

# The Liberative Role of Discourse in Articulating Women's Issues and Concerns in Filipino Melodramatic Films from 1990 to 2000

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*This article explores the liberative capacity of discourse to enable and empower marginalized sectors to have a voice and space in the discursive space of media. Discourse is a site of struggle and should be understood in the context of power where ideological assumptions are often hidden in language since it pertains to language as text, speech, and the image. Through a study of six contemporary melodramatic films by Filipino women film directors, this article surfaces the value of discourse in articulating once-muted women's issues and concerns through its enabling power in finding a space and giving a voice and image in the dominant sphere where women can emerge from their marginalized state.*

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## Introduction

Why are certain ideas, concepts, and even images that were deemed unacceptable in the past now widely circulated? Films and television programs that used to be banned or not aired are also openly shown in theaters or in television today. We often explain these phenomena by saying that these programs or films have developed a Filipino audience “ready” to accept such shows, films, images, concepts, or ideas. Some even conclude that today’s audiences are “more educated” or thank the influence of the information highway in making many audiences receptive to such formerly-taboo images. However, what if this readiness, acceptance, or receptiveness is neither the product of information and communication technology nor the result of foreign cultural influences, but simply due to the existence of “a distinct world-view or conceptual structure that determines the nature of knowledge in a given period” (Foucault, 1972)?

Such an explanation is called *discourse*. Discourse is defined as the ubiquitous ways of knowing, valuing, and experiencing the world, which can be used for an assertion of power and knowledge (Fairclough, 2003). It can include written text, spoken language, and non-verbal forms such as architecture, institutional practices, charts, and graphs (Foucault, 1972). In the social sciences, a discourse is considered to be an institutionalized way of thinking, a social boundary defining what can be said about a specific topic or possible truth (Butler, 1993). Discourse is constituted as language and operates within a language system. Language as an arbitrary symbolic system is used by human beings to communicate with one another; and as such, the elements of discourse like written and visual texts (images) circulate within social practice and become irreducible parts of social life (Fairclough, 2003). Within these parameters, language is elemental in discourse.

We live amid discourse and it is very much a part of people's lives. It is able to construct beliefs and realities that may find acceptance or resistance. Discourses are seen to affect our views on all things and it is impossible for people to escape from it because it is part of social practice and social relations. French philosopher Michel Foucault (1972) described discourse as the vision of each age or epoch as distinct, exclusive and incompatible with visions from other ages, making it impossible for people in one period to think like those of another. Discourse makes possible the acceptance or resistance of certain ideas, texts, and images in any given age. Through discourse, realities can be constructed, circulated, and maintained.

While discourse may be construed as pertaining to language as text and as speech, it is also understood in the context of defining semiotic resources of visual representations in the mass media such as television, video or film. Since discourse is inescapable, it often becomes the site of struggle since it is understood in the context of power where ideological assumptions are often hidden in language. Thus, people tend to take these for granted. Many times, they have no choice but to accept how language constitutes them and leads them to identity formation. But language may also empower and enable people to find a space in the dominant sphere where they can emerge from their marginalized state. It is in this last characteristic of discourse that it is can be a liberative tool for marginalized voices to articulate their narratives, issues, and concerns.

## Film as Discourse

Film is discourse. It contains visuals and images that are constituted as language because film is understood as a language system. Film as language was propelled by the French theoretician Christian Metz. He addressed the issue of where and how language “enters” the cinema in his landmark work, *Language and Cinema* (1974), stressing the linguistic character of film through the recorded phonetic sound and written materials within the image (Stam Burgoyne & Flitterman-Lewis, 1992). To Metz, the actual film is the text, which is an object of the real world (Rohdie, 1975). The text is a record of an event where something was communicated and involves the presentation of facts and beliefs that are often ideological, the construction of identities of the participants discussed in the communication, and the strategies that frame the content of the message (Fairclough, 2003). Indeed, a film carries all these characteristics of text as both a re-presentation and representation of reality.

This writer raises the concern of examining the way woman is imaged through film, bearing in mind that the filmed image as text is salient in the production of meanings and social constructs. Language as social practice used in the representation and signification of women through film discourse can create meanings about women and create social positionings and historically defined ideologies. There have been prevailing representations of the Filipino woman that have formed part of film discourse from the 1950s to the end of the 1980s. It is argued that much of the images of the Filipino woman in Filipino films (mainly in melodramatic films) have created a discourse on woman that has entrapped her and rendered her weak, subservient, and the absorber of all of society’s problems. Such an image makes being a woman in Filipino society a burden.

## The Melodramatic Film and the Prevailing Discourse on Filipino Women

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. 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. This influences the consciousness of the viewer by putting across ideas about oppositional concepts in society, historical realities, and notions of modernity (Tolentino, 2000). Through the melodramatic film, the Filipino female audience is confronted with images of herself in the traditional roles of mother, martyr, nurturer, saint, “sacrificial lamb,” and even as a form of debt payment to save her family from ruin. Other images have loomed in a larger than life perspective for her, such as being the object of men’s desire, a sexual object, the commodified body, and the source of evil and destruction of a family or a community. As filmed images, they are viewed in a larger-than-life screen perspective. What complicates this matter is the cross-media proliferation of these images and ideas in television, radio, through the Internet, and popular literary forms such as *komiks*, magazines, and novels.

These discursive formations (groups of statements, objects, concepts, and themes on the Filipino woman) have evolved into a discourse on the Filipino woman’s position in society despite significant social, economic, and political changes. Just like other films, the melodrama film carries with it particular texts or images that are culled from real life, with some taken from the depths of imagination and fantasy. The audience “reads” these images and through their interaction with the film, create their constructs of the world. The environment that surrounds the Filipino woman (cultural developments, technological developments, governance, laws, mass media, and people) all play on the way the discourse on being a Filipino woman evolves and revolves. In many Filipino melodrama films, the male defines the woman’s world and what is best for her. In this discursive space, males are able to define themselves and are reinforced to maintain such identity. This brings to mind the concept of subject positioning wherein a film can present a dominant ideology by placing the subject as spectator. This experience of subjectivity is intricately interlocked with reproduction by a social formation of self as a “natural state” of things, which is primarily the operation of ideology (Higashi, 1991).

## **The Shift in Knowledge and Visions about Filipino Women**

The advent of the 1990s provided the impetus for significant inroads in evolving new discursive formations on the Filipino woman through the film text. In the Foucauldian context, there has been a shift in how knowledge or world-view are built and expressed. It is in these years that the Philippines was able to achieve significant economic and social progress. This shift in world-view was brought about by rapid technological advances from which the country has benefited, and its entry into the international global community through the much-touted information highway has changed the physical landscape in both urban and rural areas of the country and has also developed the intellectual capacities of a great number of Filipinos, which arguably has evolved a new ideology among its people.

It has been written that Filipino women's enlightenment began in the late 1960s through the women's liberation movement in the West and the spread of feminism in the 1980s in the country. The discourse on women during these years of ferment has redounded to the discourse on women in the 1990s leading to the new millennium. Significant to this new discursive landscape is the Philippines' role as a signatory to the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action for Women (the result of the 4<sup>th</sup> World Conference on Women held in Beijing, China). This act committed the Philippine government to fully implement the twelve areas of concern in the platform for action for women that included addressing the persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women, unequal access to education and training, unequal access to health care and related services, violence against women, inequality in economic structures and policies, and other socio-economic and political barriers to women's advancement.

The Beijing Conference on Women was a turning point toward significant changes and the re-education of all sectors of society on the status of women, gender sensitivity, and gender responsive development in the country. It made possible the allocation of a Gender and Development (GAD) budget in the General Appropriations Act, where all government agencies must allocate at least 5% of their total agency budget for programs and projects on gender and development. This milestone made possible the enactment of several laws geared toward social reform, such as RA 7877, The Anti-Sexual Harassment Act of

1995; RA 7882, The 1995 Act Providing Assistance to Women Engaging in Micro and Cottage Business Enterprises; RA 8353, The Anti-Rape Law of 1997; and RA 8505, The Rape Victim Assistance and Protection Act of 1998. Local legislation, international treaties, and programs have been drawn up to address women's issues and concerns, such as women's human rights, violence against women, the trafficking of women and children, elimination of discrimination, protection of women and children in situations of war, and social equality for women. Schools and universities responded to these developments through their creation of academic programs on women's studies that further contributed to advances in the status of Filipino women. The shift in knowledge about women then is from weakness to strength.

The affect and effect of these developments have filtered into the local Filipino mainstream film industry through six women directors who by themselves are in the midst of these shifts in world-view about women. They are Laurice Guillen, Marilou Diaz-Abaya, Lupita Aquino-Kashiwahara, Olivia Lamasan, Rory Quintos, and Joyce Bernal. They have utilized the discursive space of film to arrive at the image of a "new Filipino woman" in their melodramatic films from 1990 to 2000. They have interpreted the Filipino woman's narrative and articulated her experiences through their own experiences with the discourse on the Filipino woman through six landmark films released from 1990 to 2000, namely, *Dabil Mahal Kita: The Dolzura Cortez Story* (1993, Laurice Guillen), *Ika-11 Utos Mahalin Mo Asawa Mo* (1994, Marilou Diaz-Abaya), *Madrasta* (1996, Joel Lamasan), *Babae* (1997, Lupita Aquino-Kashiwahara), *Dabil May Isang Ikaw* (1999, Joyce Bernal), and *Anak* (2000, Rory Quintos). Through these films, these six directors have become social agents from whom discursive statements about the Filipino woman of the 1990s to 2000 have emanated. It is argued that through their discourse, they have helped liberate the Filipino woman from her position of weakness before the 1990s.

At first glance, one could say that nothing has changed about being a woman in this period; the women in the films still cry, they still get hurt, they look for love and exclusivity in a relationship, and they struggle like hell in their world whether they are trapped in it or are in it by choice (Santiago, 2001). However, these are essentially human traits that women have. It has been said that women are complex beings and one has to shift through the many layers of complexities that women

inherently have. While superficially such a description of women may be negatively understood, to this writer, such complexities are positively represented in the melodramatic films of the 1990s to 2000 and have become a liberative tool for new discursive statements about the Filipino woman to emerge and prosper.

### **Re-presentations, Images, and New Discursive Formations on the Filipino Woman**

The six films were able to surface eight imagings of the Filipino woman that echo real and not imagined women's issues and concerns that continue to find a voice and space in the larger media landscape in Filipino society and in the consciousness of both women and men. Within these imagings are both resistive and compliant elements that either try to break out of the mold of Filipino melodramatic filmmaking conventions or find compromise within the genre. Embedded in these eight imagings are new discursive statements that are contributory to the shift in knowledge and ideologies of Filipino women about themselves. These eight imagings are in the following areas:

1. The Filipino woman and family, motherhood and mothering;
2. The Filipino woman and marriage;
3. The Filipino woman and sexuality;
4. Homosexuality and heterosexuality;
5. Female friendship and women bonding;
6. Female strength/female subservience;
7. Class issues; and
8. Work issues

Moreover, these directors were able to integrate through their films aspects of contemporary Philippine social reality that arguably would not have found space before the 1990s, such as the revisionist view of the stepmother, the presentation of blended families from the result of marriage annulment, the complex relationship between a heterosexual woman and a homosexual man, the depiction of families without a father or male figure, and the representation of women who are individuated and complete without a man.

*The Filipino woman and family, motherhood, and mothering*

The family is the most important social institution in the country that is protected by the constitution and many laws of the land. It is often constituted in the nuclear family of husband, wife, and biological children. It is circumscribed by the dominant culture as a heterosexual social unit as well as maintaining a monogamous structure that is highly sanctioned by state law (Ramirez, 1984). Salient to family is the mother (woman) who is also its central figure and the one who exercises great influence over the children and husband. The mother also assumes multiple roles within the family.

The six films depicted the Filipino woman in a familial setting where she encounters problems and finds their solutions in the confines of family. However, this is expected since the genre and conventions of melodrama stipulate that the centrality of a woman's story is within the family. The woman is understood to be the weaker sex who needs the presence of family to protect her. Paradoxically, however, it is also family that oppresses her and is the source of her suffering. In the context of filmmaking as a social practice, the Filipino woman's narrative must be propelled within the mold of the melodrama, and a woman's story is almost always understood within the parameters of family.

In *Dabil Mahal Kita: The Dolzura Cortez Story*, Dolzura's relationships with the men in her life has resulted in her having children, thus having a family but without the so-called benefit of a husband. When she contracts HIV, which progresses to full-blown AIDS, she has her own family (her mother and siblings) to fall back on and care for her up to her last day. Amidst this familial setting, Dolzura's predicament is in looking for ways to provide for her own children's education and upbringing. The discourse on protecting the integrity of family is articulated and positioned prominently. *Ika-11 Utos Mahalin Mo Asawa Mo* gives family a new meaning because it is represented as akin to friendship. The film does not emphasize much on the family since its narrative is focused on the domestic violence and the bonding of the three women protagonists. However, the bonding through friendship and sisterhood (as their experiences attest and intertwine their lives) is put across by Diaz-Abaya as "like family". The women manifest a loyalty that could only be understood in the context of family. The film offers this new discursive structure to the discourse on family.



In *Madrasta*, the revisionist view of the stepmother in the Filipino family is the backdrop for the representation of blended families in the film. Salient to the film is the preservation of the composition of the family through the acquisition of the person who can assume the role of mother to a family who had been abandoned by the first mother and wife to a husband who was deserted by the first wife. *Babae* explores the articulation of complex family relations. New ground is tested in its attempt to represent the reality that gay men could have children with women as well as depicting the complex family structure and relationships resulting from such coupling. However, the film also represents the prevailing discourse on the composition of the family, that of having a father, mother, and a child through the characters of Bea, Ricky, and Alexis in spite of Alexis' not being Ricky's biological child with Bea.



The movie poster of *Madrasta* (Lamasan, 1996)

*Dabil May Isang Ikaw* represents a kind of family comprised of women from three generations without the presence of a father or a male figure. Such representation deviates from the prevailing discourse of family. *Anak* examines how a mother reintegrates herself with her family after years of absence as a migrant worker in Hong Kong. It depicts a family without the father figure, which initially may be understood as deviating from the norm of representing family but the “presence” of the father is well articulated in the dialogic exchange between and among the characters in the story.

The constitution of motherhood and mothering is another discursive ground that is explored and represented in the six films. In *Dabil Mahal Kita: The Dolzura Cortez Story*, Dolzura recognizes and accepts the responsibility of being a mother that Filipino society expects. She forces her way to see to her children's welfare even to the point that she exploits her body, which causes the disease that she contracted and would be the cause of her death. Such a representation is heroic in a

sense and reinforces the Filipino's valuation of children. To her mother, Dolzura is important, as a child needs her support and care. Both mother and daughter share the same roles as nurturer and caregiver. Pregnancy and childbirth in *Ika-11 Utos Mahalin Mo Asawa Mo* signal the entry of a woman into motherhood. In the film, the man receives the news of pregnancy with glee. This gives the woman the impression that with the coming of a child, her agony and suffering from the physical battering she receives constantly from her husband before the pregnancy will cease.

*Babae* and *Madrasta* also depict pregnancy; however, in the former, the pregnancy is terminated through a miscarriage and in the latter, the pregnancy pushes through in spite of the many tensions and problems the woman confronts in her blended family. The child in *Madrasta* functions as the instrument that would unify the blended family. In *Dahil May Isang Ikaw*, Ruby's pregnancy is welcomed by the family in spite of its occurring out of wedlock. The situation is justified because of the commitment to marriage by Ruby's boyfriend. In *Anak*, Carla gets pregnant, but suffers a miscarriage. Carla's pregnancy is the result of her rebellion against her mother, Josie, and the termination becomes justified and acceptable because of the circumstances of the child's formation and the not so bright future that it may have with an immature mother.

In the films that depict terminated pregnancies, a new discursive structure evolves: the value of the child is diminished if the events that led to its conception are flawed and deemed by the woman as enough



The movie poster of *Ika-11 Utos Mahalin Mo Asawa Mo* (Abaya, 1994).

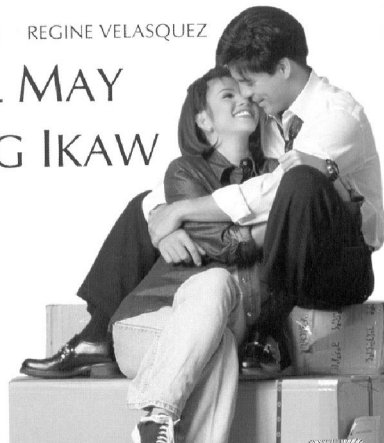
justification for the pregnancy's termination. While religion reinforces the discourse on children as gifts from God that must be accepted, the practicalities of life outweigh that discourse.

Good mothering is always seen as a virtue in a patriarchal society. This is because it posits the view that it is natural for women to become mothers because of their capacity for reproduction. The subtext of mothering is thrown into the discursive space of the six films. Intense motherly love is the driving force in Dolzura's story. Mothering in *Ika-11 Utos Mabalin Mo Asawa Mo* is seen through the overprotectiveness of Sol over her unborn child. She shields her belly from her husband's battering. The three main women characters in the film *Madrasta* depict mothering: Fides' (Mariel's mother) concern over Mariel's well-being as a second wife to Edward, Mariel's mothering of Edward's biological children and her own child, and Sandra's (Edward's first wife) concern over her children who are in the care of Mariel.

In *Babae*, a modern notion of mothering is articulated. As a mother in the high-power position of architect, Bea and Alexis only have the weekends to bond, talk, and perform domestic chores in the home. *Dahil May Isang Ikaw* represents mothering through Ruby and Lola Amor. The mothering represented in the film is in the context of having a parent who is like a friend or a pal because of the casualness of the atmosphere of their home and the joking relationship that Anya has with her Lola and mother, Ruby. This is new discursive ground that deviates from the usual way of representing the mother and mothering. Another deviation from Filipino melodramatic convention is the representation of a grandmother who has had many men in her life without benefit of marriage. In many

AGA MUHLACH REGINE VELASQUEZ

## DAHIL MAY ISANG IKAW



Regine Velasquez and Aga Muhlach star in the movie *Dahil May Isang Ikaw* (Bernal, 1999).

Filipino films, senior citizens are represented as sexless, upright citizens with sterling characters and reputations. *Anak* is a film that represents the mother and mothering in the conventional way. While Josie had been away from her family for a long time, her process of reintegration takes from where she left off as a mother to her children. Josie is depicted as the premiere domestic in her family – she is a hands-on mother who takes care of her children, from preparing their meals down to washing their clothes. In between, she deals with the many problems of maintaining the household.

### *The Filipino woman and marriage*

Another social institution that is regarded highly and protected by the laws of the country is marriage. This is because the family emanates from the legal union of a single man and a single woman and as such, the country deems it necessary to protect it. Marriage is propelled through the ideology of romantic love and is the basis for a happy life. A woman's preparation for marriage starts in her own home where she is educated in domestic work, and as an habituated activity (Ramirez, 1984), gives the woman the moral backbone as well as developing in her task persistence, high frustration-tolerance, and self determination that are all projected in her work.

The direct representation of romantic love leading to marriage and how marriage is important to a Filipino woman is in the film, *Dabil May Isang Ikaw*. Anya, the film's protagonist, gets married in a grand way with Andrew in Catholic ceremonies. The film has as its centerpiece three generations of women in a family that is devoid of men (a concept that negates the common description of a nuclear Filipino family). The family of women is comprised of the grandmother (Amor), the daughter (Ruby), and the granddaughter (Anya); all three women are strong-willed and feisty and believe that their destinies lie in their hands alone. In spite of the two elder women's experiences with men, marriage is still upheld as an ideal, which Anya (the film's protagonist and granddaughter to Amor and daughter to Ruby) must have and she did have which can be described as grand and replete with all the symbolic accoutrements of a fairy tale wedding. Director Joyce Bernal may have presented some modifications to the ceremony, which only served to give it more drama and emotional build up through the alternating visuals of Anya and Andrew saying their marriage vows.

*Madrasta* presents two kinds of marriages – one in a civil ceremony performed by a judge and one in a Catholic church setting officiated by a priest. A person who has received the decree of annulment of marriage usually marries his/her second spouse in a civil ceremony. Such is the case with Edward and Mariel. A great majority of Filipino films depict church weddings as the ideal way to get married. Presenting a civil ceremony of marriage is a deviation from the norm of representing marriage in the context of Filipino melodramatic filmmaking. Interestingly, the film depicts church weddings as not an assurance of the solidity of a husband and wife's union as represented by the first wife's abandonment of her family; the film is essentially a critique of church weddings. While Edward and Mariel's wedding is not traditional, Edward's daughter (Rachel) from his first wife had a traditional church wedding as the result of Rachel's pregnancy by boyfriend Dodie. Such binary oppositions, while articulating embedded meanings on marriage, make the film toe industry and Filipino societal lines on marriage norms. However, both ways of getting married do not guarantee loyalties, "happily ever-afters," and permanency.

*Ika-11 Utos Mahalin Mo Asawa Mo* hints at marriage between Roy and Sol, but visually portrays them as a couple living-in together. The film does not depict their marriage but in the story, Sol adopts Roy's surname and refers to Roy as *asawa* (husband). Filipino discursive practice discourages the articulation of unions that do not have the blessings of the Church (church wedding) or the security and legality provided by law (civil ceremony). In many Filipino films, a couple may be represented initially as unmarried and living together; but in the film's end, they are expected to be married in church or in a civil ceremony. This film challenges that convention.

### *The Filipino woman and sexuality*

The expression of sexuality by women is taboo in Philippine society. While sex is a basic human drive, its expression is modified and shaped by society (Medina, 2001). Traditionally, Filipino women are brought up in chastity and must emulate the Virgin Mary. Norms specify with whom and under what circumstances the sex drive may be satisfied; among Christian Filipinos, one may have sex only with one's spouse (Medina, 2001).

Sexuality is at the forefront of the film *Dahil Mahal Kita: The Dolzura Cortez Story*, as the main narrative line in telling the story of how Dolzura (the film's protagonist) contracted HIV that led to her having full-blown AIDS and her demise. While most Filipino drama and action films have articulated constructions of the Filipino woman as the



The CD cover of *Dahil Mahal Kita: The Dolzura Cortez Story* (Guillen, 1993).

object of men's desire and serving the visual pleasure of the male gaze, the film subverts this by representing Dolzura in a straightforward way, using medium and full shots to show her unique way of walking (flirtatiously swinging her hips, which catches men's attention) and how she attracts men. The film also depicts a woman who is not afraid to talk about her sexual adventures and her own sexuality. Guillen's camera does not use close-ups of her derriere when showing Dolzura walking because her gait is not to encourage voyeuristic pleasure to the viewer. While Dolzura tells Paolo about her sexual adventures, Guillen does not show bed scenes. Her romantic representation of the sex act between Paolo and Dolzura employs backlighting to render a silhouetted image with tender musical accompaniment (It may be argued that this is traditional Filipino melodramatic filmmaking culture. However, this method is Guillen's attempt to downplay the prevailing notion of the loose morality of a sexually aggressive, aware, and confident woman). This representation of a woman who is confident about her sexuality is new ground the film explores. Before the 1990s, women were depicted as the one pursued and hunted by men. In the film, Dolzura is not afraid to be the hunter, just like men.

The other film that depicts the Filipino woman as comfortable with herself and her sexuality is *Dahil May Isang Ikaw*, through its

protagonist Anya Katindig. She is a deviation from the traditional stereotyped Filipino woman as primly dressed, poised, coiffed and maintaining her beauty for her man. Anya is not poised and coiffed; and her minimalist attitude toward her looks speaks more of confidence than lack of femininity. She has an aggressive streak and speaks her own mind to Andrew. The scene that depicts her as sexually aggressive is when she and Andrew go back to their hotel room after a day of sightseeing and as the sexual tension builds up between them, Anya initiates the passionate kiss to which Andrew responds in an equally passionate way. Many Filipino melodramatic and action films depict men as the aggressors or women as seducers of men by wearing revealing clothes. In this film, though, such a portrayal is absent. The lovers' gestures show their passion for each other more than appearances. Bernal's representation is not in producing sexually-titillating scenes, but in showing a natural development of attraction between two lovers. Bernal does not exploit the bed scene of Anya and Andrew. The medium shot that captures them both falling in bed while kissing is enough to say that they will eventually have sex and the afterglow of sex is portrayed by a two-shot medium close-up where Anya whispers "I love you" to a sleeping Andrew. But as in the convention of presenting a love scene, tender love music accompanies the scene.

#### *Homosexuality and heterosexuality*

The films *Dabil Mahal Kita: The Dolzura Cortez Story*, *Babae*, and *Dabil May Isang Ikarw* depict homosexuals in the narrative. In the first film, homosexuals are represented in the conventional way as frivolous individuals and restricted in their work to a beauty parlor. Dolzura's gay friends are depicted as having nary a care in the world and complacent about AIDS. They are not afraid of Dolzura's illness and her potential to infect others. This representation and construction of homosexuals vis-à-vis AIDS is the product of the homophobic reaction and attitude of a patriarchal society. Even in 1993, homosexuals had been equated with AIDS and unsafe sex. The film has not contributed to discursive formation on homosexuality and AIDS.

*Babae* is a brave film in its portrayal of the complex relationship between a woman and a homosexual man. Bea and Alfred's relationship had resulted in a biological child between them. While such relationships

could be said to be an aspect of modern-day Filipino society, its representation in the film is undisputed. Philippine media, through television and print, have labeled such relations as deviant, abnormal, and must be condemned. However, such confessions through talk shows and feature articles provide good ratings and high circulation. In film, such discursive ground had seldom been explored (a film that comes to mind is *Moral* by Marilou Diaz-Abaya in the 1980s). Many Filipino films frequently represented gay men as having relationships with men, such as in Lino Brocka's *Tubog sa Ginto* in the 1970s. *Babae*'s representation is a deviation from film industry norms and is contributory to the discourse on homosexuality and man/woman relations. The film hints at an indiscretion and a moment of passion between Alfred (Bea's gay friend) and Bea; despite this, Alfred never changed his sexual orientation and Bea accepted that they must remain as good friends. They share custody of Alexis – Alexis lives with Bea but spends weekends with Alfred and his long time companion, Gilbert. Alexis knows about Alfred and Gilbert's relationship; she also accepts the complex family relationship she shares with her mother and Alfred. It is argued that *Babae* is a brave film to represent the reality that gay men could have children with heterosexual women as well as depicting the complex family structures and relationships resulting from such coupling. The representation of homosexuality in this film is a deviation and a resistive image from what Filipino filmmaking practice and culture usually dishes out to its audience.

*Dabil May Isang Ikaw* represents the homosexual as a close friend (akin to family) in the character of Donna, Anya's business partner, and as a wedding consultant in the character of Earl. The homosexual as having good business acumen and good managerial abilities is seldom seen in films. On the one hand, Earl manages and arranges Margarita's and Andrew's wedding (this was before Andrew met Anya). While being a wedding consultant is considered trivial and frivolous, Earl is a bit subdued and not the hysterical type. While Margarita likes Earl, Andrew avoids him like the plague, which echoes the homophobia of Filipino macho society. Donna, on the other hand, has excellent managerial skills compared to Anya. Donna troubleshoots most if not all of Anya's follies. While Anya is out on a delivery task, Donna takes care of the office and puts job requests in order. Unlike the way other Filipino films before *Dabil May Isang Ikaw* have represented homosexual characters as hysterical and frivolous types, Donna and Earl are quite the opposite in



the film, which introduces a new discursive formation to the character of the homosexual.

The discourse of heterosexuality is very much represented in the six films. Men's heterosexuality through having many women to prove their masculinity is depicted in *Dabil Mahal Kita: The Dolzura Cortez Story*, *Babae*, and to a certain extent in *Dabil May Isang Ikaw*.

In the first film, Dolzura learns that her husband has a first wife when he brings her home to his province and plans to have both of them with him. Dolzura does not accept the role of being second wife and living with the first wife in spite of Gardo's professing his love for both of them. When Dolzura meets Paolo, she encounters the same articulations of masculinity through his many non-committal relationships and his need to have sexual relationships with as many women as he wants.

In the second film, the main protagonist Ricky (Bea's husband) flaunts his extramarital affairs and philandering and blames his indiscretions and disloyalty on Bea. However, heterosexuality is placed in opposition with homosexuality, which Ricky inflicts on Bea when he reminds her that her child Alexis is the child of a homosexual man because she cannot attract non-homosexuals.

In *Dabil May Isang Ikaw*, the heterosexuality is expressed in Andrew's attraction to Anya after getting engaged to be married to Margarita. His virility as a man is put across in the film with his secretary's attraction to him as well.

While the representations of these men glaringly point to their heterosexuality, such orientation would not be possible without the representation of the female, which is grounded on the premise that women cannot live without men and that women should only have relations with heterosexual men. In a familial context, Ramirez (1984) explains that men are brought up to be promiscuous because they are privileged to do whatever pleases them because they are less restricted. The films studied privilege the male in these representations, thereby reinforcing the discourse on sexual orientation. While *Babae* may have been a brave film in representing homosexual relations with a heterosexual woman, it still had to toe the line and preserve the dominant ideology. In fact, Alfred's image is very patriarchal in his expression of his wanting Alexis to get married in church and his assumption of the role of provider for each and every need of Alexis. *Babae* did not dwell much on Alfred's

relationship with Gilbert except to depict the latter in the former's house whenever Alexis visited or when father and daughter go on a shopping spree.

The films' representation of the Filipino gay is no different from that of other mainstream media – the gay individuals in the films studied constructed them as exotic and excessive but in the context of their having a source of living (they have jobs). Reyes (1989) writes that, "Filipinos have a higher level of tolerance for homosexual behavior hinged on the homosexual's ability to make himself useful to society." The gays depicted in the films studied are both beauty parlor employees and owners or in the case of Alfred, one who owns a computer business; hence, they are economically viable individuals, which suits the dominant cultural norm. There is the hint of financial power that shrouds their sexual identity and therefore renders them less threatening to the viewer.

#### *Female friendship and women bonding*

The concept of female friendship is very much ingrained in the films. The woman is represented as always having a female friend beside her who can help her in times of need or in emergencies. The concept of female friendship privileges the male because traditional Filipino norms dictate that married women are not allowed to build friendships with men and that only single women and single men are allowed to enter into friendships for the purpose of mate selection.

The concept of women bonding comes from the West. The bonding of women is more than friendship. Women come together to gather strength and make each one strong and survive their oppressions that are brought about by men. The concept has a feminist context. Semantically, "friendship" connotes "ties" and conceptually may or may not be broken. However, "bond" connotes permanency and would not be easy to break.

*Ika-11 Utos Mahalin Mo Asawa Mo* re-presents the concept of female friendship and women bonding. Sylvia and Sol have a friendship and Sylvia includes the reluctant Susan as well because the latter is the former's friend before she met Sol. Sylvia and Susan's friendship goes back to their high school days, which connotes a bond. Sylvia and Sol's friendship blossoms and becomes a bond as well, especially when Sol's marital situation becomes more serious and Sylvia's involvement in her

life becomes deeper. Susan bonds with both Sylvia and Sol. The bond that is built between the three women becomes the instrument in liberating themselves from the abusive Roy (Sol's husband).

*Madrasta* represents the friendship that develops between Mariel and Sandra (the second wife and the first wife), which is unprecedented in Filipino filmmaking history. The film goes against the grain of representing the confrontation or meeting between a first and second wife. Most Filipino films depict these two women as aggressors and antagonists – one cannot accept the man's choice for the other and cat fights ensue (such representation privileges the man). In the film, Mariel and Sandra's first meeting is civil but not cold. There is a warmth in the relationship between the two women. Both know their situations well. Sandra has no intention of going back to Edward because she has found her happiness in her American husband, Phil. Mariel's new found security in Edward's love gives her the generosity of accepting Sandra's presence in Edward's children with Sandra. Lamasan throws this new discursive formation of the Filipino woman as a second wife and as a stepmother in this film. But in examining the image of Sharon Cuneta (playing the role of Mariel) as an actress and the way Filipinos know about her life and her sweet low-key persona, the character of Mariel fits her quite well. Filipino films have the characteristic of the centrality of the star in the narrative (Reyes, 1986); a film must also work at preserving the image of its actors and actresses. Seen in this context of the social practice of Filipino film production, *Madrasta* toes industry lines in its representation of the new *madrasta* in the Filipino family.

*Babae* represents the friendship between Bea and Melinda. Melinda is an obstetrician in a large hospital and she finds the time to be with Bea whenever she calls her. While Melinda has some knowledge of Bea's situation, she is unable to help her or give advice because she herself has problems of her own that she does not confide in Bea in order not to add to her friend's burdens. There is a one-sided friendship where Melinda is more the helper and a sounding board for Bea. Melinda becomes Bea's attending physician when the latter suffers a miscarriage. The pregnancy is unknown to Melinda and she is surprised at the miscarriage. The depiction of this kind of friendship is common in many Filipino melodramatic films. Most of the time, the friendship is never on equal terms; one is able to disclose everything to the other but such disclosure prevents the other from doing the same in deference to the friend and to keep the bond intact.

The representation of female friendship and bonding is echoed in the camaraderie between Josie, Lyn and Mercy in *Anak*. Their friendship began in Hong Kong and blossomed into something akin to sisterhood. The friendship is extended when all three return to the Philippines and bonding develops as they embark on a taxi business together. Each one knows each other's life and they strengthen each other in material and non-material ways, such as giving emotional support and companionship when needed. Lyn and Mercy are Josie's support and coping system. When Josie's domestic tensions and problems peak, the friends go out to escape for a while, sober up and talk about their problems. Lyn and Mercy offer solutions to Josie's problems, which the latter thinks over and tries. Director Rory Quintos makes every meeting of the friends have humor and their scenes together are in well-lit interiors or during the day to semiotically put across the "different" world Josie enters when she sees her friends – her friends bring the sunshine to her life.

*Female strength/female subservience*

The dichotomy of female strength and female subservience are depicted in the six films studied. Female strength is articulated as physical, emotional, mental, and material sense. All forms are equated with strength of character in the films.

In *Dabil Mahal Kita: The Dolzura Cortez Story*, Dolzura exhibits physical strength during her pre-AIDS days. She is able to perform many jobs to earn a living and maintain her nightly work in bars and clubs. She has no difficulty in tending to her children during the day in spite of the grueling night hours she spends at the bar. While she is depicted as having a "wild streak", Dolzura's acceptance of her illness makes her an emotionally mature woman and in spite of this, she still worries about her children's welfare. Dolzura may not be strong in material sense that is equated with wealth; she is portrayed as a woman who exhibits pragmatism in managing her finances and thinking of ways to augment it because of the fierce drive of providing for her children. The impetus of her strength is her children. Female subservience is represented in the magnitude of AIDS as a disease that initially she resists then later recapitulates with. AIDS is symbolically circumscribed in the film as an oppressing instrument to Dolzura. It is argued that while the disease was

due to her sexual adventurism, the source of her illness are men, which, seen from a feminist perspective, is the patriarchy symbolic of men that oppresses her and causes her death. Dolzura's strength as a sexually confident woman is diminished by the cause of her death. Dolzura can be viewed as one who becomes subservient to the patriarchy around her – the men who abused her body and gave her AIDS and to whom she has to submit in the hospital.

*Ika-11 Utos Mahalin Mo Asawa Mo*, represents female strength through Sylvia and Susan and later through Sol (initially Sol is the subservient female and is weakened by her abusive husband). Sylvia's and Susan's female strength is equated with having a good educational background that granted them the knowledge about their human rights and the skill at discerning when abuse must stop. In this sense, Director Diaz-Abaya reinforces the Filipino value of education. Sol was not able to finish her college studies because of her decision to marry Roy; however, the viewer knows that she had both an elementary and secondary education because of the common knowledge that one cannot enter college without both.

The women in this film manifest feminine traits in their manner of dress. Between Sylvia and Susan, the film depicts Susan as the stronger because she is able to drive a car and lives by her self. These two images alone construct Susan as the epitomé of the modern and independent woman who has it all – education, material wealth, and the independence to lead her own life without a man. Sylvia's strength is in her family, where at times, her husband treats her as a co-equal. Within the bounds of family, Sylvia is subservient to Tony as seen in scenes where Tony tells her not to meddle in the affairs of others and when Tony follows after her at Roy's house and brings her home. In these scenes, Tony assumes the role of "man of the household", a patriarchal value.

Sol's subservience to her husband is borne out of her innocence and naiveté about marital life and the relations between husband and wife. She is also rendered subservient by her religion – evident in the scene where she follows the priest's homily in saying that she has to follow God's eleventh commandment of loving one's spouse (from where the title of the film is based). Sol is rendered weak by Roy's continuous physical and verbal abuse of her and later on in the film, Sol's strength emerges from her state of weakness and she is able to fight her abuser no matter that it is constituted in the context of motherhood.

This construct supports the prevailing ideology on women as mothers whom society expects to be protective of their children even if they are yet to be born.

*Madrasta* shows Mariel's strength in her perseverance with Edward and his children as well as her financial independence from him. It is Mariel's career that gives her the ability to be level-headed and be confrontative if need be. Initially, the film depicts Mariel as a submissive woman to her husband (brought about by her innocence and naiveté over marital and family relations). She entered into a ready-made family and her inexperience at not having children yet fuels her subservience in the early part of the film. However, time has a way of developing one's confidence in the home and the birth of their biological child gives her more strength (though in the context of motherhood) when she protects her son from the cruelty of Edward's eldest child, Rachel.

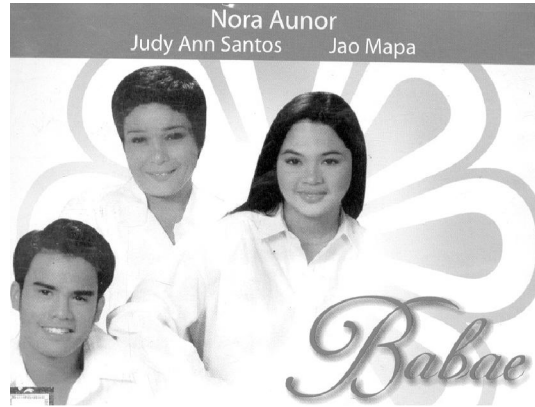
Mariel's strength is represented in the arena of her work where she holds a high position and has staff under her. She exhibits efficiency in running her office and has the respect of the company president and her peers. While she may exhibit feminine traits in her manner of dress and her low-key way of speaking, she runs her office with the pragmatism attributed to male company executives.

In combining these images of work and family, the film depicts the reality in Philippine society of the double burden women carry that further oppresses them – maintaining both a career and assuming the role of a “super mother and wife” in the home. Other images come to the researcher's mind that could have eased Mariel's burdens such as contracting a nanny/governess to care for her children while she is at work instead of tackling household chores hands-on. However, the film is building the portrait of the second wife or *madrasta* in the family as someone who is caring and generous as well as the things that a second wife would do to integrate herself into her husband's family (an oppressive situation).

The film offers a redefinition and a reconstruction of the *madrasta* in the Philippine context as someone who is the most oppressed, loving, and generous that is in opposition with the long-time myth of being cruel, nasty, selfish, and only after the husband's wealth.

*Babae* is a film that initially confused this writer in reading strength in the woman because Bea was depicted as a subservient woman for most of the film's length and she only exhibited strength toward the

film's end. Bea is the epitomé of the woman trapped in her family and her subservience is not only to her husband Ricky but to her daughter Alexis as well. But on second and third viewing of the film, this writer realized that as a viewer, one has to be especially keen in

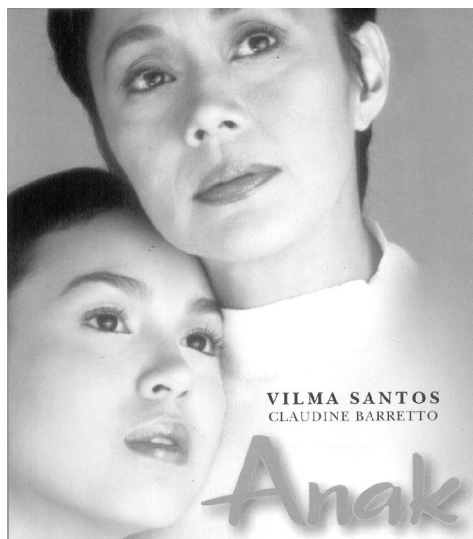


Nora Aunor, Judy Ann Santos, and Jao Mapa in the movie poster of *Babae* (Kashiwahara, 1997).

looking at Bea's eyes because they speak of her emotions and her strength. In the Filipino film industry, the film's lead actress Nora Aunor is known for ability to act using her eyes and this technique has won her numerous awards and recognitions as an actress. Director Kashiwahara's technique of showing the image of the wife the way the dominant culture prefers woman to be, can confuse the viewer. But on closer reading, one finds that the director is didactically tracing for the audience the build-up of Bea's strength to liberate herself from abuse and she uses the strength to liberate her daughter as well who is also experiencing physical and verbal abuse from her boyfriend. However, the technique falls short in presenting the narrative of Bea's experiences. The representation of the Filipino woman is just like those of films before the 1990s with the difference offered at the end delivered weakly. To this writer, it is no surprise since Kashiwahara belongs to the old school of melodrama that represented women as weak and submissive. Bea's strength is in the context of the Filipino adage of "*kapag puno na ang salop*" ["when the box is full"].

A woman's strength is the main vein in the narrative of *Dabil May Isang Ikaw*, where the three generations of women are represented as a complete family without the father or a male figure. At the onset, Director Bernal goes against the grain of conventional Filipino melodrama by representing three strong individuated women. Anya is a woman who is confident in her looks and sexuality. She knows how to drive a truck, fix a flat tire, and troubleshoot engines (all male attributes). She also manages a forwarding business and is successful at it. Ruby, her

mother and grandmother Lola Amor are stay-at-home women who maintain and manage the household. They do not have to rely on men to do house repairs. The women have lines in the film that articulate their views about men and how and why they do not need them in their lives. Anya finds her strength from these two women. Ruby and Anya are subservient to Lola Amor in the context of family relations that reinforce the social value of respect for elders.



Vilma Santos and Claudine Barreto in the movie *Anak* (Quintos, 2000).

*Anak* articulates the strength of a woman as a single parent. The mere representation of a single parent from the death of a spouse is new discursive ground for Filipino melodrama, especially when the single parent assumes the role of both father and mother to her children with the added burden of having to reintegrate herself with her family after a long absence as a migrant worker. While it can be argued that *Babae* and *Madrasta* also have representations of a widowed wife (through Bea's mother Adora and through Mariel's mother Fides), they are depicted as co-dependent of their husbands and they cannot forge ahead with their lives because they cannot cope without a husband. In *Anak*, Josie is depicted as a woman with spunk and the capacity to tend to her children's welfare and the management of the household. She has physical strength as shown in her ability to do carpentry and plumbing work around the house. However, in presenting her physical strength to perform all possible household chores, it is also paradoxically exhibiting her weakness and subservience to her children, which in the process is oppressive for her. Josie's strength is constituted with the ideology of mothering – a woman should care for her children at all times and in all ways. What stands out in *Anak* is Josie's continued subservience to her husband Rudy even in



death. She remains loyal to him and his memory and this entraps her into not telling her children about the true character of their father and the reasons why she had to be the main breadwinner for the family by being a migrant worker. She could not tell her eldest child Carla about the weakness of their father in providing for the family (the main cause of Carla's bitterness toward Josie whom she was made to believe had deserted her father all in the name of acquiring wealth). Honculada (1994, p. 17) states that a woman's commitment to a man ideally goes hand-in-hand with commitment to the family they create together. Josie's commitment to Rudy goes to the extent of not wanting to destroy Rudy's image as an ideal father to her children. Josie is subservient to the prevailing societal system of putting importance on material wealth and she decides to seek employment anew in Hong Kong.

### *Class issues*

Class differences and class struggle figure prominently in the six films studied. Class aspirations, economic survival and the accumulation of material wealth as a marker of upward mobility form the moral basis for Josie's pursuit of migrant employment in *Anak*, of Roy's persistence at many band auditions in *Ika-11 Utos Mahalin Mo Asawa Mo*, and perhaps, in Anya's diligent perseverance in running a forwarding business in *Dahil May Isang Ikaw*. However, in *Babae*, Bea is already satisfied with what she has, having been born into wealth and having a lucrative career as an architect while Ricky struggles to compete with the economic capacities of his wife. *Madrasta*'s Mariel is also satisfied with her financial independence as a working woman; however, her and her own family's middle class position makes her work at making themselves acceptable to the elite to which Edward and his mother belong. Mariel wants her mother and siblings to be appropriately dressed whenever they have a family get-together and for them to be punctual every time as demanded by the social standards of the elite. While Mariel has learned the sophisticated behavior and manner of dressing of rich people brought about by her profession, she wants the same physical appearance to be imbued by her mother and siblings who remain adamant in being who and what they are.

The representation of class differences and class struggle is an oft repeated motif in Filipino melodrama convention. The woman

character is often from the lower class compared to men and the discourse of a woman's salvation is in the hands of the men around her. However, the films of these six directors present a different picture. The women are positioned as either at the same plane as the man or at least are no longer in abject poverty. Such is the case with Sol in *Ika-11 Utos Mahalin Mo Asawa Mo*. Both she and Roy are in the same social class. Their struggle is to uplift themselves from the poverty they are surrounded with. The same is seen in *Anak*. Josie and Rudy come from the same lower middle class and both want to earn more to sustain their family. The reverse is seen in *Babae*, where Bea belongs to a higher social class than her husband Ricky. In the films *Madrasta*, *Dabil May Isang Ikarw*, and *Dabil Mahal Kita: The Dolzura Cortez Story*, it is the women who belong to a lower class compared to the men. Mariel comes from a middle class family while Edward is from the upper class. Anya too is lower class compared to Andrew's elite background. In Dolzura's situation, while her low economic status cannot afford her what she wishes for her children, it is only at one point in her story that the American Keith "rescues" her and provides her with the material wealth needed to educate her children and provide them comforts (here, Dolzura found the arrangement as a stepping stone to her later higher achievements in the film). However, the coming together of the women and men in these films is not posited on the man rescuing the woman from her predicament and low social class as in melodramatic films before the 1990s.

### *Work issues*

Most of the women in the films do productive work. Dolzura was a sex worker, shoe shine girl, bar owner, and a labor recruiter; Sol did laundry for Sylvia and Tony; Susan is a psychologist and counselor; Mariel holds a high position in a large advertising agency; Bea is an architect; Bea's friend Melinda is a medical doctor in a large hospital; Anya is the owner and manager of her own forwarding business; and Josie and her friends Lyn and Mercy are migrant workers and later own a taxi business together.

In representing the women as productive, the film directors deviated from the mainstream depiction of women in melodrama as without work and who stay home doing household chores. While Josie's narrative begins on her return to the Philippines where she is unable to find work, she is seemingly relegated to perform reproductive work

within the confines of home; but she and her friends set up a taxi business and manage their finances well. While the films do not reveal how much these women earn, their representation as neither gaunt nor starving or begging is a hint to the viewer that they earn enough for themselves and their family. In *Madrasta*, there is ambiguity at play – there are scenes where Edward gives Mariel a generous allowance for managing the household but there are times when the film hints at her using her own money to buy things for Edward’s children and to give to her mother and siblings. In *Babae*, Bea is the one who provides for the family – this is stated in the scene where Ricky plans to withdraw money from their joint account and Bea tells him that he has not contributed much to the account and cannot withdraw from it.

The films are instructive on women’s issues and problems and also in creating a level of awareness about aspects of Filipino social reality and social practices. But the viewer must be able to sift through the various thematic oscillations and ambiguities represented by the women protagonists. Many contradictions are represented – for instance, the easy way that Bea was able to liberate herself from Ricky’s abusiveness makes the viewer wonder at the workings of domestic violence because the manner represented seems contrived and unreal. What is emphasized here is that the form of melodrama and the narrative dramatic construction of the film help it achieve a level of realism in its representation of stories and experiences of women. While the images of the Filipino woman are very close to the realities in Filipino society, the oscillation between the films’ resistive and compliant elements makes the understanding of the films and their capacity to introduce new discursive structures to the discourse of the Filipino woman unconvincing. However, this writer finds that the attempts of the women mainstream directors are laudable, images that they have contributed to the discourse on the Filipino woman being valuable.

## Conclusions

Women’s issues have had a difficult time finding expression in mainstream media like film. This is because certain hegemonic forces in society prevent their entry into the dominant field. The existing patriarchal ideology works hard at maintaining them as marginal, and therefore, unimportant. However, because culture as an active process links the production of

meaning to the social structure of a society in a specific historical dimension, the shift from a traditional mode of communication to a radical unconventional mode is possible, as evidenced by the six melodramatic films discussed in this article. The films postulate the woman's position in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other or the woman is presented in opposition to the male who is depicted as weak or as having a weakness that works toward the emergence of the woman's strength and completeness.

The eight imagings of the Filipino woman in the six films and what are embedded in these imagings are successful in finding a space in the larger media landscape in the country. New discursive formations have broken in the discursive space that melodramatic film offers and the six women directors were able to communicate their social messages and provide the entertainment value of the genre. Guillen, Diaz-Abaya, Lamasan, Aquino-Kashiwahara, Bernal, and Quintos have taken advantage of the platform that mainstream cinema allows and their films are understood at the level of human experience and social phenomena in the way their woman protagonists operate within a socially restricted milieu that leads them to find the solutions to their problems and articulate the issues and concerns of Filipino women in general through the discourse of film.

However, the ability and capacity of melodramatic films in providing the liberative platform for articulating women's issues and concerns would not have materialized without the shift in knowledge and visions about women that only discourse is able to evolve. These representations, images, and new discursive formations on the Filipino woman will raise ideological tensions. However, the open-mindedness and the recognition of women's human rights in the 1990s and the influx of a myriad of influences that concern the arena of women may continue to generate more discourses on the Filipino woman. Indeed, current discourse in this context has proven itself to be a liberative instrument for women's issues and concerns.

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