

Comics as Third Space: An Analysis of the Continuous Negotiation of Identities in Postcolonial Philippines

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Abstract—Comics in the Philippines has taken on many uses for the Filipino people. They have been sources of entertainment, education, and political and social commentaries. History has been witnessed to the rise and fall of Philippine comics but the 21st century is seeing a revival of the medium and the industry. It is within this context that an inquiry about Filipino identity is situated. Employing the analytical framework of postcolonialism, particularly Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of Hybridity and the Third Space, this study analyzes three contemporary Philippine comics, *Trese*, *Filipino Heroes League*, and *Dead Balagtas*. The study was able to draw three themes that represent how Filipinos inhabit hybrid worlds and hybridized identities. First, the third space emerged through the use of hybrid worlds in the comics. Second, (re)imagined communities are established through the use of intertextual signifiers. Third, (re)negotiated identities are expressed through visual and narrative devices such as the use of Philippine mythology, historical and contemporary contexts, and language. In conclusion, comics can be considered as Third Space where these identities have the agency and opportunity to be expressed and represented.

Keywords—Comics, hybridity and third space, Philippine comics, postcolonialism.

I. INTRODUCTION

COMICS has been part of Philippine history for many decades now. Philippine National Hero, Dr. Jose Rizal, was said to have created the first Filipino cartoon strip, featuring the fable of "The Monkey and the Tortoise" while he was visiting his friend Juan Luna in Europe in 1886" [1]. It has served many purposes for the Filipino people, as forms of entertainment, education, promotion of developmental projects, and political and social commentaries [2], [3]. The 1950s and 1960s were said to be the Golden Age of Philippine Comics but due to reasons both internal and external to the industry, the popularity of and the interest in comics had declined since those years. However, the 21st century is seeing a resurgence of Philippine comics, their visibility and popularity gaining traction particularly through self or independent publishing. It is still a niche market. But while comics today may not be on the same level as the one it held during its golden age, the varying purposes that they have in both their creation and their reading are still both familiar and relevant up to the present. It is from this understanding that this study takes off with its central inquiry into the continuous

negotiation of identities in Philippine comics.

"Colonized by the Spanish, followed by the Americans and the Japanese, Filipinos are still in constant search for a national identity." [4] The American occupation was also the period when comics was introduced to the country when American soldiers brought them for their entertainment from the 1920s [5]. American comics and American culture had heavily influenced much of the early decades of Philippine comics history even after the Philippine Independence in 1946. During the declining years of comics in the country, the Philippines became exposed to the Japanese culture, specifically pop culture through anime, influencing a new generation of Filipino comics creators, which renewed once again the interest in Philippine comics in general [6]. Such influences are important, to be sure, in shaping the Philippine comics culture. Under the yoke of such influences and the development of the Philippines as a nation, this study seeks to investigate how and in what ways Filipino identities are expressed in Philippine comics. A postcolonial framework is employed to analyze three contemporary Philippine comics: *Trese* by Budjette Tan and Kajo Baldisimo, *Filipino Heroes League* by Paolo Fabregas, and *Dead Balagtas* by Emiliania Kampilan [7]-[9].

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The usage of the plural form of identities in the research question signifies the assumption that there is no single expression of identity. It is therefore critical to look at postcolonial Philippines and see identities as negotiated identities rather than a single, essential identity. In other words, a constructionist position will be used in this study, which is where the theoretical underpinnings of Homi K. Bhabha's hybridity and the concept of the third space are also located.

One of the earlier uses of the concept of hybridity was to establish difference and boundaries between peoples. Hybridity was used to refer to "the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization" [10]. In effect, it was used as a tool to differentiate and to relegate people to a lower standing in society. This term still carries the mark of differentiation and does not deny the presence of hierarchies. However, it has also come to be used, through the postcolonial lens, as a marker of agency for those who were previously confined to and defined only by their disempowered positions. This is connected to the concept of 'representation' and how power can be wielded in

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making decisions about representations of the Self or the Other.

Bhabha contends that “all cultural statements and systems are constructed in [the] contradictory and ambivalent [Third] space of enunciation,” including cultural identity [11]. It is in this space that identities are negotiated and where resistance against imperialist and colonialist discourse can take place. It is also in this space of translation that first, the Other becomes “the subject of its own experience, which [creates] a process by which new identities and cultures have been forged” and second, new hybrid discourses and identities are realized through a process of negotiation within this space [12]. And these negotiations are fluid in their continuities and changes. And a critical analysis of Philippine comics through this particular framework will reveal the (re)presentation and the expression of hybridity.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a critical analysis of selected Philippine comics namely *Trese* by Budjette Tan and Kajo Baldesimo, *Filipino Heroes League* by Paolo Fabregas, and *Dead Balagtas* by Emiliana Kampilan using the postcolonial lens.

Trese is a horror/crime comic book series centering on Alexandra Trese, a detective called on when crimes take on a supernatural turn. Created by writer Budjette Tan and artist Kajo Baldesimo and first published in 2005, *Trese* currently has six books for its main storyline and is generally set in Manila, capital of the Philippines, with the occasional settings in other regional centers. Alexandra Trese hails from a family that has had connections with the supernatural world. She is proprietor of the club, Diabolical, but is frequently called by the Philippine National Police when certain cases carry the marks of the supernatural. Throughout her many investigations, she has her two bodyguards called *the Kambal*, which in English translates to “the twins,” whose origin story is later revealed in the series as well. The story is set in modern-day Philippines but with a twist since the supernatural world exists right alongside the human world. This supernatural world is heavily built from Philippine mythology. The first two volumes in the series comprise of stand-alone cases while the rest of the series starting from the third volume follows an overarching story arc that still contains, at times, individual cases, that are now being told with the goal of a bigger narrative that includes the introduction of Trese’s formidable archenemy.

Filipino Heroes League (FHL) follows a group of Filipino superheroes as they fight against injustice in the country despite being undermanned and under-funded. The comic book series, created by Paolo Fabregas and first published in 2011, currently has two volumes and is set in modern-day Philippines as well. The FHL finds themselves investigating a series of political assassinations plaguing the capital. A police operation gone wrong resulted in them being framed and depicted as the ‘bad guys’ the same time that a new group of superheroes enter the scene, juxtaposing themselves against the FHL as ‘the true superheroes.’ As the FHL tries both to clear their names and find the real perpetrators, they find

themselves in a plot that echoes eerily of the past, back when the FHL was well-known and equally well-respected as they fought alongside the Filipino people against the authoritarian rule of then President Maldano and his group of supervillains. The FHL builds up its roster, getting new people on board and welcoming back returning superheroes, to battle with characters from the past that resurfaced to wreak havoc and seize control of the country.

Dead Balagtas is about the origin of the universe, the world, and the Philippine archipelago told in parallel with slice-of-life stories of the different characters that inhabit this comics. Consisting of four chapters, these stories of origins are overlaid on ordinary life situations that talk about how connections and relationships between people emerge and are built. The first chapter, narrated by a *Babaylan* or what is known as a priestess, tells the origin story of the universe based on the Visayan (central region of the Philippines) mythology about *Tungkung Langit* (Sky God or Pillar of Heaven) and his wife *Laon Sina* (the Virgin Goddess). The second chapter tells the origin story of the earth, drawing parallelism between the movement of plate tectonics and the way love and friendship grow distant between two childhood friends. On the other hand, the third chapter draws a parallelism between the ocean currents and the way distance gradually disappear between two men who are finding themselves growing closer to each other. The last chapter tells the story of two women who found love with each other amid the challenges they face when it comes to family acceptance, financial struggles, and employment problems, as a parallel to the origin of the Philippine archipelago.

IV. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Using the theoretical framework of postcolonialism, paying particular attention to the (re)construction and negotiation of identities, the results of the study are discussed through three main themes: hybrid worlds as third space, the reimagined community, and the (re)negotiated identities.

A. Hybrid Worlds as Third Space

The utilization of magical realism in the way the three comic books have created the worlds in their story offers readers the overlaid and interstitial weaving of elements. In *Trese*, the coexistence of the mundane and the supernatural creates a reimagined Philippine setting. This can also be seen in *Filipino Heroes League*, with the accepted fact that people with superpowers exist alongside ordinary people. The hybridization of the modern and ordinary with the mythological and magical is depicted in the world building of these works. A contrast between these two though is that while the supernatural world is hidden from or unknown to the mundane world in *Trese*, the existence of superheroes in FHL is a known and accepted fact in that world. This contrast can be an echo of how a hybridized world is at times recognized and at times unknown to its inhabitants. In *Dead Balagtas*, the overlaying of the parallel stories presented in each chapter was expressed both visually and narratively, in the way the characters are drawn standing over the tectonic plates or the

ocean currents as representations of each other as well as the parallelism between trajectories of the stories and the coinciding movements of the geographical shifts. Through these, the three comic books have created a hybrid world that was both new and familiar. And it is through these hybrid worlds that identities are then negotiated, a more in-depth discussion of which follows in the succeeding sections.

The familiarities of certain aspects, such as the places used as settings of the stories, build on the shared knowledge, cultural memory, or belief system of Filipino readers. *Trese*, whose stories happen mostly in the capital region of the Philippines, which includes Manila, utilizes landmarks and well-known places across the metropolis. This is not different from the way FHL depicted its setting. Two of the encounters between the FHL and the new group of superheroes who are calling themselves the “Republic Heroes” happened in Luneta Park, where the well-known monument built for national hero, Dr. Jose Rizal, is located, and in the Malacanang Palace, the official residence of the President of the Philippines. The FHL Headquarters is located in Manila, in a rundown building that resembles the National Arts building, once neglected by government but has since been restored. The historically significant EDSA Shrine where people gathered in protest during the 1986 People Power Revolution is also featured in FHL with even a parallel narrative to match the utilization of this particular place. *Dead Balagtas* also demonstrated the use of familiar landmarks and places in the metropolitan as settings. Anais and Dylan, the main characters in chapter four, meet in Tatalon, Quezon City during a forum on labor and women’s rights. Tatalon is a residential area in Metro Manila where many lower-income families reside. The Oblation Statue, a symbol of one of the most prestigious universities in the country, acts as backdrop at Dylan’s graduation scene in the Manila campus of this university. The white and blue colors of the main metro/train line in the capital and the crowded atmosphere present an accurate depiction of the train-riding experience of ordinary Filipinos. With the use of overlaid geographical characteristics in the forms of currents and land formations, a hybrid setting is also created for these stories.

B. The (Re)Imagined Community

Continuity and change are weaved together through the shared memory that these comic books are asking readers to access. The intertextualities of significations expressed throughout the narrative as well as in visual presentations create a sense of connectedness and affinity. Thus, a reimagined community based on these intertextualities is being established.

In FHL, the placement of the superhero in a third world/developing country context provides a rich environment that both exposes the realities of current economic, political, and social circumstances and explores the imaginings of a superhero placed in such a context. This was an acute juxtaposition to the normative superheroes found in other comic books particularly in Western comic books where such contexts are comparably and significantly different. When

Invisiboy and *Kidlat Kid* (Lightning Kid) receive a code call from the police, they find that their beat-up car refuses to start. They then proceed to respond to the distress call by taking a *pedicab*, which is a tricycle type of transportation powered by manual biking. Operating a *pedicab* is *Kidlat Kid*’s day-job to get an additional income to help his family. The FHL at present is also government regulated but they receive little to no funding even as they go about doing their superhero activities for the country. These two instances show the realities or would-be realities if superheroes find themselves in a country such as the Philippines. There is a social commentary underlying this exposition, with the view that there are more problems than just good or evil dichotomies and that not all types of conflicts can be resolved by superhero powers.

FHL and *Trese* both utilized intertextualities when they introduced or weaved into the story characters based on actual celebrities or famous personalities (both fiction and real) in the country. The resemblances and callbacks to these people would not have been recognizable if the reader does not occupy the same spaces where these referents are known. In FHL, the parallelism created in the narrative of using the political and social upheaval of corruption, instability, dissatisfied public, and civil disobedience as the overarching arc in the two volumes has become an almost visceral reading of how eras in Philippine history have developed. The underlying narrative of the oppressed rising together to fight a collectively perceived evil, the existence of the disillusioned public vis-a-vis the manipulated public, and the exposition of how power, position, and connections are negotiated and competed over draws from the reader an acknowledgement that these engagements are familiar because they have been a part of the history and the memories of the Filipino people about centuries of colonization and years of being under a dictatorship.

As for *Trese*, in *A Little Known Murder in Studio 4*, the case centers on the death of actress Heather Evangelista who had been filming the ‘*Luha ng Bituin: The Nova Aurora Story*,’ which are references to two actresses. The derivation from their names as well as the film industry setting allow for the recognition of such connections. In *The Fight of the Year*, a famous and well-renowned boxer by the name of Manuel fights for his life as well as the lives of the people in his hometown of General Santos City against creatures from the supernatural world such as demons, *enkanto* (fairies), and *maligno* (evil beings) in a Coliseum located in the city’s famous fish port. This character was based on no other than Filipino boxing champion Manny Pacquiao. The character art depiction resembles the real person as well. In books five and six of *Trese*, readers are introduced to the character of ‘*Madame*,’ who when revealed, bears an uncanny resemblance to the infamous former First Lady of then President Ferdinand Marcos, Imelda Marcos. She becomes a formidable villainous foil to Alexandra Trese and the manipulations and political maneuverings she commits to in these two books contribute visually and narratively as they add gravitas through the intertextual quality of the characterization.

In *Dead Balagtas*, the re-imagination of the community occurs through the organic way that past and present are weaved together in its four chapters. The stories of creation that are the foundations of the whole comic book takes on a deductive approach, first with the creation of the universe, second of the smaller earth, then of the even smaller oceans and currents, and finally come to the creation of the Philippine islands. This shows that as much as history is general, it also has the quality of specificity. This can be interpreted as a representation of the periphery becoming the center, not in the manner where it becomes such by turning others into peripheries as well but in a way that refocuses the identification of the community as subject and not object, one that was created by themselves. The agency of being the storyteller of one's own stories is powerfully signified in both the narrative and the art. The particular way that continuity was expressed in the weave-like patterns and flow in the first chapter as well as the representation of the land and water through each character in the rest of the comic book establishes that agency.

C. The (Re)Negotiated Identities

In these three comic book series, identities follow an ebb and flow movement that characterize change and negotiations. In *Trese*, the foundational characterization of Trese as well as her two bodyguards, the *Kambal* expresses the third space that they occupy with their hybridized identities. Trese, being human but with strong connections with the supernatural world, is straddling two worlds and within this, she has carved an identity of her own as a detective and protector, albeit with influences still from her family connections. The *Kambal*, on the other hand, are hybrids as they are the offspring between a human mother and a demon god. When they were children, they were raised in an environment where hurting or killing others held no consequence. However, as they grew older under the wings of the Trese family, they are able to forge their own paths, make decisions on their own, albeit with the underlying gratitude and loyalty to Alexandra and her father. In FHL, the resiliency demonstrated by the FHL superheroes amid having to face societal demands while remaining vastly lacking of support from all fronts are elements that would resonate with the Filipino readers particularly due to Filipinos' predisposition to support the underdog. Through this, the reader not only sympathizes but empathizes with the plight of these characters. A transposition occurs wherein (re)negotiation of identities narratively and meta-narratively contributes to the larger reading experience. This transposition is not different to what occurs in *Dead Balagtas*. In contrast to the other two comic book series, *Dead Balagtas* does not have the element of the supernatural. However, the clever use of the overlaying of characters onto geological elements does create a sense of unnatural-ness that is logical and acceptable rather than off-putting.

D. Postcolonial Philippines in the Comics

The use of mythology and folklore highlights the shared cultural memories that the comic book series are trying to

evoke or draw from the readers. With the story anchored in this mythological world, it only makes sense if one lives in the milieu that recognizes and interprets these intertextualities as signifiers of Filipino cultural history and memory. In one manner, it can be juxtaposed with an imagined Philippines that has been heavily influenced and shaped by Western powers ever since the colonization period. These creatures become a signifier for that which is local. But on the other hand, this paper argues that the use of Philippine mythology in the story is not motivated by an essentialist view of the Filipino identity and the desire to go back to the past. What occurs here is a renegotiation; an acknowledgement of a past that included these mythological stories but at the same time contextualization of these stories as part of a schema that makes up the Filipino psyche at present.

The juxtaposition of the local heroes vis-a-vis the Western superheroes both within the narrative and as a meta-commentary can be construed and interpreted as an act of resistance. On a meta-plane, there is recognition that comic book superheroes are derived from the United States/Western canon and popular genres and that the Philippine comics history has been heavily influenced by such. At the same time, the creation of these local superheroes, who find themselves in particular circumstances while in a Philippine setting, highlights the resistance towards being defined based on standards set by the Other. There is still much construction of identity based on 'Othering,' by the oppositional process of identification. The peripheral self-refusing to be regarded into the sidelines by the Other in the self's own story is a (re)negotiated self.

Language had been used as a tool in the process of colonization. Subsequently, it has also been used as a tool of resistance against colonization and its effects. *Trese* and FHL both used the English language as their main language. The narrations and the dialogues are all in English. However, in *Trese* Filipino words or terms are used to refer to specific items, creatures, or events such as when referring to specific mythological creatures or the weapons or combat techniques used in the comics. FHL, on the other hand, offers a unique perspective when it is revealed in one of the conversations between Invisiboy and Kidlat Kid that the characters in the comics might actually be speaking in local languages, which are then expressed in English due to the language used in the narration of the comics. This revelation occurs when Kidlat Kid is trying to impress a guest female character who is an American by speaking with her in broken English. Invisiboy teases Kidlat Kid about his apparent dilemma of being unable to talk to the woman because he does not know how to speak in English. *Dead Balagtas* is different from these two comics since the main language used is Filipino. There is, however, a contrast between the form of Filipino language used in narration and the form used in the dialogues between the characters. The former can be associated with formal form of the language while the latter can be associated with everyday use. All these differing dynamics speak of the hybridized environment that is the Philippine setting. The Philippines currently has two official languages, Filipino and English.

And while English has been a colonizer's language in the past, it has become part of the Filipino identity as well. On one hand, the use of English can be read as an act of subversion, using the colonizer's language to create stories about the Other, thus turning the colonial gaze. On the other hand, it can also be read as the Other assimilating that language into itself thus making it its own. In this case, English has become a part of Filipino identity and the use of English in these comics is not reiteration or reproduction of colonial powers but an expression of the hybridized identity that has been negotiated by the Other as it turns into the Self, with the agency to create their own stories.

V. CONCLUSION

Contemporary Philippine comics is reflective of the processes of identification that espouses hybridized forms while at the same time acknowledges the influences gained across the historical development of comics in the country. The themes drawn from a postcolonial analysis of the selected Philippine comics, namely the emergence of the third space through the use of hybrid worlds, the (re)imagined community that was established through the use of intertextual signifiers, the (re)negotiated identities that are expressed through visual and narrative devices such as the use of Philippine mythology, historical and contemporary contexts, and language, represent how Filipinos are inhabiting hybrid worlds and hybridized identities. Comics is then seen as third space, where these hybridized identities can take forms and be continually negotiated in their presentation and representations.

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