

SUBVERTING *ZSAZSA ZATURNNAH*
The *Bakla*, the 'Real' Man and the Myth of Acceptance

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Abstract

This essay examines Carlo Vergara's graphic novel "Ang Kagilas-gilalas na Pakikipagsapalaran ni Zsazsa Zaturnnah" in an attempt to confront the media's discourse on homosexuality. It posits that the adaptation of the graphic novel into a musical and film to "un-stereotype" gay men by repacking the gay persona as a strong superhero. The essay seeks to figure out whether Vergara succeeds in subverting the dominant patriarchal ideologies of homophobia and heteronormativity.

This essay is a queer reading of a commercially and critically acclaimed graphic novel *Ang Kagila-gilalas na Pakikipagsapalaran ni Zsazsa Zaturnnah* (*The Amazing Adventures of Zsazsa Zaturnnah*), which has been adapted into a musical play and film. Created by Carlo Vergara and published in 2002, the text attempts to 'un-stereotype' representations of homosexuality in Philippine media by repacking the gay persona as a strong superhero. By examining the text, this essay seeks to figure out whether Vergara succeeds in subverting the dominant patriarchal ideologies of homophobia, heterosexism and heteronormativity.

Gay Capital of Asia

The Philippines, Nepal, Thailand and Shanghai, China, are listed as top spots in Asia where homosexuality is accepted, according to a CNN Travel Asia article "Scenic, Cultural, Fun-loving and Gay-friendly" written by Tiffany Lam (2010). The article emphasizes the Philippines' gorgeous beaches

and welcoming gay bars where gays mingle and interact. The Interactive Travel Guide website (www.iguide.travel) pushed the recognition a notch higher by declaring Manila as one of the Gay Capitals of Asia, alongside Thailand. The country's reputation of openness to gay culture in the country is reflected in other homegrown travel sites like One Stop Manila (www.1stopmanila.com) and Gay Boracay (www.gayboracay.com). These reports and websites may suggest that Filipino gay men are in paradise, that they are in one of the friendliest in Asia. However, in a nation where cross-dressing gays are prevented from entering certain establishments, where men suspected to be gay are barred from entering the police and military forces, where gay couples are prohibited from showing simple acts of affection in public like straight couples freely do, where fathers often inflict physical and/or psychological punishment on their effeminate sons, where Congress has been sitting on a bill (House Bill 1483 or An Act Defining Discrimination on the Basis of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Providing Penalties Therefor) that will protect the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) community from discrimination and provide them with equal rights, this notion of gay acceptability is a myth.

The acceptance of gayness in the Philippines reported in the abovementioned articles and websites may refer not much more than tolerance of what J. Neil Garcia (2004) describes as “public display of transvestism,” exemplified in the numerous representations of funny, effeminate cross-dressing gays or the Filipino *bakla* in popular media texts such as comics, magazines, television and film. Emmanuel Reyes describes the toleration of the *bakla* in Filipino public as functional: “they are entertaining... since much of the humor is based on how ridiculous their actions appear to the straight set, they usually end up as targets of heterosexual hostility” (cited in Baytan 2008: p.185). J. Neil Garcia in *Philippine Gay Culture* (1996) explains that the *bakla* and the homosexual are not essentially mutually exclusive, though the former is a term used to exclusively describe gender identity, not sexual orientation. Therefore, a *bakla* is labeled based on physicality and gesture. In the 1960s, the cinematic representation of the *bakla* is one who is sexless or is going through a ‘phase’, meaning, a *bakla* can be converted back to masculinity.

Nick Deocampo bewails the reluctance to articulate homosexual issues in films due to the “risk of being shunned by commercial producers for being too serious, when what the public wants are images of homosexuals audiences can laugh at” (cited in Baytan 2008: p.183). However, as film

production has become less costly with the use of digital video technology, stories that would not usually be film-produced for the mainstream audiences have lately been surfacing as film narratives, including those dealing with homosexuality. This has resulted to greater visibility of gay characters in independent films like *Duda* (2003), *Bathhouse* (2004), *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* (2005), *Masahista* (2005), *Selda* (2007), *Lalake sa Parola* (2007), *Daybreak* (2008), *Ang Lihim ni Antonio* (2008) and *Sagwan* (2009). The emergence of avenues for screening independent films, like local film festivals and censorship-free cinema theaters like the Cultural Center of the Philippines and the University of the Philippines Film Institute, has encouraged the production of films with homosexual content and characters, offering a variety of representations of gay men – from the familiar image of the effeminate, to transgender, butch homosexuals, authentic and self-labeled bisexuals, terms which are discussed later. These films have been able to portray gay characters as *sexual* characters, a point that mainstream texts are still hesitant to discuss. For the purpose of this study, I call these films *gay films*.

On the other hand, mainstream film outfits have also produced significant gay films in the past decade such as Regal Films' *Manay Po* (2006), *Zsazsa Zaturannah Ze Movee* (2006), *Happy Hearts* (2007) and *Manay Po 2: Overload* (2008); Star Cinema's *In My Life* (2009) and Viva Films' *Petrang Kabayo* (2010). All the mainstream films are comedies except *In My Life*, a drama, and all portray the gay man as less of a man or not a real man, consistently repeating images of gay men either as laughable clowns like the *bakla* or lonely woman-hearted men yearning for love and acceptance.

Zsazsa Zaturannah Ze Movee (to be referred as *Zsazsa Zaturannah* in this study), is based on the independently-published and critically-acclaimed graphic novel of Carlo Vergara, *Ang Kagila-gilalas na Pakikipagsapalaran ni Zsazsa Zaturannah* (2002). Initially published in December 2002 under Alamat Comics, *Zsazsa Zaturannah* became an unanticipated sensation with audiences and critics alike. Its circulation grew even larger with a publishing house, Visual Print Enterprises, now backing it up. It even received a National Book Award for Comic Books from the Manila Critics' Circle in 2003. It was adapted to a musical play and film in 2006. After five stagings and a total of 59 shows from February 10, 2006 to March 5, 2007, *Zsazsa Zaturannah: Ze Muzikal* became the musical staged by Tanghalang Pilipino with the most number of reprises. Credits include Chris Martinez (stage adaptation), Vincent de Jesus (musical direction) and Chris Millado (stage direction). Eula

Valdez, who played the title role of *Zsazsa Zaturannah*, won Best Stage Actress for a Musical at the 2006 Awit Awards. *Zsazsa Zaturannah: Ze Movee*, directed by Joel Lamangan, was released under Regal Films, Inc. on December 25, 2006 as part of the Metro Manila Film Festival. Rustom Padilla, who played Ada, won Best Lead Actor in Gawad Urian and Gawad Tanglaw. Chokoleit, who played Didi, won a Best Supporting Actor award from Gawad Tanglaw.

Zsazsa Zaturannah is a story of a superhero named Zsazsa Zaturannah who emerges from a *bakla*. Zsazsa's character departs from the male-dominated arena of superheroes. *Zsazsa Zaturannah* pays homage to the most popular local superhero in the Philippines: Mars Ravelo's *Darna*. The two superheroes share physical attributes (strong and beautiful, clothed in revealing two-piece outfits) and missions (to defend the poor and weak against evil characters). *Darna* in *human* state is Narda, a little orphan girl who is bestowed power by a magical stone which, when she swallows, followed by screaming "Darna," transforms her into the female superhero, a rarity in the male-dominated world of superheroes. Zsazsa, on the other hand, is Ada, a lonely effeminate gay man (a *bakla*), a hair stylist and proprietor of a beauty salon, who becomes Zsazsa every time he swallows a rock the size of a fist, followed by shouting the name "Zaturannah!" In the case of Zsazsa, the transformation is not simply a change from human to superhuman form, but also from male to female.

Carlo Vergara (personal communication, September 27, 2007) hopes to reinvent the gay character from the trite portrayal by the mass media of the *bakla* by 'un-stereotyping' the typically imaged effeminate, cross-dressing, loud *parlorista* (gay hairdresser). Vergara explains that the use of a stereotypical *bakla* as a central character is to recognize the existence of stereotypes; but by repackaging the *bakla* as a strong superhero, he hopes to represent them in a new, hopefully liberating, way.

According to Bierhoff, the stereotype is "a set of *opinions* about the personal attributes of members of a definable social group" (1989, 108). Bierhoff cites Ashmore and Del Boca's definition of the stereotype as "a set of *beliefs* about the personal attributes of a group of people" (109). Such beliefs and opinions signify constructions that we often accept without question such that representations of the stereotyped are seen as "natural" rather than cultural or socially constructed. The stereotyped themselves often accept and reinforce such images as even they often convinced of the truthfulness of the stereotype. Defining a group through stereotyping can lead to negative effects such as discrimination, which homosexuals in general suffer in most societies.

Consistent with the physical representations of gays (this generic term is used in most of this section but as the discussion progresses, other terms will come up according to their particular nuances) as effeminate and as cross dressers, gays are assumed to feel that they are women trapped in men's bodies. Given this assumption, this paper asks how Zsazsa Zaturannah, with Ada portrayed as the stereotyped gay, un-stereotypes the *bakla* through the gay superhero character. Regrettably, this paper shows that *Zsazsa Zaturannah*, which supposedly liberates gays from stereotypes, conforms with the it attempts to demolish. *Zsazsa Zaturannah*, in all three of its literary permutations – graphic novel, stage play and film – is treated in this study as a single cultural text.

Zsazsa Zaturannah: Synopsis

Ada, a lonely effeminate homosexual male (*bakla*), owns and operates a beauty parlor where he also works as a beautician. He has to make a big decision in his life after a piece of stone the size of a fist with the letters ZATURNNAH engraved on it, falls in his shower room. Didi, Ada's flamboyant gay (*bakla*) assistant and best friend, challenges him to swallow the stone, just like what is done in the graphic serial *Darna*. Persuaded by Didi, Ada swallows the stone then shouts "Zaturannah!" Magically he transforms into a beautiful woman with supernatural physical strength (minus the ability to fly), a feature of her (his) new identity that Didi discovers. Didi then names Ada's alter ego, Zsazsa Zaturannah and, inspired by Ravelo's *Darna*, dresses her (him) in a skimpy, revealing outfit. To their surprise, Zsazsa Zaturannah does not have Ada's ability to style and cut hair, leading them to believe that Zsazsa and Ada are two separate entities in one body.

As absurdity comes into play, a giant frog invades their town, which Zsazsa Zaturannah fights and defeats. This encourages Didi and Zsazsa to use the latter's power to fight evil instead of pursuing the idea of showcasing her (his) supernatural strength in a carnival, which Didi first proposes to earn money, capitalizing on Zsazsa's superhuman strength. The giant frog is sent by Queen Femina Suarestellar Baroux with her followers, the Amazonistas from Planet XXX: Sharon C., Dina B., Nora A., and Vilma S. Queen Femina is impressed by Zsazsa as a warrior but questions her placement in an area where "male forms" thrive and dominate. Her mission is to colonize Zsazsa's world. Zsazsa is ignorant of Queen Femina's goal but accepts her challenge.

Zsazsa and Didi meet Dodong for the first time in the cemetery

as they wait for the next challenge by Queen Femina. Ada likes Dodong, but chooses not to talk with him for fear of rejection, which he had experienced. Dodong praises Zsazsa for successfully defeating the giant frog. The conversation was going well when the undead start to rise from their graves and attack the whole town. A zombie punches Zsazsa on the nape, causing the stone to forcefully come out of her (his) mouth, thus revealing to Dodong that Zsazsa is Ada's alter ego. Ada commands Didi and Dodong to direct the whole community to evacuate to the church while he fights the zombies as Zsazsa. In her battle against the zombies, Zsazsa meets her (his) father who has never accepted her for being *bakla*. She (he) tells him that she has always loved him no matter what, but the father decides to self destruct, rejecting reconciliation. Zsazsa ignores the rejection and continues fighting the zombies, now with the cooperation of the people in the community, leading to the successful obliteration of the zombies.

Dodong asks Zsazsa if he may have the stone so he may be the one to battle with the Amazonistas, stressing his concern for Ada's safety. Zsazsa disapproves of the idea with the rebuke that Dodong implies that gays are not capable of doing battle. Dodong tells Zsazsa that he has no other intention but to help, and leaves frustrated.

Zsazsa and Queen Femina meet on their last fight. Queen Femina reveals that her anger at men – the male forms – is deeply rooted in the violence to which the men had subjected the women in the Planet XXX. She recalls that on her 18th birthday, she stood up and fought for the rights of the women in her planet, leading to the massacre of the male forms. She tells Zsazsa that she in turn is using violence that she learned from the male forms.

Queen Femina proves to be a tough villain as Zsazsa has a difficult time defeating her. Didi is almost killed when Queen Femina aims a bullet at his chest but is luckily saved. The battle ends when Zsazsa, frustrated at Queen Femina and the Amazonista's "hypocrisy about the point of hating men for their violent ways while using this same violence to justify and to achieve their goal of female domination," reveals her (his) true biological sex. The Amazonistas break into a riot. Zsazsa spits out and hurls the stone, aiming directly at Queen Femina's mouth. The stone lands in its target and the Amazonistas asks who the man in the female costume is. Queen Femina answers that it is none other than Zaturannah. The utterance of the word causes her to transform into a pig with the body of a man. The Amazonistas try to destroy the creature, and then they board their spaceship to return to

Planet XXX.

Ada, now without his alter ego, returns to his life as a beautician and moves to Manila to escape memories of the past. To his surprise, Dodong comes and pledges his love to Ada, asks for his permission for courtship, and proposes to live with him. Ada, delighted at the proposal, accepts it and looks forward to a happy life with Dodong.

Queering Gender and Sexuality

Gender and sex are often constructed as synonymous. For example, in various bio-data and application forms, the two terms are used interchangeably to indicate whether one is male or female, ignoring the difference between sex and gender and naturalizing their socially ascribed characteristics. While sex refers to the physiological and anatomical characteristics that determine male and female, *gender* refers to the social characteristics ascribed to each sex, which connotes the constructed differences between the two, leading to the assignment of roles that are “natural” to each, with the males claiming masculinity and the females femininity. If an individual’s gender identity and role performance do not correspond to his/her “natural” sex, which is usually what society imposes as his/her primary identification, he/she is perceived as deviant. Such perception leads to discrimination and oppression (Perry & Ballard-Reisch, 2004).

Gayle Rubin argues that both sex and gender are socially constructed, a “socially-imposed division of the sexes,” which results to an “obligatory heterosexuality and constraint of female sexuality” (as cited in Hatty, 2000:114). Therefore, one is subjected to the belief that he/she is a member of a specific gender category and he/she is expected to follow his/her gender’s ascribed behaviors, norms, values and beliefs, perpetuating boundaries between the categories and extending their differences. This constructionist view of gender echoes J. Neil Garcia’s (1996) work on *Philippine Gay Culture* where he states that current notions of sexuality were not present in the early Philippine society, indicated by the lack of local terms for homo- and heterosexuality. This suggests that our present knowledge about sexuality is a result of our adoption of a Western construction.

Feminists look at gender not only as an agent for maintaining differences but for justifying dominance and submission. Denise Thomson (2001) defines gender’s ideology as a set of “systematic meanings which excuse,

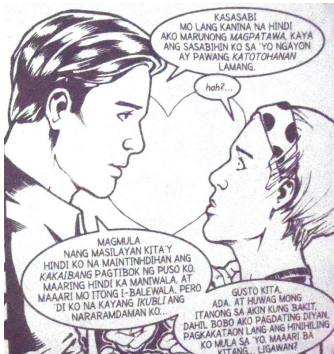
permit, legitimate and provide justifications for relations of ruling” (p.22). She questions justifications of men’s violence and degradation towards women and the subordination of women to men. Thompson attempts to develop a feminist politics that critically looks at constructed meanings, whether these reinforce or challenge the interests of the dominant.

Judith Butler (1990) steps out of the strict dichotomous paradigm of gender and argues for gender as a multifaceted, unstable concept, that there is no authentic or ‘normal’ expression of gender. She criticizes traditional and feminist scholarships that naturalize sex under “patriarchy and hierarchical gender differences” (Lane 2006, 49). Butler looks at the prohibition of the homosexual desire, which is internalized and silenced, creating an anxiety that relegates gender (and the whole self) as a series of performance, a performance to be perceived as heterosexual. Her concept of gender as performative challenges the constructed nature of gender as ‘being,’ but makes sense of it as ‘doing’ - stating that we must work critically with the systems that produce us as objects and disrupt the naturalness of heterosexuality.

Considered a pioneer contributor to queer theory, Butler’s works open a scholarly avenue for the destruction of binaries, dichotomies and norms in the understanding of identity, dissolving the socially constructed ideologies of sexuality and gender. “The queer body is not some essential identity outside gender relations; it is a capacity to destabilize gender identity from within” (Colebrook 2004, 231), which means the body is not ascribed with a fixed role and, just like gender, is culturally constructed.

Queer theory therefore proposes a deconstructive approach to identity, as it disrupts the codes of heterosexuality and homosexuality that structure our daily life (Seidman 1994). A queer approach offers a pluralism of meaning (Simon 1996) so that we can “recognize that manhood and womanhood is a socially generated fluid concept, not separated by a strict irreversible boundary of imaginary extensions of one’s genitalia, but blending ... and occasionally dissolving to enable human beings to enjoy a kaleidoscopic range of gendered and non-gendered experience” (Basu 2004, 62).

This paper is a queer reading of *Zsazsa Zaturnnah* as a contemporary text, which attempts to reveal the dominant ideology of gender, sexuality and identity in a text that supposedly works against that ideology, by deconstructing or tearing the text apart to surface the contradiction between its professed objective and unexamined premise.



Ada and Dodong



Ada/Zsazsa

Imaging Gayness and the Myth of Acceptance

Ada: *Sa buhay, may mga pangyayaring hindi natin maipaliwanag. Ang pagsabay ng buhos ng ulan at sikat ng araw. Ang pag-aaway ng aso't pusa. Ang paglaho ng inasahang walang kamatayang pag-ibig. Gayunpaman, tuloy-tuloy ang buhay. Minsá'y hindi mahalagang malaman pa ang dahilan. Basta nangyayari na lang. Tapos. Tulad ko. Ilang taon ko nang iniisip kung bakit malambot ang galaw ko. Kung bakit matinis ang aking boses. Kung bakit **hindi ako... normal** (emphasis supplied). Balde-baldeng luha na ang aking naiyak dahil dito. Nguni't sa dulo, tinanggap ko na. **Bakla ako.***

(Emphasis supplied)

Ada: [In life there are events that cannot be explained. Rain falling under the striking sun. Cats and dogs brawling. The loss of what was hoped to be an undying love. Life, however, goes on. To know the reasons sometimes is not necessary. Things happen. Just like me. I've been wondering why my movements are soft. Why my voice is high-pitched. Why I am **not... normal** (emphasis supplied). I have shed buckets of tears over it. But I just accepted myself in the end. **I am gay.** (Emphasis supplied)]

These opening lines, a first-person narration of protagonist Ada, suggests that his gayness is not a choice but a product of nature – albeit an abnormality, Ada's musing hints at how the dominant culture looks at gays and how gays see themselves as men who lack masculinity, who emulate what are considered feminine and who dream of becoming women. Ada as a *bakla* is assumed to be abnormal because he deviates from his culturally-constructed but taken-as-natural role as male.

J. Neil Garcia's (1996) seminal work *Philippine Gay Culture: the Last Thirty Years*, an in-depth study of the then-unquestioned position of gays in Philippine society, looks at the evolution of metropolitan gay culture covering three decades (1960s to 1990s) with an emphasis on the *bakla*. The visibility of the *bakla* in public provides an illusion of acceptability of gays in general. Garcia (2004) describes this as faulty, noting that these characteristics are "allowed only in certain social classes and within certain acceptable contexts" (p.13) exemplified by today's famous *bakla* personalities on television such as Vice Ganda, John Lapus and Chokoleit, who capitalize on their identities and bodies to generate comedic laughter, creating the illusion that their popularity is proof of acceptability of gays in general.

The happy façade of the *bakla* in media ironically reinforces society's discriminatory attitude towards the *bakla*. Labeling an innocent young boy or a macho man as *bakla* is taken as derogatory and therefore provokes a violent reaction in defense of his bruised masculine ego. Cross dressing in public likewise may elicit mockery and snide remarks. The *bakla* son has also deeply disappointed fathers, some of whom use physical and psychological torture on their effeminate sons to exorcise femininity out of them. In *Zsazsa Zaturmnah*, Ada's father submerges him in water to force him to become masculine. Garcia (1998) explains the root of society's negative attitudes

towards the *bakla* as colonial, “his abjected status as less-of-a-man (in other words as coward), and a joke of/an unreal woman, seems to derive from a clearly indigenous bias against effeminacy in general” (p.83).

The *bakla* then is equated to the Woman as the ‘Other’ and man as the standard, the ‘One.’ Worse, as an unreal woman, the *bakla* is pushed further to the margins. Thus, the notion of gay acceptance in this country is a myth. Even the so-called acceptance of transvestism merely serves as a visual cue to the masculine to separate the *bakla* as an ‘Other’ - not a threat to macho culture. Even the Catholic church (and other religions), which claims it is accepting of gays but not of same-sex relationships, which is deemed contrary to human nature and is therefore sinful, appears to regard homosexuality as a static gender identity devoid of its performativity.

The problem of pinning down the *bakla*’s identity may partly be traced to confusion about the label *bakla*. In the Philippines, the term *bakla* applies to both the feminized man and the male homosexual. Therefore, a masculine male homosexual who desires another man is a *bakla*, in the same way that an effeminate, cross-dressing *bakla* is a homosexual regardless of his attraction to men. However, J. Neil Garcia (1996) differentiates between the two: the *bakla* is a feminized man, denoting gender identity, while the male homosexual is erotically attracted to members of the same sex, denoting sexual orientation. Since there is no Filipino term for homosexual and homosexuality, *bakla* has referred to both categories differentiated by Garcia. Nevertheless, Garcia (1996) says that “with the continued sexualization of the Filipino, the conceptual boundaries of the two terms might meet” (p.52). Today, the terms have indeed fused into a hybrid. Ronald Baytan (2008) acknowledges that there are now masculine homosexual men who have embraced the term ‘*bakla*’ to refer to themselves and that they seek other *bakla* as partners, not straight men. Baytan acknowledges the possibility of becoming both a *bakla* and homosexual and that *bakla* is no longer just effeminate and “he may even be masculine and non-transvestic, and he can claim that he is *lalake*, too” (p.193).

Tan (1996) explains this linguistic merger in a historical context:

“The Americans introduced the terms, and Western-based concepts, of ‘heterosexuality’, ‘homosexuality’ and ‘bisexuality’. Filipinos are exposed to these concepts usually through schools and the media, and graft these on to older popular gender constructs ... The rise of gay

consciousness in the West, particularly in the United States, has spilled over into countries such as the Philippines. The terms 'homosexual' and 'gay' are now used in many Philippine languages, usually as synonyms for *bakla*." (p.209)

However, the dominant image of the effeminate *bakla* has resulted to "self-homophobia" within the gay community, evident in the self-labeling project of some butch gays (gays who are masculine in their physical presentation and demeanor). The term "bisexual" or "bi" has become popular "not to denote a person's preference for both same-sex and opposite-sex partners but rather to serve as a *safer* euphemism" (Baytan 2008). It is as if the use of the term "bi" saves one from social ridicule.

Given the label that conflates the concept of male homosexuality in the Philippines, it is imperative to use a more generic term, such as "gay." Garcia (1996) finds "gay" a viable term because a) some still find *bakla* a deriding term; b) it does not sound clinical compared to homosexual and; c) it is accepted internationally. The use of the Western term for the study of Filipino homosexuality may sound problematic, but as J. Neil Garcia puts it in his influential work *Philippine Gay Culture*: "To ignore the insights of Western homophobic discourse will be to shut Philippine gay culture off from the originators of its very life: the forces that both constantly sustain and challenge it" (1995, p.49). However, "gay" in this study is used to accommodate the sea of sexualities usually silenced, if not ignored, by society; while the terms *bakla* and "homosexual," unless indicated, are used according to the stricter, separate definitions offered by Garcia.

The linguistic complexities complicate the acceptability of homosexuality in Philippine society, a problematic that characterizes the representation of gays in media. John Philips (2006) emphasizes the implication of the way we represent things: "in a sea of images, representation has in so many respects conditioned our view of the real to the point where it can actually replace it" (166-167).

Ada: *Maraming tanong hindi na mahalaga ang kasagutan. Ako si Ada. Isang bakla. Yun lang.*

Ada: [There's a lot of questions that need not be answered. I'm Ada. I'm gay. That's just it.]

The line above boxes the character inside the limiting construct of a stereotype due to an “absence of more accurate self-representations” (Garcia 1998, 2). Vergara’s representation of Ada reestablishes the stereotype “in one’s consciousness as truthful, and so they end up becoming part of the ideological apparatuses whose singular purpose is to effectively maintain the present gender” (p.2).



Ada and Didi



Queen Femina



Ada swallows the stone



The ‘Real Man’ in the Closet

This section examines Dodong, the dominant masculine male character whom Ada secretly covets, his affirmation/negation of (internalized) homophobia and the absence of a linguistic equivalent to refer to his homosexuality.

An attractive and well-built man, Dodong nurtures Ada/Zsazsa, an act inconsistent with the macho culture’s disdain for effeminate men. When Dodong professes his (romantic) feelings for Ada, there is no affirmation whatsoever of his homosexuality in the narrative, a peculiar situation in a story where gay lingo and gay sex innuendos prevail and at a time when *bakla* as a term finally includes masculine homosexuals as well. The story focuses instead on Dodong’s masculinity as highlighted in the first stanza of the song “*Ikaw ang Superhero ng Buhay Ko*” (De Jesus 2006) in the theater and film adaptations:

*Ano ba ang sukatan ng pagkalalaki
Sa lalim ba ng boses o sa tibay ng tindig?
Nasusukat ba ito sa dami ng pinangakuan ng pag-ibig?*

[What is the measure of masculinity
Is it in the depth of one’s voice or the strength of his stance?
Can it be measured in the number of promised loves?]

As Dodong finds himself falling in love with Ada, he questions the norms and expectations of masculinity but does not realize his (homo) sexuality. In a culture where gays fall in love with “real men,” where a relationship between two gays is seen almost as an abomination or, ironically, a type of lesbianism, the absence of a linguistic realization of Dodong’s sexuality heightens the intensity of masculine/patriarchal ideology and reinforces homophobia, the negative attitude towards the LGBT – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender. Garcia writes that “homophobia starts and ends with the fear of the Other within the Same” (1998, p.44). While society has learned to tolerate the effeminate (*bakla*) homosexual image, it remains paranoid about the invisible, anonymous homosexuality.

The mark of effeminacy is indeed absent in masculine homosexuals – usually labeled as the “straight-acting” and “discreet” type or, in local gay terminology, *pa-mhin* (gay who acts “like a man”). For some, a “straight-

looking, straight-acting” man who desires another man is unthinkable as society has become accustomed to equating homosexuality with “woman-heartedness” – the common-sense notion that a homosexual is a “woman trapped in a man’s body” and that he is looking for a “real man” as a partner (Garcia 1998). The *pa-mhin* or butch homosexual is usually stereotyped as the “closeted” one, someone who is believed not courageous enough to reveal his gay identity. The butch homosexual is accused of hiding inside the comforts of the closet, enjoying society’s approval for satisfying the social criteria of the image of the “straight man.”

Could it be that the predominant negative image of the *bakla* is so powerful that some butch homosexuals choose to deny or keep their sexual preferences to themselves for fear of “losing” their masculinity and transforming them into the *bakla*, whose image they despise, causing their social marginalization. What lies beneath this line of thinking is the pressure on butch homosexuals to come out in stereotyped terms, starting with a dramatic transformation by adopting feminine dress and manners, the way former macho action star Rustom Padilla did when he came out as Bebe Gandanghari, dressed in a long gown and sporting long hair and makeup, and to want a “real man” for a lover. Rustom Padilla publicly came out as gay in the Celebrity Edition of the television reality program *Pinoy Big Brother* in February 2006. The older brother of famous action star Robin Padilla, Rustom was a matinee idol and action star in the 1990s and was married to actress Carmina Villaruel. After coming out, he was cast as Adal Zsazsa Zaturannah in *Zsazsa Zaturannah Ze Movee* (2006), which earned him his first *Gawad Urian Best Actor Award*. In 2009, he changed his name to Bebe Gandanghari and declared he is not gay but a woman. Rustom/Bebe is the image society is familiar with, failing to understand the conceptual difference between *bakla* and homosexual.

This explains the presence of internal homophobia among some homosexual men. For fear of losing the status of imaginary authenticity of manhood, some homosexual men have to hate themselves and conform to the heterosexist and heteronormative (the belief that heterosexuality is the norm) culture. They repress their own desires, form traditional families, and stay inside the closet. Nonetheless, the closet has become a place of contradiction. It can be a place of comfort but it is also a place of solitary confinement where one cannot follow one’s heart freely. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993) explains in her essay *The Epistemology of the Closet*, for many gay people the closet is:

“Still the fundamental feature of social life; and there can be few gay people however courageous and forthright by habit, however fortunate in the support of their immediate communities, in whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence” (p. 46).

One may surmise that Dodong’s expression of his love for Ada is his way of coming to terms with his (homo)sexuality, but the absence of a concrete linguistic expression or naming of this newly discovered gender/sex identity creates an ambiguity and inequality in gay politics. Ada experiences constant discrimination while Dodong does not. This reveals two things: (1) that male homosexuals who pass themselves off as “straight men” are less vulnerable to discrimination and scrutiny by society and (2) effeminate homosexuals are discriminated because of their effeminacy.

There is no easy way for the homosexual man. He stays in the closet, avoids society’s scrutiny, but lives a repressed life. Or he comes out and risks ostracism by his family and other social institutions, and also risks “losing” his masculinity. He consciously keeps his masculine image, perpetuating his own homophobia, possibly discriminating against the *bakla* or effeminate men. Naming based on sex/gender identity structures individuals under the constricting binaries of normal-abnormal and accepted-rejected while revealing the heterosexual-homosexual dichotomy as a product of the dominant-subordinate ideology of masculine/feminine.

Heterosexist Reversals

Worth noting is the packaging of the women from Planet XXX, the Amazonistas led by Queen Femina Suarestellar Baroux, as colonizers. Colonization is considered by Garcia (1998) a “masculinizing project” which reflects how “Western, Mediterranean machismo came to be implanted in our gender system” (p. 91). This section examines these women’s project of female domination.

In the scene where Zsazsa Zaturannah triumphs over the giant frog, Queen Femina hails her before the townspeople as a hero. The praise that Queen Femina heaps on Zsazsa appears to be genuine, calling her a powerful female, a defender of a place where *male forms* thrive.

Queen Femina: Magnificent! Who would’ve thought that such a valiant female warrior could choose to live in a wretched place like this? And it

seems that even your local male-forms applaud your triumph which is admirable but beware of their deception (original dialogue in English).

Queen Femina reveals her history, the struggles that the women, whom she calls womyn, of her planet experienced to claim their rights and privileges in society. The men were threatened by the women's increasing power, thus resulting to the abuse and massacre of the women, causing their near-extinction. Femina, along with a few women and girls, were kept alive so that men could continue to breed. When Femina grew up, she waged a war against the men, then castrated and killed them all. Queen Femina and the Amazonistas' may be construed as a metaphor for radical feminism's aspiration for the separation of the genders, or the programmatic banishing of men from female consciousness and the enshrining of women at the center of their own very energy and lives (Wilton 1995). However, Femina and the Amazonistas go farther by literally and violently eradicating men. Whether the characterization of the Amazonistas is an exaggerated critique or misunderstanding of feminism bears analysis.

The Amazonistas, being the only representatives of females in the graphic novel, are portrayed like the men they despise, embodying masculine violence. To Queen Femina, a man is a brute, nasty and violent, qualities she is ready to embody to achieve domination. This inscription of masculinity as naturally violent also naturalizes the subordination of women, and the notion that the only way for women to free themselves from subordination is to acquire this masculine trait. Femina justifies her use of violence by blaming men, who should be anquished through violence. In this sense, she does not empower women but isolates them. She neither seeks equality of men and women in society nor does she fight patriarchy, but ironically supports its agenda by embodying patriarchy, with the vision of eradicating men for female rule.

Feminism opposes patriarchy, not men. To equate feminism with man-hating is to assume that patriarchy and men are inseparable in principle (Lewis 2007). Patriarchy and domination are just constructs which are closely associated with men, and the only way to subvert the oppressive dangers of these concepts is to oppose them, not the people associated with them. One of the most significant scenes shows Zsazsa Zaturannah fed up with Queen Femina:

Queen Femina: As I've said, it was the male-forms who taught us the

art of *violence*. If we have to *act* like them to further our goals, then so be it (Vergara's emphasis).

Zsazsa Zaturannah: *Ipokrita ka. Gusto mo palang tularan ang mga lalake. Baka mainggit ka sa ipapakita ko sa iyo.*

Zsazsa Zaturannah: [You're a hypocrite. You just want to be like men. You might get jealous if I let you see this.]

(Zsazsa then disgorges the stone out of her mouth).

Here the irony of Femina and Zsazsa's desires are heightened: a woman who wants to be like a man (Queen Femina) and a man who wants to become a woman (Ada). At this stage of the narrative, both have experienced the fulfillment of their desires. However, feeling the disappointments that come with such fulfillment, Zsazsa disgorges the stone and throws it away. Ada is repelled by Queen Femina who, despite her savage hatred of men, desires to be like the powerful men. Queen Femina is outraged upon learning that Zsazsa Zaturannah is actually an alter ego of a male form. Ada/Zsazsa defies Femina's conviction that for a woman to be powerful, she has to acquire the "nature" of a man; but the image before Femina is that of a man who has left his body to achieve strength in becoming a woman, the identity which she is trying to overcome.

An identity crisis ensues, ending the battle between the two women warriors – Zsazsa and Femina – who both transform into men. Zsazsa transforms back to Ada after spitting the stone out and feels a sense of liberation: he does not have to become a woman to seek happiness as a *bakla*. On the other hand, Queen Femina transforms into a male body with the head of a pig after Ada shoots the stone into her mouth and forces it down her esophagus. Her change provokes a riot among the Amazonistas, who proceed to beat her (him) up. According to Vergara (2007), the pig's head symbolizes the male chauvinist pig, which is an ironic fulfillment of the image – although perhaps an unanticipated one – that Queen Femina desires.

Another interesting reversal happens every time Ada transforms into superhero Zsazsa Zaturannah: the woman-hearted man becomes a *bakla*-hearted woman. This fantastical externalization of internal desire of the 'woman trapped in a man's body' is a literal transmutation of Judith Butler's concept of the body as arbitrary and of gender as performance, dismissing constructs

not only of gender identity but also of the superhero genre. Soledad Reyes (2009) observes that the graphic novel “is a graphic transgression of official culture’s many stifling rules because it allows behavior, ordinarily contained and punished in society, to exist” (p,28) at least in fiction. However, since Zsazsa Zaturannah is female, can she be construed as a gay superhero? Does it matter? What is important is that Zsazsa Zaturannah realizes and experiences the *bakla’s* desire, even if only temporarily.

A Hetero-Homosexual Love Story

Zsazsa Zaturannah, like other popular texts, participates in the dissemination of the ideology of “true love” reflecting Patrick Fuery’s (2000) note on cinema’s contribution to the formation and representation of love in culture. Fuery refers to love as a cultural construction that is manifested by care, requires sacrifice and is used to justify truth and meaning. In Fuery’s criticism of *Casablanca* he writes, “Love is used to make sense of the world in the unchanging world of” Nazi-ruled *Casablanca* (p.103), promoting the belief that love is necessary to survival. This ideology of love is blatantly embedded in the grotesque world of *Zsazsa Zaturannah*. After Zsazsa’s successful battle against Queen Femina and the Amazonistas, the narrative ends happily for Ada, who finds his true love in Dodong. The ideology of true love, however, in a patriarchal culture like ours, is strictly inscribed in heterosexual terms.

Richard Dyer (2006) in his essay *Stereotyping* comments on how stereotypes of gayness in books and films translates into social truth, accepted even by gay people. He finds offensive the organization of people’s identities according to types based on society’s standards of normalcy. For instance, gay and lesbian images are stereotyped as effeminate and butch, respectively. To Dyer, stereotyping is the dominant group’s mode of imagining and understanding the gay community, in line with the former’s heterosexual ideology. For Dyer,

“What we should be attacking in stereotypes is the attempt of the heterosexual society to define us for ourselves in terms that inevitably fall short of the ‘ideal’ of heterosexuality and to pass this definition off a necessary and natural” (p.357).

Dyer sees ethnocentrism, or the imposition of a dominant culture’s norms and standards on minority groups, in the expectation that gays

play heterosexual roles – those of a man and a woman – in a homosexual relationship. Dyer looks at the power of film to reinforce stereotypes through (1) iconography, or the use of visual and aural codes to signify gayness, and (2) structure, or the strengthening of the sense of rightness of heterosexuality in the narrative.

Discussed earlier is the problematic ascription of Dodong as a ‘real man’, which puts him in the role of *the* man, and Ada as the *bakla*, in the role of the woman, mirroring an “ideal” heterosexual relationship. However, their relationship is atypical, not the stereotyped relationship between a *bakla* and a “real man” who enters the relationship for financial benefits. Ada expresses this in replying to Didi’s suggestion to move to Manila for more economic opportunities:

Didi: *Malay mo, maging kostomer mo pa ang mga artista, makakuha ka pa ng boypren na mestisuhin*

Ada: *Hindi ko kailangan ng boypren, Uubusin lang nun ang kita ko.*

[Didi: Who knows, you’d have actors as customers, you might even get a good-looking, white boyfriend.]

[Ada: I don’t need a boyfriend. He’ll just take all my money.]

The *bakla* accepts the commonness of this arrangement even as he dreams of a genuine romantic relationship with a “real man.”

It is common for people curious about the dynamics of a homosexual relationship to ask who is the “man” and who is the “woman” in the partnership. In his discussion of MSM or Men Who Have Sex With Men, J. Neil Garcia (1996) notes how some of these men still consider themselves straight despite their sexual attraction to and interaction with men. Michael L. Tan (1996), in his study on the public perception of the *silabis*, or the Filipino equivalent of the bisexual, emphasizes the importance of the roles of two men in sexual intercourse in defining homosexuality in heterosexual terms. If a man is masculine-looking, married and has a family and children, and performs the insertive role in anal sex (or ‘top’ in gay terminology; ‘bottom’ refers to the man who performs the passive-receiver role in anal sex) and does not perform oral sex, he is **not** *bakla*, but a *silabis*, which may not be considered strictly “straight” but is indeed the “man” in the male-to-male relationship. This gendered categorization of sexuality limits homosexuality to the strictures of heterosexual structuring of sex/gender roles.

To see Dodong and Ada's relationship as that between a "real man" and a *bakla* is to subscribe to a heteronormative ideology, a homosexual relationship conforming to patriarchy. The traditional view of homosexuality, according to Garcia, "is as oppressive as it is heterosexist: underlying the identities and relations of the *bakla* and the real man is the symbolic distinction between the roles of a dominant male and a dominated female" (1998, 55). Garcia wishes to liberate gayness by veering away from the cultural hegemony of heteronormativity, by "getting the *bakla* realize that they are indeed physically male and that therefore they don't actually need a real man to love them because they too, are just as real and manly as he is" (p. 174). The Ada-Dodong relationship may be genuine and valid, but it could have been portrayed as homosexual love between two homosexuals, without performing the gender roles of masculine-feminine, and could have risen as a solid challenge to heteronormativity. *Zsazsa Zaturrnah* indeed challenges gender assumptions, particularly in the male-dominated fantastic world of superheroes. However, the texts' subversions are diluted by the subtexts of heteronormativity, revealing an underlying homophobia and heterosexism.

A gay text created by a gay author, which makes visible the reality of homosexuality, demands a queer reading to expose how layers of the dominant gender ideology have insidiously undergirded the supposed openness of liberal society's gayness, shaping even the way gays view themselves. A queer reading attempts to embrace uniqueness and free the text from the constraints of mainstream society's heteronormativity. Future texts should acknowledge that labels and classification are unnecessary, that these structures that divide individuals. It should be noted that there were few important heterosexual characters in *Zsazsa Zaturrnah*, but its entire narrative space, its world, follows strictly the patriarchal ideology it is supposed to critique. What can be aspired to is a destruction/deconstruction of norms, a re-inscription of the world, to put homosexuality and the rest of the gender spectrum in a better light. A good step is to denaturalize heterosexuality, to make it strange as queer, as according to Dyer, "If things are natural, they cannot really be questioned or scrutinized ... Such naturalization often characterizes how we see and don't see, the powerful; how they see and don't see, themselves" (2002, pp. 118-119), to reveal how straight sexuality is in itself, a construction. A gay auteur may adapt "queer" as a perspective in order to re-imagine and re-map the gender and sexual order.

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