

# Novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Analyzed Based on Marilyn Frye's Oppression

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## Abstract

Novels have been considered mirrors of social realities. In Soledad S. Reyes' work *Values of Love and Marriage in the Tagalog Novels (1980)*, with the help of 25 novels, Reyes reveals the Filipino concept of love and marriage and how such concepts are influenced by parents, society, and family members to adhere to the idealized love and marriage. Taking Reyes' work as true, this paper will look into Reyes' work and her conclusion that the concept of love and marriage are networks that oppress women based on Marilyn Frye's *Oppression (2000)*. Hence, this paper will conclude that despite Reyes' work being only one, the novels she has analyzed are numerous, and these novels have different themes which when related to each other will reveal a network that oppresses women to adhere to the idea of women during those times.

*Keywords: Soledad S. Reyes, literature, Marilyn Frye, oppression*

## INTRODUCTION

Reyes stated in her *Values of Love and Marriage in the Tagalog Novels* that 'novels have been used most often as a reflector of social realities (Reyes 1980, 284).' In this paper, the researcher will look into how Reyes analyzes the novels she has mentioned revealing the concept of love and marriage and how the concept that Reyes has revealed showed that it is actually a double bind, an oppression explained by Marilyn Frye in her work *Oppression (2000)*.

This paper will comprise two parts: the first part will be about Marilyn Frye's Double Bind found in her *Oppression (2000)* journal article and the second part will be about *Values of Love and Marriage in the Tagalog Novels (1980)* by Soledad S. Reyes.

## Network Explained

Marilyn Frye tries to explain the concept of oppression experienced by women using the analogy of a bird cage in which women are trapped, or pressed against something rendering women immovable. This is, for Frye, what oppression is.

Oppression for Frye is losing its meaning especially when we usually incorporate the idea of oppression as something that restricts us. Accordingly, this was the 'oppression' that men thought they were receiving hence, they were the same as with women being oppressed.

The statement that women are oppressed is frequently met with the claim that men are oppressed, too. Some men will cite as evidence of their oppression their much-advertised inability to cry. It is tough, we are told, to be masculine. When the stresses and frustrations of being a man are cited as evidence that oppressors are oppressed by the opposing, the word 'oppression' is being stretched to meaninglessness (Frye 2000, 10).

Hence, here Frye explained that oppression came from the root word 'press' which means 'to mold things, or flatten them, or reduce them in bulk, sometimes to reduce them by squeezing out the gases or liquids in them' (ibid, 11). Frye added that being oppressed or pressed against is like being caught in a network of forces or a system of forces that presses women into immobility. She said this can be seen in an example of a double bind.

A double bind for Frye is where a woman is in a situation where options are reduced to very few, and all of them expose one to penalty, censure, or deprivation (Ibid.) Frye has given here the example of a sexually active woman versus a sexually inactive one. The sexually active woman will receive the judgment of being a 'whore' or 'easy', while being sexually inactive will lead to being a 'lesbian,' a 'cockblocker,' or 'uptight.'

Frye added that the experiences an oppressed person lives through are not accidental rather, it is a network that is systematically related to one another to restrict the oppressed to any motion (ibid, 12). Frye coincides with this with a bird cage. Closely, we cannot see the bar that hinders the movement of the bird or if we do see, it would be only one bar, but looking at it from a distance, we can see that many bars

hinder the bird's movement. These are, according to Frye, the systems that hinder the oppressed from mobility.

Furthermore, these systems or networks that hinder the mobility of women are difficult to identify, 'as the cageness of the bird cage is a macroscopic phenomenon, the oppressiveness of the situations in which women live our various and different lives is a macroscopic phenomenon. Neither can be seen from a microscopic perspective. But when you look macroscopically, you can see it' (ibid, 13). Hence, these networks are difficult to identify individually, but when seen relatively to other situations, we can see the whole picture that all are connected within a bigger picture.

Consequently, for Frye, no human being is free from social structures (ibid,) and a person can use these social structures as 'oppression' but rather, they are not. These are only limitations or restrictions a person experiences, but not oppression. A good example is traffic signs where certain vehicles can only move to one side of the road; those are restrictions but one cannot say that they are oppressed by stating that they can only drive on one side of the road.

Barriers for Frye, have different meanings according to those on the opposite sides of the barrier. For example, inside a prison, the wall's function is to keep prisoners in, while from the outside, it is to protect them from what was kept in. 'A set of social and economic barriers and forces separating two groups may be felt, even painfully, by members of both groups and yet may mean confinement to one and liberty and enlargement of opportunity to the other' (Ibid, 14). A good example of this barrier that can be an opportunity to one and a confinement to the other, was the sex roles. Women typically have the role of being a mother, a wife, and a housekeeper. They are kept in confinement. Meanwhile, men are typically seen as embodying the role of a father, provider, and husband. They are usually kept in opportunity as they are the ones experiencing the world outside of home:

The barrier is erected and maintained by men, for the benefit of men. It consists of cultural and economic forces and pressures in a culture and economy controlled by men in which, at every economic level and in all racial and ethnic subcultures, economy, tradition – and even ideologies of liberation – work to keep at least local culture and economy in male control (Ibid, 15.)

Frye added that some of the restrictions that we experience are more or less internalized and self-monitored, as these became part of our upbringing and expectations imposed on us (Ibid.) Women, for example, are expected to dress up because, it shows that they take care of themselves, and it signifies that they are also desirable as women. On the other hand, if she does not dress up, no men would look at her twice and she will be seen as someone who does not take care of herself.

### Values of Love and Marriage in the Tagalog Novels by Reyes

The novels that Soledad S. Reyes analyzed in her work were:

1. Urbana at Feliza (1853) by Modesto de Castro
2. Florante at Laura (1838) by Francisco Balagtas
3. Babaeng Martir (1918) by Juan Arsciwals
4. Dakiling Pag-ibig (1921) by Juan Arsciwals
5. Ang Magmamani (1924) by Teofilo Saucó
6. Pusong Walang Pag-ibig (1909) by Roman Reyes
7. Bulaklak ng Kalumpang (1907) by Roman Reyes
8. Nena at Neneng (1905) by Valeriano Hernandez Peña
9. Pinaglahuan (1907) by Faustino Aguilar
10. Wakas ng Pagtitiis (1908) by Faustino Aguilar
11. Luha ng Makasalanan (1919) by Juan Lauro Arsciwals
12. Ang Monghita (1929) by Fausto Galauran
13. Sa Paanan ng Krus (1937) by Lazaro Francisco
14. May Pagsinta'y Walang Puso (1921) by Iñigo Ed. Regalado
15. Tala sa Panghulo (1913) by Patricio Mariano
16. Bulaklak ng Kabaret (1920) by Ruperto Cristobal
17. Ang Mestisa (1921) by Engracio Valmonte
18. Bulaklak ng Bagong Panahon (1926) by Dogracias Rosario
19. Mga Taga-Bukid (1913) by Rosauro Almarino
20. Katalik-Laan (1914) by Santiago Flores
21. Andrea Liwaswas (1909) by Roman Reyes
22. Lalaking Uliran o Tulisan (1914) by Juan Lauro Arsciwals
23. Makiring Maynila (1946) by Teofilo E. Saucó
24. Sampaguitang Walang Bago (1918) by Iñigo Ed. Regalado
25. Busabos ng Palad (1909) by Faustino Aguilar

These novels were published in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the writers of these novels claim themselves as moralists, which mirrors the problems we face in society. Reyes stated that the 'novel has been used as a reflector of social realities, it may be viewed as a potential source

of insights into some aspect of an individual's life to society (Reyes 1980, 284).’ She added that a careful study of these texts will reveal the ideas, feelings, thoughts, and attitudes of the people (ibid, 285) during those times.

Hence, I have listed five themes that Reyes has concluded in her analysis of these novels. These are:

1. Ideal love is not worldly, and not materialistic, it should have trustworthiness, fidelity, and the ability to endure pain.
2. Family is the basic unit of society, and its harmony should be of utmost importance.
3. Parents are the protectors, advisors, and punishers of unwanted actions by their offspring. Parents are also compassionate and willing to sacrifice their dignity and honor for their child's life and are forgiving of their sins.
4. Love before marriage transcends the physical one, it should encompass emotional and spiritual beauty as well.
5. Society has a role in being an observer of the values and vices committed. Unwanted actions could lead to more shame.

In 1) ***Ideal love is not worldly, and not materialistic, it should have trustworthiness, fidelity, and the ability to endure pain***, as glimpsed in *Urbana and Feliza* (1853), an ideal image of a lover as one who ‘should exhibit basic traits such as abhorrence of worldly pleasures, trustworthiness, fidelity, and the ability to endure and prevail in this ‘vale of tears,’ (Ibid, 286) is depicted. *Florante at Laura* (1838), also shows an ideal image of love, love as ‘filial piety, fidelity,’ (Ibid, 286).

In 2) ***Family is the basic unit of society and its harmony should be of utmost importance***, as seen in the novels *Babaeng Martir* (1918), *Dakiling Pag-ibig* (1921), *Ang Magmamani* (1924) and *Pusong Walang Pag-ibig* (1909), the dynamics between a mother and daughter relationship as a reference to family values is portrayed. Despite the daughter being rebellious and their mother being strict, the daughter always listens to her parents and heed their guidance as her parents are always right. This can be seen in what Reyes said, ‘there is a strict hierarchy composed of the different members of the family; each member is expected to know his/her proper place and role. Certain fundamental values bind them together, compelling them to act with definite goals in mind’ (Ibid, 288). Hence, the parents, based on what

Reyes has analyzed, should be respected and followed, and the children, should obey and should always feel indebted to their parents.

*Babaeng Martir* (1918), tells the story of a daughter who elopes with a man, not heeding her mother's advice that the man is untrustworthy. Eventually, the daughter realizes that the man is not indeed trustworthy after the man leaves her for another woman; the man later kills himself. The daughter then returns home, lets herself heal from her ordeal, and marries her former suitor, restoring her status in society. In these novels 'the parents ought to be treated not only with respect but with absolute obedience as well, for their task is to ensure that their offsprings are in good hands before their own death' (ibid, 292).\

In addition to "**harmony between family members should be preserved,**" with cases where there is a family conflict, one should be willing to sacrifice for the other. Reyes stated that some writers 'have shown the need to perpetuate certain values affecting familiar relationships, mostly those concerned with bringing about the happiness of the other members of the family' (ibid, 297) especially if it leads to conflict like the novel, *Ang Monghita* (1929) where two sisters fall in love with the same man. Accordingly, 'the peace in their home depends on the willingness of one of them, to suffer, (ibid)' hence the family dynamics or relationship will be restored if one is willing to sacrifice herself for the sake of her sister's love.

Another theme was also discussed in these novels which was the topic of forgiveness in the family. Once their husbands or wives have erred, forgiveness is a must for the order or harmony of the family. A good example is *Babaeng Martir* (1918) which tells the story of a mother, who despite her abusive husband, refrains from saying anything against him because 'marriage is a life-long commitment' (ibid, 299).

Reyes noted here that since family plays a crucial role in these novels, preserving the family was the priority, meanwhile, its contrast, its destruction was looked down upon. As much as love for one another, between husband and wife was a virtue, adultery or concubinage was not.

In 3) **Parents are the protectors, the advisors, and punishers of unwanted actions to their offspring. Parents are also compassionate and willing to sacrifice their dignity and honor for their child's life and are forgiving of their sins,** a good example of parents as protectors is in *Urbana at Feliza* (1853) where they protected their daughter's virginity

and did not allow them to stay by the window so men would not gawk at them as if 'grapes ready to be picked (ibid, 286).

Parents as advisors, on the other hand, is seen in *Babaeng Martir* (1918) where the daughter did not adhere to her mother's advice leading to her demise; or, *Dakilang Pag-ibig* (1921) which has the same premise. These stories also show the parents are willing to forgive. Like in *Babaeng Martir* (1918), and *Dakilang Pag-ibig* (1921), they let their daughter redeem themselves, not for themselves but for society as well by marrying a man, who has honor.

Parents who are willing to sacrifice meanwhile can be seen in *Luha ng Makasalan* (1919) where the mother becomes a cabaret dancer just to support her children after her husband leaves her (ibid, 294).

In 4) ***Love before marriage transcends the physical one, it should encompass an emotional and spiritual beauty as well***, Reyes revealed that other novels show the importance of character rather than beauty. A good example here was the idea of the *dalagang Tagalog* shown in novels such as *Bulaklak ng Kalumang* (1907), *Wakas ng Pagtitiis* (1908), and *Nena at Neneng* (1905), which exemplify the desirability of the best qualities of Maria Clara, Laura, and of Urbana and Feliza that was in the *dalagang Tagalog*, compared to a 'modern' girl who was spoiled, arrogant, lazy, materialistic, unfaithful, and brazen (ibid, 298).

In addition, honor and reputation were of utmost importance to the character of a *dalagang Tagalog*. 'Purity must be preserved at all costs for once lost, it is irretrievable. (ibid, 299).' Hence, the idea of a woman in a novel who was a virgin or has lost her virginity has been a recurring theme in these novels.

According to Reyes, 'love before marriage is depicted in a highly idealized manner, intensely emotional and often impulsive. In marriage, the romantic excesses invariably give way to a more sober, objective, serious view of love. Love for the sake of love is transformed into love as an answer to the other's needs (ibid, 297)'. Just like how the two sisters fall in love with the same man, the other sacrifices her love for her sister's happiness.

Reyes also stresses here that despite the family holding great importance when it comes to values between love and marriage, society too, holds a place when it comes to scrutinizing the wrongdoer that could aggravate and produce more shame for the family. In 5) ***Society***

**has a role in being an observer of the values and vices committed. Unwanted actions could lead to more shame**, 'society is revealed as a source of stability, as the dominant systems that sanction behavior and condemn violators of the rules' (ibid, 302). Just like some novels that show women should marry a man with honor to redeem themselves or society will crucify them until they die for their wrongdoings.

As much as Reyes has revealed the concept of marriage and love in these novels, Reyes has also revealed her reservations about these novels, like 1) the authoritarian figures of the parents and being the source of the suffering of their children, and 2) the double standard between man's concubinage and woman's adultery.

One good example of 1) the authoritarian figures of the parents and being the source of the suffering of the children is the *Bulaklak ng Kalumpang* (1907), which tells the story of Geleng, where when she did not obey her parents, they physically abused her such as being slapped or kicked. Another example is *Pinaglahuan* (1907), which shows domineering parents over their children, and *Wakas ng Pagtitiis* (1908), which shows that parents should be sensitive to their children's emotions (ibid, 293).

For 2) the double standard between man's concubinage and woman's adultery, a good example is *Sampaguitang Walang Bango* (1918), where the wife commits adultery; when the husband finds out, he leaves her and takes her children with him, leaving the wife helpless. Reyes was aware that there is bias in these novels that when a man commits concubinage, he is left pretty much unpunished; but, when a woman commits adultery, she loses her family and her place in society. Reyes stated, 'the girl mesmerized by the married man's good looks and glib talk then fend for herself and must learn to pick up the pieces of her life' (ibid, 301).

### The Themes as a Network explicate

As stated above, there are networks or systems that oppress women, and these are difficult to see because they can be seen on a macroscopic level. A good example is the article published by Soledad S. Reyes, it might not be a big deal when reading her Philippine Study work. Reyes is actually doing Filipinos a favor by summarizing the concept of love and marriage during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Reyes also has given us a favor by explicating that these novels have influenced the Filipinos during those times and are a reflection of those times.



But looking at it from the perspective of Marilyn Frye, Reyes has also revealed that these novels, those 18 novels were listed above show that it is actually a network that oppresses women.

A good example is from the *Urbana and Feliza* (1853) the concept of purity or virginity, and the rebellious daughter in the likes of *Babaeng Martir* (1918), the daughter that eloped; *Dakiling Pag-ibig* (1921), the daughter who lost her virginity, and *Nena at Neneng* (1904) giving birth to an illegitimate child. These stories reveal a network of what should a woman do and not do. A woman should not lose her virginity like of the daughter in *Dakiling Pag-ibig* (1921) or the daughter should not elope in *Babaeng Martir* (1918), falling in love with a man you did not marry resulting in an illegitimate child, putting your family in shame in *Nena at Neneng* (1904). These might be the synopsis of these stories, but these novels are three! How many do we need to say that these are networks that oppress women?

Another example was the idea that a man with honor, probably with a good job, or wealth will redeem a woman from her shame. This can be seen in the novels, *Pinaglahuan* (1907), where the parents marry their child to a rich man despite the daughter being in love with another man, with whom she carries her child, or *Dakilang Pag-Ibig* (1921) where the daughter married the man whom her mother wanted her to be with despite losing her virginity, but wanting to redeem herself to her mother, she married the man she wanted.

The idea of dalagang Tagalog is also the thing that is part of the network of oppression. A woman that is in the likes of *Maria Clara*, *Ninay*, *Laua*, and or *Urbana and Feliza* is desirable, whereas, a 'modern' woman is not. This can be seen in the novels *Tala sa Panghulo* (1913), *Bulaklak ng Kabaret* (1920), *Ang Mestisa* (1921), and *Bulaklak ng Bagong Panahon* (1926).

The idea that a woman should also be a martyr despite an abusive husband can be seen in *Pusong Walang Pag-ibig* (1920) and *Babaeng Martir* (1918), that 'inspite of the insufferable and mean ways of their husbands, the wives refuse to say anything derogatory about the men, lest society misconstrues their attitude' (ibid, 299).

Reyes, on the other hand, is aware of the double standard of some of the novels like *May Pagsinta'y Walang Pusong* (1921) and *Dakilang Pag-ibig* (1921) where men committing concubinage go unpunished, whereas, women committing adultery lose everything.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the 25 novels mentioned here, we can see that these novels show networks to oppress women. And these are only novels, what more if we look outside the factors that led these novelists to write the 'social realities' done during those times? In addition, these novels might have been published in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and some might not be on the wish list of our readers today. Nonetheless, these novels have influenced future writers and Filipinos of their time and might have ingrained the 'morals' that these writers have in their work. And those readers might be our great-grandparents who have influenced our parents, cousins, teachers, co-workers, and even politicians. Consequently, yes, these are only works of literature; but the ingrained 'morals' attached to these novels can last a lifetime, especially if not aware that these situations are part of a bigger network that oppresses women. If left unchecked, we might not be able to erase these networks.

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