

Rewriting herstory: Feminist perspectives in contemporary short stories

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Abstract

Women's representation in literature reflected societal norms and challenges. This literary analysis research examined selected 21st-century Filipino short stories from a Feminist perspective to unravel gender dynamics and societal expectations. Through directed content analysis, five short stories were analyzed, revealing the complexities of women's experiences, struggles, and resilience in navigating societal pressures. The stories illuminated issues such as economic disparities, political marginalization, and cultural norms, highlighting the need for greater gender equality and empowerment. Therefore, the implications include promoting gender equality in policies, enhancing economic opportunities for women, promoting gender-sensitive education, supporting networks and community programs, initiating grassroots movements, addressing intersectional discrimination, and supporting marginalized groups. By addressing these issues, society can move towards greater recognition and empowerment of women in all aspects of life.

Keywords: content analysis; feminist perspective; short stories; contemporary; Philippine Literature; social; political; economic

1. Introduction

Women have taken an active part in society since they have been given equal roles in the political, economic, and social world. Gone are the days when women just stayed at home and tended the household and the children. Just like men, they have actively faced the challenges of life. Yet, the underrepresentation of women in society is a pressing issue that affects various aspects of life, from politics and economics to media and culture. Despite continuous progress, women remained to be underrepresented in political leadership positions around the world. According to the UN Women's report (2023), as of January 2023, women constitute only 22.8% of parliamentarians globally. This means that women have limited influence in shaping policies and laws that directly impact their lives. With fewer women in political leadership roles, important perspectives and experiences are often overlooked, hindering the creation of inclusive and gender-sensitive policies. In addition to political underrepresentation, women also face challenges in economic equality. Women continue to earn less than men for the same work. The gender pay gap, which refers to the difference between the average earnings of men and women in the workforce, stands at 16%. Despite attempts to narrow the gap, women still earn just 84 cents for every dollar a man makes (Aragao, 2023). This disparity affects women's economic security and contributes to gender inequality.

Moreover, violence against women remains devastatingly pervasive and starts alarmingly young, according to new data from the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021). Across women's lifetime, 1 in 3 women, around 736 million, are subjected to physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner or sexual violence from a non-partner – a number that has remained largely unchanged over the past decade. Further, school girls still face barriers to accessing quality education in many parts of the world. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2023) reports that around 132 million girls are out of school, denying them opportunities for personal and professional development. Furthermore, women are often portrayed stereotypically in the media, reinforcing harmful gender norms and limiting the representation of women in diverse roles and professions (Santonniccolo et al., 2023).

Studying women's roles in literature is crucial for understanding the complexities of gender dynamics, societal norms, and historical contexts. Through literature, people gain insights into women's experiences, struggles, and triumphs across

cultures. Analyzing the portrayal of women in the narratives will help uncover underlying themes, biases, and perspectives that have shaped and continue to shape in understanding of gender roles. It also provides a platform for making women's voices heard, highlighting their contributions to literature and society, and challenging stereotypes and misconceptions. Feminist literary criticism is a vital lens through which to examine literature, shedding light on how gender shapes and is shaped by literary texts. By analyzing themes, characters, and narratives through a feminist perspective, scholars aim to uncover hidden biases, illuminate overlooked voices, and explore the complexities of gender dynamics in literature.

The selected Filipino 21st-century short stories will be examined on the complexities of gender dynamics, societal expectations, and women's roles within the cultural context of the Philippines. In these narratives, authors navigate a range of themes, including identity, agency, patriarchy, and the intersections of gender with other aspects of identity such as class, ethnicity, and religion. In addition, the portrayal of women in literature and society challenges traditional roles and stereotypes while amplifying the voices and experiences of women. Feminism, in this context, will help shed light on the multifaceted lives of Filipinas, exploring their struggles, aspirations, and resilience in the face of systemic oppression and cultural constraints.

Hence, these short stories will be critically analyzed with issues of gender, power, and representation, prompting reflection on how societal structures shape the lives of women and marginalized genders. These narratives serve as a testament to the rich tapestry of Filipino literature and the ongoing struggle for gender equality and social justice in the Philippines and beyond.

1.1 Research Question

This literary analysis aims to unravel the representations of women in the selected 21st-century Philippine literature short stories. Specifically, it will answer the question: What are the social, political, economic, and cultural experiences encountered by women and the marginalized gender in the selected Filipino short stories?

1.2 Review of Related Literature

The changes to society's standards have influenced the image of Filipino women in the past decades. This too is reflected in the short stories published in the 21st century short stories. Feminism has evolved significantly through phases of liberal feminism, radical feminism, and recently, intersectional feminism. Each phase focuses on different equality and representation to the examination of oppression and the intersecting of race, class and sexuality.

According to Dials (2017), Filipino women today are faced with challenges in this complex world. Women have created identities throughout history. In Arellano's (1994) study of the *Lwayway Magazine*, emphasized that the modern and educated women accepted the burden of mother, caregiver, and breadwinner. One of the mediums that feminist writers brought intense and impactful representation of societal changes is short stories. Feminist writers explore different themes and societal norms through vivid storytelling and powerful characterization reflecting modern society.

1.3 Theoretical Lens

This content analysis is guided by the Feminism Theory: Postmodern Feminism. Feminist philosophy has evolved with postmodernism. It covers three main topics: female differences, reevaluation of gender distinctions, and subjectivity. It examines women's perspectives on identity creation and the role of unconscious desires (Williams, 2002). Postmodernism offers new ways of thinking for feminist thought. It includes integrative modes of thinking that value women and reject binaries. It also promotes pluralism and is political in difference, which means it considers differences in race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Additionally, postmodernism values the other. It allows exploring women's experiences and behaviors in the context in which they occur, rather than within a presumed normative framework that treats women as dysfunctional group members. (Fricker, 2000; Frost & Elichao, 2014).

Postmodern feminism is committed to critiquing all those modern theories that are so lofty, grandiose, and all-encompassing, attempting to build a theory of community, i.e., establishing political and moral principles based on the experiences of local, specific groups while rejecting causation and macro-social conceptions (Karim & Azlan (2019)). This makes postmodern feminism and, like postmodernism, challenges other genres of feminism that have preceded it. Furthermore, it is a philosophical approach that examines how societal communication shapes our social assumptions about the treatment of women. It acknowledges the intricate nature of social relations and highlights the role of discourse in shaping social norms. This approach has been instrumental in social work, as it presents a nuanced perspective on behavior, and challenges the notion of oppression centered solely on patriarchy. Postmodern feminism places great emphasis on diversity and multiple perspectives and encompasses critical elements such as identity, discourse deconstruction, and a reevaluation of cultural notions surrounding the feminine body.

Feminist thinking leads to various suggested principles for postmodern feminist practice. These aim to recognize diversity and strength, eliminate privileging certain groups of women, and address social and individual causes of women's problems. Principles for working with men suggest gendered power relations have implications for men and celebrate the redefinition of masculinity. Feminism is a significant contributor to critical practice theory, being open to a wider range of explanations for oppression and looking at interactions between different forms of oppression.

2. Methods

This research will use the directed content analysis approach to analyze five short stories from 21st-century Philippine literature. Directed content analysis is a method of content analysis that uses a predefined coding scheme or theoretical framework to guide the analysis (Assarroudi, 2018). Unlike other forms of content analysis that may allow for more open-ended exploration of the data, directed content analysis starts with a specific set of codes or categories that are developed based on existing theory or research questions. These codes are used to categorize and organize the data, guiding the analysis process and focusing attention on specific aspects of the content that are of interest. The predefined coding scheme or theoretical framework serves as a lens through which the data is interpreted, allowing researchers to systematically analyze the content for themes, patterns, or relationships that are relevant to the research objectives (Kibiswa, 2019). In this case, the analysis will be guided by feminist theory, which focuses on examining literature through the lens of gender dynamics, power structures, and the representation of women in the narratives.

The feminist theory will serve as a guide for the researchers in analyzing the 5 short stories from 21st-century Philippine literature. As an approach, the researchers will focus on examining these short stories through the lens of how women are represented in the stories. It seeks to uncover and challenge gender biases, stereotypes, and patriarchal ideologies present in literary works (Barry, 2020). Feminist literary criticism aims to give voice to marginalized female characters, highlight the experiences and perspectives of women, and critique the ways in which women are portrayed in literature (Irshad & Yasmin, 2022). By applying the directed content analysis approach and feminist theory to the analysis of these short stories, the research aims to provide a deeper understanding of how gender is represented and constructed in 21st-century Philippine literature.

3. Results and Discussion

Table 1. Social Experiences of Women Characters

Research Questions	Talia Migrante by Don Pagusara	The Steel Brassiere by Iris Sheila Crisostomo	Santos De Sampaguitas by Alyssa Wong	Sinigang by Marie Aubrey J. Villaceran	The Old Woman Of The Candles by Kevin Piamonte	Themes
What are the social experiences encountered by women in the selected Filipino short stories?	You really can't trust men to care for their children.	Obedient as she is...	Christina struggled to undergo the ritual that would change her identity.	There is a sense of obligation and duty imposed on Liza by her mother.	Lola Conching's role in maintaining this tradition	Imposed Gender Roles and Identity
	"Talia fell in love with a good-for-nothing istambay. And the guy just fooled around with her. To make a long story short, she became pregnant."	She stays quiet even after listening to his rant		Liza, is expected to be skilled in household chores		
	Talia Migrante is facing the struggle of what is sane and not, as she is being described as "Buang"...	A man needs a woman to take care of his needs and the woman needs a man to support her...				Pressure to Conform to Social Expectations and Standards
	the society that often values physical conformity.	Lindoln kept me up all night with his how-to-be-a-good-mother lectures				
	Who wouldn't laugh at the way she looked?	...conform to their family's tradition...	The comparison may impact the wife's sense of identity and self-worth	"'She's pretty, I guess.' She was." "like she was in her forties—the same age as my mother"	Women are expected to uphold family traditions and practices	
	Whenever our eyes would meet, we would smile meaningfully	...importance of marrying into a higher class				

The stories depict the theme of imposed gender roles and identity, highlighting traditional expectations placed on female characters. In "The Steel Brassiere," the expectation that women should be caretakers and obedient reflects traditional gender roles. "Sinigang" illustrates Liza's obligation to care for her family, emphasizing women's expected domestic duties. The story also touches on societal pressure on women to conform to narrow beauty standards. "The Old Woman of the Candles" shows Lola Conching maintaining tradition despite blindness, emphasizing adherence to traditional gender roles.

The stories illustrate the theme of pressure to conform to societal expectations and standards, with characters feeling compelled to adhere to norms at the expense of their own desires or well-being. In "Talia Migrante," Talia defies labels of "Buang" or crazy, saving Bembe and showcasing her true character. "The Steel Brassier" portrays a woman pressured to obey her husband, reflecting societal expectations of traditional gender roles. "Santos de Sampaguitas" depicts pressure on women to uphold family traditions and marry into higher social classes. "Sinigang" highlights societal emphasis on women's physical appearance and beauty standards. "The Old Woman of the Candles" shows the expectation for women to uphold family traditions, even in difficult circumstances.

Enforced gender roles often restrict women to domestic responsibilities, limiting their access to education and career opportunities. This economic disempowerment hinders not only individual growth but also societal progress. According to Desai and Joshi (2019), gender inequality in economic participation leads to significant losses in potential economic growth, as women are not able to fully contribute to the workforce. Women forced into traditional roles often experience psychological stress and identity conflict. These roles can create a dissonance between personal aspirations and societal expectations. For instance, the expectation for women to prioritize family over career can lead to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem (Kabeer, 2021). This internal conflict can result in mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression. Women forced into traditional roles often experience psychological stress and identity conflict. These roles can create a dissonance between personal aspirations and societal expectations. For instance, the expectation for women to prioritize family over career can lead to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem (Bhat, Rajan & Gamage 2023). This internal conflict can result in mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression.

Table 2. Political Experiences of Women Characters

Research Questions	Talia Migrante by Don Pagusara	The Steel Brassiere by Iris Sheila Crisostomo	Santos De Sampaguitas by Alyssa Wong	Sinigang Marie Aubrey J. Villaceran	The Old Woman Of The Candles by Kevin Piamonte	Themes
What are the political experiences encountered by women in the selected Filipino short stories?	And the guy just fooled around with her.	she begins to question her struggles under her domineering husband Call again. The line is bad. I can't quite hear you." I put the phone down and leisurely walked to the bedroom.	"I don't need your gifts. You'd best leave. Don't bother coming back."	She was forever baffled at the way my mother could be such a martyr when it came to my father as having a complex role, being both a "martyr"	comfort woman during World War II	Gendered Power Dynamics
	After her pregnancy, she regained her good looks. And this time our heroine could not be deceived anymore		"I don't need your gifts. You'd best leave. Don't bother coming back."			Patriarchal Resistance
			Christina is part of a lineage of women who have been chosen by the dead	a tyrant to her children."	Despite her blindness, Lola Conching upholds the family's tradition.	Matriarchal Legacy

The theme of gendered power dynamics explores how power is unequally distributed between men and women in society, often favoring men. In "Talia Migrante," Talia's relationship with an "istambay" reflects a dynamic where men can exploit women's emotions. "The Steel Brassiere" portrays a domineering husband asserting control over his wife, illustrating unequal power dynamics. "Sinigang" depicts a mother sacrificing her needs for her family, reinforcing the expectation for women to prioritize others. Lastly, "The Old Woman with the Candles" mentions the exploitation of women during World War II, highlighting historical gender-based exploitation.

The theme of patriarchal resistance in the political experiences of women is evident in the selected stories. In "Santos de Sampaguitas," Christina refuses the offer of the dead god, challenging male dominance. "Talia Migrante" shows Talia striving for independence and refusing to be deceived by men after her teenage pregnancy. In "The Steel Brassiere," the wife's neglect of her husband's demands can be seen as a form of protest against patriarchal norms. These stories highlight women's resistance through overt defiance or subtle acts of protest, reflecting a broader struggle against societal structures that limit women's autonomy.

The third theme of the political sphere is the matriarchal legacy, where women hold significant power and influence. In "Santos de Sampaguitas," Christina inherits powers from a dead god, highlighting a tradition of female authority. In "Sinigang," Liza's mother exerts tyrannical control, showcasing matriarchal power within the family. In "The Old Woman with the Candles," Lola Conching, despite her blindness, upholds her family's religious traditions. These stories illustrate the diverse manifestations of matriarchal legacy through spiritual inheritance, authoritative parenting, and the maintenance of cultural traditions, underscoring strong female leadership.

Moreover, unequal power dynamics among women often lead to disparities in access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making power. For instance, women from marginalized backgrounds may experience more significant barriers in achieving economic independence or career advancement compared to their more privileged counterparts (Garriott, 2020). This disparity can result in a lack of solidarity and support among women, further weakening collective efforts toward gender equality.

Table 3. Economic Experiences of Women Characters

Research Questions	Talia Migrante	The Steel Brassiere	Santos De Sampaguitas	Sinigang	The Old Woman Of The Candles	Themes
	by Don Pagusara	by Iris Sheila Crisostomo	by Alyssa Wong	by Marie Aubrey J. Villaceran	by Kevin Piamonte	
What are the economic experiences encountered by women in the selected Filipino short stories?	After graduating from high school, Talia got pregnant and the man left her. She went back to her mother and helped in making charcoal. When still sane, Talia went abroad to work as a Domestic Helper.	"Lindoln is a sales manager at a pharmaceutical company that paid well." I whispered "Thank you" loud enough for him to hear but my hand was crushing the bills inside my pocket.	"You only get married once. And especially a maid getting married to Sir Carlos—" - This line, spoken by Vicky, implies that marrying into a wealthy... "I don't know why we're paying for this wedding," says Ma'am Chitti			Women's Economic Disparities and Inequalities
		As a stayed-at-home wife, she depends financially on her husband. I asked him for money... He took out P500 then changed his mind and gave me P300 instead		The mother's decision to stay, even after knowing the betrayal of her husband, is influenced by economic factors.		Financial Dependence

The themes of women's economic disparities and inequalities emerge in the selected short stories, highlighting challenges in achieving economic equality. In "Talia Migrante," Talia's journey from teenage pregnancy to working abroad as a Domestic Helper demonstrates the hurdles women face. "The Steel Brassiere" contrasts the husband's easy job prospects with the wife's limited opportunities, indicating gender discrimination and societal expectations. "Santos de Sampaguitas" shows the economic gap between a maid and a wealthy man, emphasizing the significance of marrying into higher social classes for economic advancement. These stories illustrate the complex realities of women navigating economic challenges and societal expectations.

The second theme explores the financial dependence of women characters, highlighting their reliance on others for support and the challenges this brings. In "The Steel Brassiere," the wife's lack of financial independence makes her vulnerable and affects her lifestyle. Similarly, in "Sinigang," economic factors influence the mother's decision to stay in her marriage for financial stability. These stories reflect broader societal issues of women's financial dependence and the complexities it brings to their lives. Postmodern feminism challenges traditional economic roles for women, advocating for financial independence to address disparities and inequalities that impact both individual women and broader societal structures.

Firstly, economic disparities and inequalities limit women's access to resources and opportunities, which perpetuates a cycle of poverty and marginalization. Women often face wage gaps, with data showing that they earn significantly less than men for the same work. According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2020, women earn only 68% of what men earn on average (Nam, 2020). This income disparity restricts women's ability to invest in their education, healthcare, and overall well-being, further entrenching economic inequalities.

Financial dependence on male partners or family members exacerbates these issues, as it limits women's autonomy and decision-making power. This dependence can increase their vulnerability to domestic abuse and economic exploitation. For instance, research by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) highlights that economic dependence is a significant barrier for women attempting to leave abusive relationships (Reilly, 2018). In a nutshell, women's economic disparities and financial dependence have significant implications, including perpetuating poverty, limiting personal autonomy, and hindering broader economic growth. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive policy interventions and societal shifts towards gender equality.

Table 4. Cultural Experiences of Women Characters

Research Questions	Talia Migrante by Don Pagusara	The Steel Brassiere by Iris Sheila Crisostomo	Santos De Sampaguitas by Alyssa Wong	Sinigang by Aubrey Villaceran Marie J.	The Woman Old Of The Candles by Kevin Piamonte	Themes
What are the cultural experiences encountered by women in the selected Filipino short stories?			"The shelves lining her room are covered in wooden carvings of saints, each adorned with wreaths of dried, dead sampaguitas"		Despite being blind, Lola Conching continues to light candles on the altar	Religious duty and sacrifices
	performs the role of being a housewife	"Stay home. Its best for you and our children".	"It's no wonder they're pissed," says Jene. "Your sister's a nice girl, Tintin, but she's a probinsyana like us..."	"Everyone makes mistakes, Liza." Her eyes begged..."		Housewives and Women's Cultural Expectations
	Halos miggimaw sa shorts ilang mga itlog! Ay di gyud kasaligan ning mga lalaki pag atiman og anak	"There was nothing more to ask but I felt I really had nothing".	"It's because he got her pregnant, the idiot."	...women are expected to tolerate such behavior to preserve the family unit.		
	She spends ample of time Mareng Ellen...	Then I remembered Tiya Anding. We used to walk together... She would tell me about her husband...				Gossip and Social Dynamics

The identified short stories depict three cultural experiences of women: religious duty and sacrifices, housewives and cultural expectations, and gossip and social dynamics. The first theme, religious duty and sacrifices, is illustrated in “Santos de Sampaguitas” and “The Old Woman with Candles.” In “Santos de Sampaguitas,” a woman's meticulous preparation of sampaguita garlands for saints showcases her deep faith and commitment to religious practices, emphasizing women's roles in upholding traditions. “The Old Woman with Candles” portrays an elderly woman lighting candles daily, symbolizing her faith and sacrifices for her family and community. The second theme, housewives and cultural expectations, appears in “Talia Migrante,” “The Steel Brassiere,” and “Sinigang.” These stories depict women fulfilling traditional roles within the household, highlighting the socio-economic pressures, discrimination, and personal sacrifices they face. Talia in “Talia Migrante” challenges traditional roles by becoming a financial provider, the protagonist in “The Steel Brassiere” defies passive, submissive roles, and in “Sinigang,” the protagonist's role in preparing the dish underscores the importance of preserving family traditions and fulfilling domestic responsibilities.

The theme of gossip and social dynamics in the stories portrays women bonding and sharing information about others. Gossip serves various functions like bonding, establishing norms, and sharing information. In “Talia Migrante,” gossip reflects the close relationship between the narrator and Judith, reinforcing societal expectations. Similarly, in “The Steel Brassiere,” gossiping with Tita Andeng strengthens family bonds and copes with social norms. These stories show gossip as more than idle chatter; it's a tool for bonding, regulating behavior, and empowering women, offering a glimpse into the complexities of women's interactions and the power of seemingly trivial conversations in their lives.

These cultural expectations often confine women to traditional roles, limiting their potential and perpetuating gender inequality (Perry-Jenkins & Gerstel, 2020). Cultural expectations that prioritize women's roles as housewives and as mothers restrict their access to education and professional development. Although, as Torres, Sangala, San Jose and Mortos (2020) explained in their study that motherhood, often described as difficult but beautiful adventure, becomes increasingly complex when mothers take on additional roles and expectations. Cultural expectations traditionally cast women, especially mothers, in the role of primary caregivers and household managers. These roles are demanding on their own, requiring significant time, energy, and emotional investment.

4. Conclusion

The stories “Talia Migrante” by Don Pagusara, “The Steel Brassiere” by Iris Sheila Crisostomo, “Santos de Sampaguitas” by Alyssa Wong, “Sinigang” by Marie Aubrey Villaceran, and “The Old Woman of the Candles” by Kevin Piamonte illuminate the struggles and challenges faced by women as they navigate societal expectations, economic disparities, political dynamics, and cultural norms. From the pressure to conform to social standards to the economic dependence on men, and the political marginalization in patriarchal societies, these narratives shed light on the complex web of forces that shape women's lives. Through these stories, we gain a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of women's experiences and the need for greater recognition and empowerment of women in all aspects of society.

Through these intricate narratives, readers gain a deeper appreciation for the complexities of women's lives. These stories not only shed light on the myriad challenges women face but also emphasize the resilience and strength they exhibit in navigating these challenges. They call for a broader societal shift towards recognizing and empowering women, ensuring that their contributions and experiences are valued and supported across all domains of life.

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