado is Angelita's father. If he was, then he lost the privilege of being reunited with his family because he opted to be paid off by Don Gonzalo. Although Angelita once mentioned that she is searching for her parents, this is eventually tuned out as she becomes more concerned in searching for her mother. When she is reunited with Janet, she is not conscious of the absence of the father, and does not search for him. The text annihilates the father figure and makes the mother the completion of Angelita. This echoes the earlier events in the film showing how the mother or female image is evil and strong, while the male or father image is meek.

Nuances in the mother-daughter relationship are seen at the end of the film. Janet corrects Angelita by encouraging her to say "mommy" instead of "*inay*" [mother]. Angelita, not used to saying mommy, tends to say *inay* and repeatedly corrects herself. While playing with her new dolls, Angelita explains to her mother: "...*dinadamitan ko [sila], bomba kasi, eh!*" [I am dressing them up because they are naked.] These scenes show the image of

the good little girl or the virgin – she is rewarded with nice dresses and a rich mom; she is saved from being poor and now uses the more elite term “mommy” instead of “inay,” which is also reflective of the reincarnation of the native mother God or “Dios Ina” into the western “Mama Mary.”

Angelita then graduates from being an Other. She is now a normal rich kid who can enjoy the rest of her days wearing nice dresses and playing with her mom. However, there is also reference to the end of her innocence. Angelita, just like Adam and Eve when they ate the forbidden fruit, was able to recognize that *bomba* (figurative term connoting nakedness) is not good and that nakedness needs to be covered up.

The casting of Julie Vega, with her signature long hair, and a very pretty, angelic face, endears her to the public as an ideal image of a good little girl. In the only scene where Angelita is put with children her age, we see the evil-intentioned girl as ordinary-looking, and with short curly hair. The contrasting image invokes the virgin/vamp dichotomy.

While Angelita seems to be robotically doing the dictates of a higher being, she is also depicted as an instrument of that Mary who is perceived to have the “creative submission of the fully liberated human being” and “is free to serve God” (Buhay 1988). The image of Mary as the unquestioningly obedient and passive woman is revolutionized. Angelita with Mary’s eyes is neither passive nor powerless. Instead, she actively helps the oppressed, rebukes the evil and risks danger to save the weak. The text acknowledges that the mother was lost, and that the powers of a female deity, channeled through a young woman, is able to find the mother and bring back a lost relationship.

Female Priesthood in *Himala* (1982, Ishmael Bernal)

Elsa (Nora Aunor), an adoptive daughter, transforms from the town’s *manghihilot* (indigenous therapist) into a religious leader who is able to attract thousands of people into mass healings. She witnesses an apparition of the Virgin Mary while looking at a solitary dead tree standing on a hill’s highest point. She is then able to heal. As her fame rises, she begins to straddle the dangerous truth/falsehood divide.

Elsa’s ministry is established by her employer, Mrs. Alba (Veronica Palileo), who sees in the miracle and mass healings a potential business. Elsa has three devoted assistants – Aling Saling, her friend Chayong (Laura

Centeno) and her neighbor Sepa (Anna Quiambao). Chayong has romantic links with Pilo (Pen Medina) whose sexual advances the woman avoids due to her newfound ministry with Elsa.

Elsa and Chayong's other friend, Nimia (Gigi Dueñas), is a prostitute who returns to Cupang to build a cabaret, aptly or ironically named Heaven, during the height of Elsa's mass healing sessions. There a number of scenes where Nimia plays a cigarette trick to amuse her father, who helps her set up the cabaret. In one scene, while she and other prostitutes are changing into sexier outfits, Nimia notices some boys peeping through the walls. She goes out and chases the boys, then challenges them, "*Ano ang gusto niyong makita? Ito?*" (Is this what you want to see?) She then removes her dress to expose her breasts. Then she starts pulling cigarettes one by one from her panty to the amazement of the boys. The boys chase her to a hill and at one point, with the sunset as a backdrop, she puts on her veil and stands there, echoing the image of Mary.

Nimia is quick to defend her business when town officials threaten to close it to keep the image of Cupang clean in line with Elsa's mass healings. She confronts Elsa, and here the virgin and the vamp face each other, with the vamp condemning the virgin's masquerade:

NIMIA

Bakit, 'yung ginagawa niyo ba nila Mrs. Alba hindi pagpuputa sa mga tao dito? Pinagbibilhan niyo sila ng himala.

[Is not your and Mrs. Alba's deeds an exploitation of the people?]

ELSA

Tinutulungan namin sila.

[We are helping them.]

NIMIA

Pareho lang tayong puta.

[We are both prostitutes.]

We are also introduced to Orly (Spanky Manikan), a male film director who is captivated by Elsa. He comes to Cupang to film a documentary.

Essentially, he is a patriarchal institution – the male eye of the media. In one scene, Elsa and Chayong, while helpless and alone up in the hill, are raped. The director is there to secretly film Elsa and Chayong’s regular visit to the apparition site and, during the rape, he merely watches and films the whole scene without helping the two women. He later questions his indifference to the rape, and wonders if he has become “like the other people who sell miracles.”

Later, Elsa rationalizes the rape by claiming that she and Chayong were attacked by demons pretending to be wild boars. In an earlier scene in a piggery, Pilo forces Chayong on the ground for sex, while pigs are captured in the frame. Here, a connection between pigs, sex, demons and sin is established.

After the miracles came the curses. Elsa’s healing powers fade as unfortunate events occur after one another. We see an exodus as the sick, the reporters and the foreigners pack their bags and leave Cupang.

When Elsa discovers she is pregnant, she decides to stop appearing in public as a miracle worker. People continue to talk about her pregnancy, speculating that it might be an immaculate conception. When the rains come back and the people turn to Elsa once again upon the “return of the miracle,” they finally hear what she has to say. Like a priest delivering a sermon to the silent congregation, she says:

ELSA

Nitong mga nakaraang araw...parang naranasan natin ang pinaghalong langit at impiyerno. Maraming sakit ang gumaling, maraming tao ang humusay at nagkaroon ng pananampalataya. Pero nakakita rin tayo ng kamatayan, ng epidemya, ng pagpuputa, ng krimen at panloloko. Kapag may masamang nangyayari, sinisisi natin ang sumpa, sinumpa ang Cupang. Itinakwil natin ang may sakit noon kaya ganoon. Kapag may mabuti namang nangyayari, inaamin nating ito’y gawa ng langit, gawa ng Birhen, gawa ng himala. May ipagtatapat ako sa inyo. Walang himala! Ang himala ay nasa puso ng tao, nasa puso nating lahat. Tayo ang gumagawa ng himala, tayo ang gumagawa ng mga sumpa at ng mga diyos! Hindi totoong buntis ako dahil sa himala, hindi totoong nagpakita sa’kin ang Mahal na Birhen. Walang himala...

[Over the past few days...we seemed to have lived through heaven and

hell. Many sick people got well, many people learned to have faith. But we also saw death, epidemics, prostitution, crime, and deception. When something terrible happens, we blame it on the curse, or on the idea that Cupang is cursed. We drove a leper out of town, that's why! When something good happens, we give the credit to heaven, to the Virgin, we say it's a miracle! I have something to confess. There are no miracles! It is all inside us. We make the miracles ourselves. We pronounce the curse, we create our gods. No miracle has gotten me pregnant. And no Virgin ever appeared to me. There are no miracles...]

When Elsa is shot and her body is delivered to the ambulance, Sepa proclaims that Elsa is now a saint. We then see a play of words in phrases usually reserved for God: a banner saying "Elsa loves you" is displayed, a character announces that "Elsa is dead." Then Sepa concludes, "Elsa is a saint."

In one scene, Elsa questions her role and the validity of the miracles that have been performed. As she confides this to her mother, they wonder if God has played a joke on them. Elsa also takes on the responsibility for both the miracles and the curses when she asks, "*Saan ba ako nagkulang?*" ["Where did I fall short?"]

Elsa's expression of disillusionment is echoed in the priest's (Joel Lamangan) final sermon, which was, interestingly, attended by more people than before:

PRIEST

Noon ay lagi kong sinasabi, importante lagi ang pagharap sa katotohanan. Ngayon, ay alam ko na, hindi tayo dapat lagi na[g]papasilaw sa katotohan. Sapagkat kung minsan, ito ay hindi makatao. Kung minsan, ang kasinungalingan ay mas importante sa katotohanan. Kung minsan, ang kasinungalingan ay mas may nagagawang kabutihan sa tao. Katotohanan man o kasinungalingan, realidad man o ilusyon, ang importante ay kung saan ito ginagamit.

[I always used to say that it is important to face the truth. Now I realize, we should not let the truth blind us to a point when it dehumanizes. At times, falsehood is more important than the truth; it can do humanity more good. What matters is how we use truth or falsehood, reality or illusion.]

The priest here represents the religious authority. Instead of acknowledging Elsa and the events that happened, he encourages the people to settle with falsehood rather than pursue the truth. He tries to justify falsehood by saying that facing the truth “dehumanizes.” In effect he is convincing the people to return to the status quo (even if it is falsehood), and to disregard what had happened (even if that might lead to the truth). The congregation subscribes to the *hala* experience, preferring to keep the unknown a mystery.

A blind male character in the film, depicted as an oracle or prophet, recalls that Cupang drove out a leper. The leper turns out to be the Virgin Mary in disguise. She curses Cupang with drought. Mary then says she will return to Cupang, but disguised once again. If the people do not turn her away this time, the curse will be lifted.

This prophecy is parallel to the character of Nimia. She is the vamp, but she can also be the virgin in disguise who has been driven away from Cupang as a social outcast. She then returns to Cupang, still as a prostitute (or still in disguise). When the rain (and thus the miracle) comes back, we see her leaving the town again.

The text contends with the image of the virgin and the vamp. First we have the virgin. Nora Aunor is recognized as a dramatic actress at this time. She emerged from being half of a love team to being a strong competition of Vilma Santos. She is the “sufferer”, showing pain, vulnerability and sacrifice (Flores 2006). In the film, this image is merged with the character Elsa – charismatic, profound and capable of showing compassion. Nimia describes the three of them – Chayong, the religious one, she as the tripper or the *malandi*, and Elsa as the one with the brains, the one who can “put her mind to work,” the one who can “see anything she wants to see.” Pilo says of Elsa, “*Labat ng babae pwede kong ligawan, huwag lang si Elsa... parang hindi siya babae, parang hindi siya tao*” (I can woo any woman I want to woo, but not Elsa...she does not seem to be a woman, she does not seem to be human.) Elsa, like Angelita, is an Other.

During an interview with Orly, Elsa says she wanted to be a great many things, but realizing they were poor, settles for a simple life of obeying what the *Mahal na Birhen* (beloved Virgin Mary) is telling her. “*Bakit ang birhen? Bakit hindi ang Diyos o si Hesu Kristo kaya?*” (Why the Virgin Mary and not God, or Jesus Christ?) asks Orly. “*Lumipas na ang sa ama, ngayon naman ay ang sa ina* (What was of the Father is now of the Mother),” replies

Elsa. While the text here invokes the female deity, the female God that was shunned by a patriarchal society, other scenes give Elsa's character references to Jesus, especially in the ending scene where she was shot, taken down the hill with her body in a crucified position, and then worshipped by people in her death.

Elsa in the end denounces the apparitions she claims to have seen and the miracles she claims to have done. She is, in essence, removing from herself the association with power. This power is transferred to the priest, who resumes the authority on truth and miracles. Elsa, the woman, represents the fake miracle, and the priest, the man and the image of biblical patriarchy, represents final authority on the subject.

Second, we have the vamp. Nimia, when positioned against Elsa, is a virgin, especially with her disclaimer that she is not prostituting religion like Elsa was. She is in that sense true and honest, a challenge to the falsehood of religion, or the "blinding truth" that the priest was referring to. The vamp is vindicated and the virgin is criticized, in contrast to the conventions cited in Benedict's study.

The Violated Virgin in *Ang Huling Birhen sa Lupa* (2002, Joel Lamangan)

The film opens with an image of Cion (Maui Taylor) on a *carosa* (carriage), dressed as the Virgin Mary and carrying a baby. Then we see Lorena, (Ara Mina), Cion's elder sister, who tries to hide her disfigured face by wearing a veil. Through flashback we discover how they came to be this way. Lorena, who works as a prostitute, has partnered with a pretend priest, Father Emman/Martin (Jay Manalo) to perform fake miracles and turn religion into business. When they discover that Cion, who is childlike and "*kulang-kulang*" (mentally retarded) can perform miracles for real, their scheme takes a dangerous turn. Tension arises when the town's Kapitana (Elizabeth Oropesa) takes control of the religious business. She takes custody of Cion whom Lorena and Martin try to save. When they attempt an escape, they are brutally punished. Martin is beaten and killed while Lorena and Cion are raped violently. The rape scene is juxtaposed with flashbacks of Martin being raped by a priest as a child. Lorena emerges from the attack with half her face burnt. When Cion is subjected to a medical examination, the doctor finds out that she is still a virgin despite being pregnant.

Lorena, after that fateful night, survives but in her narration she says

“she has already died.” She is now a ghost, an Other who ostracizes herself from society at the same time that society shuns her. Before Lorena leaves town, she sees Cion being paraded around like the Virgin Mary. The shot of the coastline shows the religious parade mixing in with the crowd on the *peryahan*, with a huge carousel as a focal point. Religion is thus likened to a carousel, an entertaining ride that goes nowhere. It is part of the carnival of life, a money-hungry business in the guise of spiritual ascendance.

In one scene, Cion, the virgin, is being pursued by her lover Ebong (Marky Lopez) along the beach. Ebong, wanting to get Cion interested in sex, stands up, pulls down his shorts and shows her his penis. Cion, however, remains oblivious to Ebong and focuses instead on the mirage-like images she sees on the waters – an appearing and disappearing image of Mary. Ebong then points to his penis saying “*Ito ang tignan mo!*” [This is what you should look at!]. But Cion remains transfixed to the Mary image floating on the water. This becomes a deliberate turning away from the phallus and pursuit of the image of a female deity. Eventually, Cion is able to talk to the Virgin Mary who is represented as a dead tree, much like the image used in the *Himala*.

We also learn that Cion and Lorena’s mother is sick, constantly bleeding due to an unexplained disease of the womb. The mother is devoted to praying to the religious images at their house, in contrast to Lorena who is strongly against this devotion, believing more in the medicine from Apo Satur (Nanding Josef), the town’s resident *albularyo* or herbalist/indigenous healer. In one scene, Lorena forces the medicine into her mother’s mouth, saying “*Dugo’t laman ko ang pinambayad ko dito, huwag mong sayangin*” [I sold my flesh and blood just to be able to buy this, don’t waste it]. Cion eventually heals their mother by making the bleeding stop. This echoes how Jesus healed the woman with the issue of blood (Gaerlan 1991).

Ara Mina and Maui Taylor are sexy stars poised to add sensuality to the film. Both virgin and vamp are presented as sexual objects, someone Ebong, Martin and the rapist could fantasize about and violate. The sex and rape scenes here are fully shown, unlike in *Himala* where Chayong and Elsa are in similar situations. A montage sequence juxtaposes the image of Lorena having sex with her client and the image of Aling Esme while she is flogging herself. Prostitution becomes parallel with self-flagellation, the voluntary inflicting of violation and pain on oneself.

The Virgin/Vamp in *Santa Santita* (2004, Laurice Guillen)

Malen (Angelica Panganiban) is a Quiapo vendor-turned-prayer woman who initially sees religion as a means to make money. She is young, voluptuously sexy and rebellious. She speaks harshly to her customers and in one scene shouts at the blind man who bumps her – “*Bulag ka na nga, hindi ka pa nag-iingat sa dinadaan mo.*” [You’re blind, yet you are not careful how you go!] She is defiant, blatantly disobeying her mother Chayong (Hilda Koronel), who is also a prayer woman. In her dreams however, Malen sees herself as an image of a virgin, a lady in white, with her hair flowing behind, walking in the desert towards the horizon. Drops of blood fall from the wounds in her hands and feet, and are imprinted on the sand she walks on.

Malen begins a relationship with Mike whose car, like his body, is for rent. Malen packs her bags to join Mike, despite her mother’s strong objection. Later, she learns her mother has died of a heart attack. Malen, who sheds no tears for her dead mother, then picks up where her mother left off and finds herself doing the job of a prayer woman, and being surprisingly effective at it. Father Tony (John Delgado) is bothered when the clamor for Malen increases. She is, like other prayer women, clearly competition for the priests. There tension between male intercessors and female intercessors – there is a conscious effort from male intercessors to secure their authority.

Malen’s newfound religious role remains a role, however. In one scene, before having sex with Mike, Malen turns away all the graven images in the room, as if she does not wish them to watch the sexual act. When Mike comes over her, we see that his back has a huge tattoo of a cobra. This image signifies a biblical reference of sin entering mankind through Eve who was tempted by the serpent. In this scene, the man and the cobra are one, they de-virginize the virgin and let sin enter her.

Malen then dreams of the same images seen at the beginning of the film. This time, the lady in white turns to show she has the face of Malen. These images are juxtaposed with images of her mother, and of religious images being turned to a certain direction, just like what Malen did.

Malen begins to take the business of praying seriously. Her followers eventually become so many that she had to go out of the church and accommodate them at her house. In another scene, Malen heals the leg of Sister Dolores (Cherry Pie Picache), and it is miraculously healed. Dolores

reports this to Father Tony and the Monsignor, who scoffs at Dolores' claim and expresses his distrust of Malen and of nuns in general: "*Milagro? Kilala natin si Malen, at hindi maganda ang reputasyon niya. Kayong mga madre, ang dali ninyong maniwala sa mga mila-milagro*" [Miracle? We know Malen, and she does not have a good reputation. You nuns believe so easily in miracles]. Dolores replies, "*Pero bakit kayong mga pare, ang tagal bago niyo maniwala?*" [But why do you priests take so much time before you believe?] The priest continues his argument, "*Kasi tinitignan ninyo ang malalaking kababalaghan, samantalang araw-araw, may maliliit na milagrang hindi niyo nakikita*" [You only look at the big miracles, but you don't see the small miracles happening everyday]. Here, nuns are judged to have a weak understanding of the workings of God, while priests are seen as capable of discrediting claims of miracles.

Malen is the most self-reflexive among the characters included in this study. She responds to miraculous events just like a normal person would – with incredulity. She also questions her identity, and reveals the schism within her character:

MALEN

Ano ba ang gusto ng Diyos sa'kin? Sinunod ko na siya! Lahat ginawa ko na. Pati ba naman 'tong pagiging Santa kailangan kong gawin? Mahal ko talaga si Mike. Hindi ko ata kayang magpaka-santa.

[What does God want from me? I obeyed Him! I did everything. Does He want me to do even this saint thing? I really love Mike. I don't think I can bear to be a saint.]

FATHER TONY

Bakit hindi mo muna alamin kung sino ka talaga?...

[Why don't you examine first who you truly are?]

MALEN

Sa nangyayari sa buhay ko, si Mike lang ang kaya kong ipaliwanag. 'Tong mga 'to, wala 'to. Lahat parang panaginip lang. Father, ako ang pumatay sa nanay ko.

[Mike is the only thing I can explain in my life right now. All of these are nothing. Everything is like a dream. Father, I am the one who killed

my mother.]

Malen, however, fails to overcome her ultimate challenge – saving the son of Mike. When she seriously prays for someone other than herself, her prayer is not answered.

The next time we see her, she has become the Malen in her dreams – long hair, white dress. While visiting Mike in prison, we learn that Malen has continued her job as a prayer woman. The film closes with Malen walking away from the prison while Mike watches her. She is smiling, sweet-faced, peaceful. The vamp has transformed into a virgin.

Angelica Panganiban, who exudes both sexual and innocent beauty on screen, aptly captures the virgin/vamp divide. As the only film in this study directed by a woman, this film ironically employs the lingering male gaze (Mulvey 2003) as it focuses on the sensuality of the female lead. Laura Mulvey says that the “determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist roles women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*.” The title itself echoes this dichotomy, which makes it essentially a retelling of the story of Mary Magdalene, the prostitute and possessed woman who became a disciple of Jesus, the vamp who became the virgin. Unlike Magdalene who has a point of conversion, Malen does not have a turning point. In her conversation with Father Tony, she recognizes that religion is different from spirituality, separating “being a saint” from merely performing a religious role. She maintains that her identity is that of a vamp. The virgin and the vamp are still separate at this point, but they eventually merge to become the virgin. This becomes the completion of Malen’s identity as she gains a degree of normalcy and acceptance in society. What comes to mind again is the modern-day priestess, and the nativist or millenarian movement operating outside of society. They are perceived to be merely performing religious roles, but their goal is to end social oppression and inequality, treating the dominant culture as evil (Milaflor 2007). When this religious role is merged with their subversive role and becomes operational within the society, then that peace and equality sought for would come into fruition.

Likewise, Malen sees religion as the source of her repression, and this is personified in her mother. When the mother is eliminated, Malen contends

with visions of herself and with her newfound powers. When she decides to accept her fate, she finds contentment. Although the ending is ambiguous, the narrative hints at this merging of the virgin and the vamp, the subversive with the status quo, in order for things to come full circle.

Religious Culture, Gender and Sexuality in Religion-Themed Films

These films reflect important and recognizable aspects of Filipino Folk Catholicism. The contrast between supernatural occurrences versus what is considered “truth” is problematized through the representations of religious culture, gender and sexuality.

First is the discourse on gender. As with other melodramatic films, when there is a virgin, there is a vamp. In the intersection of gender and religion, the virgin/vamp divide is paralleled with the dichotomies of truth/false and good/bad.

Also notable is the play on female/mother and male/father images in the films. In *Angelita*, the mother is absent but is found in the end, the completion of her daughter. The father is also initially absent but does not seize the opportunity to return. In *Himala*, the mother is adoptive yet involved, and the father is absent. In *Huling Birhen*, the father is absent, and the mother is pathetic. The father figure, a priest, rapes Martin as a child. In *Santa Santita*, the father is absent, and the mother who forces Malen to pray (reminiscent of the mother in *Carrie* who is considered to represent the phallus) is eliminated. This echoes the general sentiment of the films – there is a turning away from the father, and an imagining of a scenario where there is no father at all. The women avoid men’s sexual advances to focus on the ministry or the image of the Virgin Mary, the female deity. There is also the repeated line, “*Sabi sa’kin ng nanay ko*” (“My mother tells me...”) to imply the authority of the mother, and not of the father. The goal is to find the lost mother, and to reconnect with her. The order of the Father has already passed and the time of the Mother has come.

True to form of the melodramatic film, this subgenre features a woman, and not a man. Aside from the woman’s strong association with religious elements and references, as discussed previously, she also adds sexuality to the text, and at the same time represents that state before sin came into human beings, the age of innocence.

The missing image then is the man, despite the fact that men who display supernatural abilities are well-known in Philippine pop culture (Cruz 2010). Filipino religion-themed films that feature male protagonists seem to be less frequent or lesser known. One such film is “Son of God,” a documentary by Filipino independent filmmaker Khavn de la Cruz and Danish filmmaker Michael Noer which premiered at the 2010 My World Images Contemporary Arts Festival in Copenhagen. The film follows the life of a mystic midjet in Leyte who is the object of pilgrimages and cult following in the area (Cruz 2010). However, this is a documentary and is reflexive of the male-dominant supernatural/religious arena. There are also biographical films such as *Kristo* (1996, Ben Yalung), but since it is a retelling of the Gospel of John on the life story of Jesus Christ, the lead would obviously be male.

The woman still dominates fictional narratives. In the religion-themed film, the man does not incur powers or see miracles. Instead, he is the violator, the one who discredits the woman, or the passive and indifferent character who watches women get violated, as in Orly in *Himala*. The man also represents the authority or dominant ideology. As a priest, he convinces his small town that the female miracle worker is suspicious, a transgression of holy and religious practice. Even as an *albularyo* who is likewise associated with folk religion, he still rises above the woman as the better authority. In *Himala*, the resident *albularyo* exorcises the bad spirits believed to be demonizing Elsa. The struggle to find and redeem the lost mother is hindered by the male – the symbol of authority and dominant ideology. The woman becomes the representation for a shifting and uncertain religious revolution, while the man represents the stable and sound religion.

Second is the use of religious, biblical and mystical images or references. Sexual innuendos abound in most of the films, and here we witness the intersection of religious and sexual images as described in Dane Claussen’s anthology (2002). Dane Claussen’s book tackles media representations and use of religion and religious materials either explicitly or unconsciously. Claussen says that the anthology seeks to examine what consciousness (sexual or otherwise) on religion the media is creating in the minds of people. Claussen makes an important statement while commenting on the essay of Carol Pardun and Kathy Brittain McKee entitled “Religious and Sexual Images in Rock Videos: A Second-by-Second Analysis”: “Pardun and McKee’s research also suggests further research on instances in which religious images are intentionally and essentially used as “responses” to, even critiques of, sexual images and ideas, and vice versa. Separately, we should

consider studying the differing interpretations and effects of religious images in the media based on audience members' recognition, or lack thereof, and understanding or knowledge of, and lack thereof, religious images."

The woman and the sexual act or violation are interplayed with images of blood, religious objects or biblical images like the serpent and pig, representing the interrelation of birth (life), sin, violence, and death. In *Santa Santita*, the image is that of Malen's virginity being violated, her innocence being put to an end, as the male and the image of the cobra comes over her. In *Himala*, the pig is associated with the sexual act/violation, sin and demons. What comes to mind is the story of the demon-possessed man in Luke 8:26. When the legion of evil spirits was cast out by Jesus, they went into a herd of pigs. The possessed pigs hurled themselves from a steep bank and drowned in the lake below.

Religious objects like the statues of the Sto. Niño, Virgin Mary, and crucifixion are consistently part of these films' mise-en-scene, having almost as much screen time as the characters themselves. This reflects Filipino religiosity which is largely based on religious objects and altars (Gaerlan 1991). In the biblical context, this is considered idolatry by a jealous God.

The opening scene of *Himala* and *Santa Santita* feature celestial bodies or orbs (an eclipse and a high risen sun, respectively), mystical images which are associated with the womb or the fullness of a woman in childbirth. The orb represents things coming into full circle, and the cycle of life. It also foreshadows disastrous events (Tolentino 2010). All these images and elements are strongly connected with the woman and her role in society.

Another recurring theme is blood. In *Himala*, one of the most memorable images is that of Elsa praying. With her head tilted towards the heavens, she is leaning back as if she is about to do a back bend. Blood is on her arms and when she wakes from the trance-like prayer, we see that her hands are also bloodied as if nails have been driven through them. In *Santa Santita*, Malen in dream sequences has bloodied hands and feet.

Blood also appears in other woman characters in the films, either through violence, sickness, or self-flagellation. In *Huling Birhen*, the mother is a biblical reference to the woman with the issue of blood (Spangler & Syswerda 2000). In the bible, a woman in her monthly menstrual cycle is considered unclean. However, the story of the woman with the issue of blood

(Matthew 9:20-22, Mark 5:25-34 and Luke 8:43-48) is set apart because she has been bleeding for twelve years. Due to this hemorrhage, she became a social outcast. When she is healed, Jesus says to her, “Thy faith hath made thee whole.” Blood from the flesh, which flows from “wounds” and “fissures”, as mentioned by Tania Modleski (2004), contribute to the “pleasure in the pejorative sense.” (Modleski says the word *jouissance* “privileges terms like ‘gaps,’ ‘wounds,’ ‘fissures,’ ‘splits,’ ‘cleavages.’ She mentions that “pleasure in the pejorative sense is sometimes personified as a female deity” and that when pleasure becomes pejorative, it is expected that it will be incarnated as a woman. Modleski notes that in most horror films, the women are killed brutally.) The image of the monster (Modleski 2004) which elicits both pity and disgust is positioned with the woman, the “ruptured body.” Modleski also notes the observation of Linda Williams in “When the Woman Looks” that the woman in a horror film is “usually placed on the side of the monster.” Although *stigmata* is associated with Christ, we can see here that blood is heavily associated with the woman, and that the absence of it makes her whole.

The use of dead trees and water as imagery for apparitions also has a biblical reference. In Habakkuk 3:17, the prophet tells of a fig tree that has dried up, referring to drought and famine in the land, a time of despair and hardship. But the writer in verse 18 says that this is still cause for rejoicing in the God of salvation. In *Himala* as in *Huling Birhen*, the woman starts her journey by looking at the dead tree, a manifestation of the apparition. The tree reflects a spiritually lifeless town, a dead religion. Water or rain, also associated with the image or the return of the Virgin Mary, is then used to signal the start of miracles and revival.

The names of the lead female characters are all associated with biblical characters. Angelita is a derivative of angel or heavenly being. The name “Elsa” invokes God as a feminine derivative because of the syllable “el.” This syllable refers to God, and is associated with the “Northwest Semitic word which means power” (Wikipedia). Its variations include “*al, iah, yah* or *Eli*” (Keathley, H.). This syllable is also used for the specific names of God in *Genesis* – *El Shaddai* (God almighty), *Elohim* (plural form of El, meaning “strong one”), *El Elyon* (the most high God) and *El Olam* (the most high God). We recall that Elsa’s name replaces God’s name in phrases uttered in the film, such as “Elsa loves you.” The name *Elsa*, however, contains the syllable “sa,” which is also the first syllable for Satan. Cion is a derivative of the Spanish names Concepcion and Visitacion, which are biblical events associated with the story of Mary

of Nazareth. Malen is a derivative of Magdalena or Magdalene, the biblical character who transformed from a sinner to saint.

Mary is heavily foregrounded in these films. Incurred powers and apparitions are perceived to be from or of Mary. The female characters eventually take on the persona of Mary, and wears costumes that exude the image of Mary or of a virgin. In *Himala*, a statue of Mary is prominently in the background as Elsa gives her speech. In *Angelita*, the statue of Mary is the object of a little girl's adoration. It is Mary who backs up and empowers the woman.

The virgin birth is also cited in the narratives. This is the speculation surrounding Elsa's pregnancy, and Cion, true to her name, is pronounced to have experienced the Immaculate Conception. This echoes the essays of Mananzan and Buhay where they say that Philippine culture has a unique level of Mary-worship.

It should also be noted that Mary gives healing powers. *Angelita*, Elsa, Cion and Malen all become healers. Healing is nurturing, and it is identified as a traditional role for women. This is also significantly associated with the Filipino priestess, and not of the Virgin Mary. This reflects Domingo's assertion that the Filipino notion of mother God does not simply refer to the Virgin Mary (Domingo 2006). The traditional stereotyped image of Mary is also something which we need to be free from (Tolentino 2010).

The Mary apparitions in these films, however, are represented through dead trees, water, disappearing and reappearing images, or merely as statues. Mary remains in the psyche of the woman and does not manifest as real, live images onscreen. Here, the female deity is given a strange presence, a ghostly existence. Her visual representation remains mystical and invisible to many, just like the existence of priestesses today.

Third is the commentary on or depiction of Filipino religiosity and society. There is the use of small, rural towns as setting. The narratives unfold in small towns, or in small communities where people know each other. The emerging female alternative leader is then judged based on the prior knowledge of the people surrounding her, just like how Jesus was judged by his own neighbors in Jerusalem. In this microscopic society, people are divided either into allies or enemies, into skeptics or believers.

The films also show religion as money-making schemes. The woman is used by some of her allies to generate money, donations or fees that are collected for the performance of each miracle, or the intercession of each prayer. The society in which the woman moves in – the microcosm of the Filipino nation – reflects how one can readily trade truth or good for the sake of money, just to alleviate one's poverty and wretchedness.

Blindness figures in the religion-themed film as a discourse of religious practice. The blind characters ironically serve as the seers – Angelita and the blind prophet in *Himala* are aware of the Virgin Mary and her impending discovery or return. The blind character in *Santa Santita* also provides contrast to the character of Malen, who at that moment is the one who is blind. The state of blindness represents the state of religion which is aware of the female deity but is unable to truly seek her, only focusing on what can be perceived by sight. This is connected to the way the woman undergoes physical transformation as she is dressed in a conservative garb which invokes a religious persona. Change is therefore perceived by society to be outward and in the realm of what people can see. It is something that can be pulled over the eyes to cover up something else, as exemplified by the fake miracles and the carnival in *Huling Birhen*. When Angelita's eyes are opened, she seeks the lost mother. This alludes to enlightenment which leaves behind religion in search for a female deity.

Screening the Supernatural Woman

The image which these films propel is that of a supernatural woman, supernatural as in being able to perform miracles, which is different from the capabilities of other supernatural characters in Philippine cinema such as Darna.

Essentially all miracle-workers, the supernatural woman in these films are transformed from being ordinary into persons of power, then back to being ordinary. If the supernatural woman is a figurative image, she is an orb, representing her struggles within herself and within the society she is in. This is a never ending circle, a revolution that goes around its own orbit.

Initially, they are already Others – rebels, ordinary, underprivileged, blind, weak. When they become supernatural, they become more Other. She experiences threats and violations against her body, honor and life. The image becomes that of the mysterious, miraculous and even exotic woman,

essentially an Other who is caught in an oppressive world where the dominant ideology threatens to make her remain as an Other.

The supernatural woman is also depicted as abject (Kristeva 2003), both eliciting pity and disgust. Kristeva's essay "Approaching Abjection" describes the concept of abject and abjection: It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object...It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. If the woman is abject, then she is put in the film to provide *jouissance*, that is, what is left when pleasure is taken out (Modleski 2004). She embodies physical pain in her wounds and the sexual violations inflicted upon her. She also embodies emotional pain as she struggles with being alternately accepted and rejected. As she tries to undo a curse or a supernatural sanction, she becomes the curse, or she becomes cursed herself. After she has gone to the hill or an elevated ground to be blessed with powers, she eventually goes down to the valley to deal with chaos and danger. After reaching the height of a supernatural experience, she is brought down and forced to once again occupy the "silent side of the altar" (Brewer 2004) and remain a "silent image" who is the "bearer, not maker, of meaning" (Tong 1989).

If the women are active here, and elicit narcissistic identification with their female audience, what we get into is an abject psyche. We identify with a woman who is pushed into further Otherness or ostracized from the Symbolic Order. However, she is able to use this to her advantage, exemplifying the "positive side of Otherness" (De Beauvoir 1949). She is able to wield power in her state of pain and suffering, mystery and abnormality.

The stereotypes and roles Santiago identifies in her dissertation also fit the supernatural woman – mother, martyr, nurturer, saint, sacrificial lamb. However, the supernatural woman is unique because she assumes roles different from those she initially plays. She becomes powerful, socially relevant, and authoritative. But she also invites disaster upon herself, to borrow from Benedict. The films show various instances of oppression and discrimination against women who are associated with miracles, sin or religion. We notice that there is an initial clamor for them when they exhibit supernatural powers which benefit others. However, when things start to go wrong, their supporters backtrack. In the process of building doubt on her authority, the supernatural woman's previous identity is brought up – *Malen*

has a bad reputation, Cion is retarded, they cannot possibly be holy and good.

The woman is also entrapped when she undergoes the process of change. It seems she has nowhere to go – there is danger when she incurs and shows powers, when she assumes new duties and when she withdraws from it. Either way, violence is done against her. The supernatural woman in the films encountered violence at different stages in the story. Elsa and Chayong are raped in the middle of their miracle crusade, Angelita is left to die by her own caretaker, Cion and Lorena are violated. All women protagonists are single, most are daughters. They are forced into becoming the mother through rape, or into becoming a non-virgin through the sexual act.

There is also that conscious disclaimer, “I am not God” or “It is not I, but the Virgin Mary/God.” While the supernatural woman can now exhibit miraculous powers, she knows her place. She seems to acknowledge that she was only given the power, and that she is not powerful herself or by herself. Not only is she discredited by the people or authority around her, she also somehow discredits herself.

Despite dissociation from her newfound role, the supernatural woman (while the miracles lasted) invokes the function of the *babaylan* or the *catalonan* earlier mentioned – that of “nurturer, preserver and diviner of omens” who takes care of the “spiritual and physical health and cultural life of the community” (Domingo 2006). They are miracle-workers who redefine the religious figure and authority in a society.

Film as critique of religion

The history of the Filipino religion is reflected in the Filipino religion-themed film. As shown in the study, the films are critiques of religious practices in the Philippines which place importance on things (e.g., religious images) which can be seen instead of those which cannot, i.e., truth, or spirituality. More importantly, the films touch on the discourse of a post-colonial or hybrid religion which spoiled the original identity and spirituality of the Filipino, whose consciousness is that of a female God.

The supernatural woman is subversive. She embodies the *babaylan* who “represents a subversive, power-full, and inextricable entanglement of woman with religious leadership” (Brewer 2004). She represents the history of the *babaylanes* who were “ostracized and condemned as she-devils...likened

to the *manananggal*, or *asuang*,” and then “relegated...to the mountains and caves,” outside of society (Domingo 2006). She reminds the audience that she exists, that she once took on such roles and responsibilities in society, that she is part of the original Filipino religious scene.

While these films seem to follow traditional narrative or melodramatic plotlines, they do not offer solid resolution on the part of the supernatural woman, in contrast to what is expected from the genre. When their fame or powers fade, the fact that they once became glorious spiritual leaders is seemingly forgotten. She either disclaims or releases her hold of that power. She is “always becoming, but never being”, as articulated by Julia Kristeva. The truth/false divide is left hanging. We can ask: What is the truth then? Did she really perform those miracles? Did those miracles really happen? This echoes Jaime Belita’s discussion on the Filipino consciousness of religion – there is fear of mystery, of the unknown. It is better to simply forget what cannot be explained, for fear of uncovering something which a person may not be ready for.

This way, the Filipino audience is presented with images and representations of religiosity which is unique to the nation, while the Filipino female audience is presented with the image of a supernatural woman who is Other, abject, and virgin or virgin/vamp in her struggle to deal with her newfound (or recovered) power and place in society. This image reflects the “concept of god among the ancient Tagalog” which “was more closely linked with woman” (Mananzan 1988).

The texts urge the audience to think critically, to engage in the struggles of a society being swayed from belief to disbelief. Essentially, the film dismantles our cultural or traditional perspectives on religion, deity and miracles. It brings us face to face with the frailty of humanity that religiosity cannot cover up. In the exposure of religious deceptions, there is a rediscovery of faith, truth and divinity. More importantly, the texts contend with male and female priesthood, and how society’s grasp of religion further deteriorates if the male and female representations of religious leadership go against each other. This becomes a reference to the ideal situation – gender equality. As Mananzan (1988) mentioned, the word *Bathala* joins man and woman, and shows “a nuance of union and mutuality, not subordination.” Even if the “pre-Spanish Filipino Society cannot be called matriarchal...the Filipino woman enjoy(ed) equal status with the male” (Mananzan 1988). In the Filipino-religion theme and through the supernatural woman, there is the recognition

of a female deity, an acknowledgement of patriarchy in church management, and a subversive agenda in light of gender equality and the redemption of a lost religion and nationhood.

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