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Gender Messages in “Iyak ni Maria”: A Critical Discourse Analysis of a Song by an All-Female Rock Band from the Philippines called Matilda

「イヤック・ニ・マリア」におけるジェンダー・メッセージ：
フィリピンの女性ロックバンド「マチルダ」の歌の批判的言説分析

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Abstract

Rock music, most especially heavy metal music, rarely get to be considered as serious themes for academic research. This paper aims to usher an alternative perspective in ethnomusicology in that heavy metal music is interrelated in the recreation of discourses on identity formation. This paper will use critical discourse analysis in examining gender representations of women in the song “Iyak ni Maria” of the band, Matilda. This study employs qualitative research methodology. It looks at what gender messages exists in the song and how it is received by the text recipient (the audience or listener). Interviews with the text producer or the member of the band gives a glimpse on how text or music is produced and later, how it is consumed by their audience. Research results show that gender representations gleaned from the song are attempts to tear down dominant discourses molded by the patriarchal systems in several ways. Most important is in the arena of the male-dominated rock music industry by showing that women can opt not to follow the dictates of social institutions in order for an all-female band to be formed. The results are an eye-opener about the uphill road leading to mainstream prominence if dominant discourses are decided to be vehemently rejected through alternative social and cultural subject positioning.

要約

ロック音楽、とりわけヘヴィメタル音楽が学術研究のテーマとして取りあげられることは、ヒップホップや伝統音楽といったジャンルと比べて極めて少ない。本稿の目的は、ヘヴィメタル音楽が、アイデンティティ形成をめぐる言説をヘヴィメタル音楽が再構築していく過程の考察から、を分析し、民族音楽学に新たな視点を与えることにある。本稿では、批判的言説分析を用いて、女性バンドマチルダというバンドの「Iyak ni Maria」という歌をに事例として分析するにおける女性のジェンダー表現について考察する。本研究では批判的言説分析と質的研究法を用いて、る。歌の中のにどのようなジェンダー・メッセージが存在し、それに対するがテキストの受け手（音楽の聞き手）の受容の仕方によってどのように受け取られるかを検討検証する。テキスト・プロデューサー（作詞家）やバンド・メンバーへのインタビューを通じて、テキストや音楽のがどのように制作過程やされ、後にそれがどのように聴衆によるによって消費課程されるかを考察する。研究結果からは、歌におけるジェンダー表現が、家父長

制によって作られた支配的な言説を様々な方法で破壊しようとする試みであることが明らかとなった。男性優位のロック音楽業界という舞台において、女性だけのバンドを結成するためには、社会制度の指示に従わないという女性たち自身自信の選択をとれることを示すことが最も重要である。同時にこのことは、オルタナティブな社会的・文化的主体の位置付けによって支配的な言説を強く否定する試みと、主流派の中での成功とを両立させることへの障壁についても目を向けさせる。

Keywords: Philippine Society, Rock Music, Gender Studies

キーワード：フィリピン社会、ロック音楽、ジェンダー・スタディーズ

1. Introduction

I stumbled upon the band, Matilda in the most unusual way. It was not through recommendations from friends nor from hearing them live in the numerous music festivals that I have been to, rather it happened in the quiet corners of my former department office where I taught in the Philippines. I was balancing my take-out lunch and milk tea on one hand while opening the door to the office with the other when music from the two-time Grammy Award winning band Smashing Pumpkins greeted me with their song “1979.” It was coming from the desktop computer of a female colleague who I had series of pleasantries with but incidentally whose name have not sunk in. Being a fan of rock music, I exclaimed “*Uy, mahilig ka din pala sa Smashing Pumpkins!*” (“Oh, you also like Smashing Pumpkins!”) of which opened a gamut of excited conversations on rock bands and their music. To cut the story short, I learned that the faculty member was a vocalist of the all-female rock band, Matilda and what followed was her adding me to her Facebook friend list and a promise that she might be able to help out with, at that time, yet to be started PhD dissertation proposal.

The all-female band Matilda was formed in 1997 when the members were students of the University of the Philippines-Diliman in Quezon City, Philippines. According to information found on the band’s Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/matildatheband/info>), their name stands for “battleground maiden. It is taken from the names of different legendary women warriors of twelfth and thirteenth century England, who fought for their rights.” The band adds that “like the femme fatale name, Matilda is an army herself as she confronts the local rock scene predominantly ruled by men. With the band’s erratic feminine stereotype mostly branded as androgynous, one can expect from this group an unconventional hybrid of music whose identity tears down the preconceived notions of girl bands. Additionally, they define Matilda as “the clever, precocious, and powerful character of the child protagonist of Roald Dahl’s book, ‘Matilda’” and this “has qualities that mirror the individual traits of the band’s members as well as the whole group’s own aura.” It is through this band’s self-introspection, which I found interesting, that I decided to explore more about their music.

The band is composed of Charms Tianzon on vocals, Meryl Antonio on guitars, Yvette

Tunguia on bass, Jovi Reyes on drums, and Maricor Reyes on the violin. Tianzon, reveals in one of our conversations that their band touches on the metal genre of music. Their Facebook page explains that “Matilda’s music isn’t confined to a fixed genre but it acknowledges its heavy leanings on goth, grunge, heavy metal, rock, and, classical influences.”

Rock music, most especially heavy metal music, rarely get to be considered as serious themes for academic research, it is for this reason that this study is significant to usher an alternative perspective in ethnomusicology, that heavy metal music is interrelated in the recreation of discourses on identity formation. This shows the potential of heavy metal music as a medium in the formation of identity choices and gender relations.

This paper uses critical discourse analysis in looking at gender representations of women in the band’s song “Iyak ni Maria,” particularly its lyrics, official music video on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x1EIUKBkHeU>), and conversations between the YouTube listeners and the band on the comments section below the video. Series of interviews were conducted with the band’s vocalist, Charms Tianzon to understand the dynamics between agency and structure especially on how women are represented in their music. I obtained consent and permission from her for her narratives to be used in this study. This paper identifies what gender messages exists in the song and how it is received by the text recipient (the audience or listener,) most specifically those who have watched and commented in YouTube. My conversations with the text producer or the member of the band gives a glimpse on how text or music is produced and how these are later on consumed by their audience. The messages, manifest or latent, are explored most especially gender cues to give us an idea to which positioning both the text producer and text recipient situate themselves. The producer’s and recipient’s subject positioning dictates whether or not they create a discourse that goes against the dominant ideology. These counter-discourses will also be given focus.

I chose “Iyak ni Maria” to do a critical discourse analysis on since it is the most known song among the songs of Matilda. It has garnered the most views (4,697 views as of October 31, 2023) in YouTube compared to their other songs which have less than 1,000 views each. “Iyak ni Maria” is also the only song of theirs with an official music video. Therefore, the one which shows how the band members themselves interpret their music into a music video platform. Due to time constraints, I am limited to do discourse analysis of just one song of Matilda and rely on the comments section in YouTube for feedback from their audience. I do intend to do a more comprehensive study later which would contain in-depth interviews of the listeners.

I used interactional analysis (Wetherell, Taylor and Yates 2001) to analyze the song’s content and text. It is said that songs are made with particular target listeners in mind with the aim of putting one’s message across through one’s music. Text does not only pertain to the documents

in written form but is anything that is pregnant with meaning and needs further interpretation and this includes, but are not limited to, language, pictures, music, and so on.

Music and identity options are linked together. According to Miriam Cihodariu (2011: 191-192), the relationship of the two are typical in mainstream culture especially among the young people because their preference for certain types of music or musical genre comes a “package of role models, a set of life rules and values, attitude models, ways to dress and to act etc.” Therefore, listeners of bands such as Matilda and similar bands under the same musical genre puts listeners into the same subculture where “crucial feelings of identity and notions of community” are established. Images from music videos also assume a powerful role because it evokes experiences that are shared by the members of the imagined community which also ignites certain forms of historical and national consciousness (Anderson 1982, Wanner 1996).

Idelber Avelar (2003) acknowledges this by saying that the community that comprises of listeners of heavy metal are aware that part of their self-definition is the negation of what they are not more than most rock genres. This is the awareness and the creation of borders that come from a “myriad of subtle and complex distinctions” (Avelar 2003: 331). In *Deconstructing Eve*, Ruiz (2013) explains that culture lies in a person’s interpretation of things around them and that individuals construct their own reality. This is not to say that it is solely agency that decides to map the course that it wants to take because aspects of culture derive their meaning from the overall system of relationships in which they are embedded and according to their cultural context (Levi-Strauss 1963, in McGee and Warms 2000).

2. Results and Discussion

2.1 Lamentations

Naririnig mo ba ang iyak ni Maria?
‘Di mo ba naririnig ang daing niya

(“Do you hear Maria crying?
Don’t you hear her screams in pain?”)

- “Iyak ni Maria”, Matilda.

The song starts with loud screams from the band members. This unusual expression serves as a battle cry for all the women and is very telling of the suffering that besets women in Philippine society. The loud cries are indeed disturbing since loud sounds of lament are barely heard with such intensity and at the same time, consistently. This goes on almost the whole seven minutes of the song’s duration and this is exactly what the band wants their audience to feel. In Charms Tianzon’s (2006) blog account “Taciturn,” she narrates on how she came up with the song and

explains that “after much thought, I have decided to retain only three clauses, because I felt more the urgency and intensity of the song’s content with less words in it.” The only lyrics of the song are at the ending.

Women are usually presented with representations in media as passive sexual objects (Ruiz 2013) and yet there is a lot of unnoticed pain and suffering of women that people do not see but still needs to be let out and addressed. Such are the outcome of these strong emotions that is the inevitable course of bottled-up feelings and what is depicted in the song “Iyak ni Maria.” While Matilda is considered as indie or having no backing of major record labels (hence, independently produced) which makes their audience relatively fewer than most mainstream acts, the band is able to connect with the more intimate audience as is common in live performances in smaller venues. Because of this, that are able to successfully put their message across.

In is also through this context that the band is able to retain their advocacies without being what Tianzon calls, a “sell-out.” Tianzon shares that they were about to be signed with the major record label, [REDACTED], but they decided not to do so because there were some clauses in the contract that the record company asked of them that were directly against what they stood for, such as showing of skin. She laments that making it big as a rock band is already difficult, most especially since most listeners prefer pop music. Radio friendly pop music focuses mostly on love (or lack of it) than songs that tackle socially relevant issues related to womanhood. Therefore, record labels request that bands create songs that will receive lots of radio air play and will be sellable to the general public. It is understandable that record labels want to break even and earn with the money they spend as capital for building up artists. Mostly, music is seen as a commercial enterprise where songs are products that aims to be sold. The downside to this practice is that the music that gets produced lack themes that highlight socially relevant concerns that take on the problems by the horns; instead, what we hear as regular music are songs that serve as an escape from reality.

Having palatable content is a main concern of record labels, so they recycle themes that has already been known to sell. The problem with this is that it reinstates representations that are overly simple and this results for gender stereotypes to be universalized and essentialized. Instead of presenting alternatives, the listeners of songs and viewers of music videos are programmed to internalize such images and representations as a benchmark to follow.

In addition, it is extra hard to be an all-female group because of the expectations that are set by the public as dictated by social institutions. In the case of Matilda, it is the belief that in order to make it big in the music industry. Specifically, women have to look beautiful and sexy for their audience. Such are the things that women have to face in a society constructed though the male gaze. Indeed, women’s representations on sexuality are culturally fashioned and dictated and reinstated by those who have the power to control. Therefore, retaining the patriarchal order

(Ruiz 2013). This is exactly what the song “Iyak ni Maria” is crying about.

Preferring quality over quantity, Matilda decided to remain being *indie* or not belonging or affiliated with a major record company. Therefore, the void of having a mainstream all-female band in the Philippine music industry remained. Tianzon narrates that during this period, there was already a clamor to have an all-female rock band in the music scene. But since Matilda declined, according to Tianzon, “*binuo ni [redacted], of the band [redacted] ang [redacted].*” (“[redacted] ([redacted], of the band [redacted]) formed [redacted].”). This time, another all-female band named [redacted] was formed which had what Philippine record companies were looking for in terms of “qualities of prospective all-female band members” which were good looks, sexy bodies and “*marunong din naman sila tumugtog.*” (“they somewhat also knew how to play music.”). “*Lahat sila doon (sa [redacted]) malalaki ang boobs eh, sa amin yung drummer lang namin.*” (“Every one of them (in [redacted]) have huge breasts, but among us, only our drummer does.”).

I asked her if she looks back to that incident as a lost opportunity and Tianzon gamely answers, “*at least ‘di na namin mararanasan ang malaos. Paano kami malalaos kung ‘di naman kami sumikat. Ano ba yun, yung parang katatapos lang manganak!* (laughs)” (“At least we will never find out how to be unpopular. How can we be unpopular if we have never been one? It is somewhat like what one feels after giving birth! (laughs)” This is similar to the results of the study of Tolentino-Canlas (2010) on children’s programs in mainstream media in where she says that “women are seen less as producers of knowledge and more as nurturers of the human race, thus emphasizing even to children the traditional roles they are to take on in the society as they come of age.” Therefore, if women are to insist on what they want, they ultimately must face the consequences of not yielding positive results because they will be facing a society which prefers the status quo.

While it may seem empowering to have an all-female band in the midst of the testosterone-laden rock industry, a closer examination shows that this is not so because the reinstatement of cultural hegemony is glaring. The female band members are seen not for their music but as commoditized products on whose sexual desirability is controlled by the male dominated industry. Counter-hegemonic discourses such as the existence of Matilda and their music are effectively silenced by not having the same number of airplay and advertising as compared to those with backing from large recording companies. But Matilda is observed as not taking this without a fight; their continuous presence through gigs in smaller venues is an indication that together with their cries are negotiations and struggles against the prevailing social constructions on women and not of defeat.

2.2 Assault of the Disturbing Moans of Anguish

Matilda’s band logo is prominently made up of curves and circles and its colors are on

shades of grey. According to Tianzon, the logo is a symbolism of womanhood as represented by the moon. If one is to look clearly at the logo, the letters creating their band’s name are used creatively to create the face of the moon by spelling the word Matilda. In her blog, Tianzon explains that: “the moon is about femininity. I think my wish would soon come true and all our goals would soon push through: a feminine revolution in music and in the arts; a Renaissance of womanity. I dare ask my co-womyn: are we ready for this? I answer at once: let’s all do this :).”



Picture 1. Matilda Mandala. Accessed from <http://matildamaldita.blogspot.com/>. Statement of Use: This material is included under the fair use exemption and is restricted from further use.

The main thrust of the band is their advocacy espousing women’s rights, so it is thought of to be appropriate by them to use the moon to symbolize their cause. The moon as a symbol of femininity stems back to the ancient times, particularly among the hunting and gathering societies where the moon symbolized the lunar goddess (Milbrath n.d.). The moon is appropriate as a symbol of womanhood because the regular cycles of the moon are similar to the various cycles that women undergo during her lifetime. For a woman, the three phases are the movement from being a maiden to a woman and later on to an older woman while the moon’s cycle moves from the phases new to full and later old (Bond 2002). Another biological explanation to this is that the moon’s cycle coincides with the menstrual cycle of a woman which occurs similarly in about 28 days. According to Bond (2002), “the English words for month (derived from Anglo-Saxon monath, akin to mona, “moon”) and for menses (from the Latin mensis, “month”) are related to ancient words for moon because of their close association with the cycles of women’s bleeding.” Taboos on menstruation are prevalent not only in India and in the Muslim region (Kamaljit K., Balwinder Arora, Gurmeet Kahlon Singh, and N.S. Neki 2012) but also in the Philippines where women are excluded to do communal practices or joining hunting and fishing expeditions and are subjected to restrictions in doing work, taking a bath, and so on. Present-day Philippine society still represents menstruation as akin to dirt which is categorized under “profane” under the “sacred-profane dichotomy.” It is for this reason that it becomes the responsibility of women to hide her menstruation well and to be careful that the public never notices it at all. Sanitary napkin commercials in local television channels help reinstate these images. Matilda, by using the moon as its symbol, shows its defiant stand against these ongoing negative representations and urges the

embracing and accepting women in our totality.

The music video of “Iyak ni Maria” is also telling of the advocacy of Matilda. According to the band, their music video “contemplates the objectification of Filipino women through time and the resistance or submissions that have resonated since.” Like the wails that easily capture their listeners, they are also successful in getting the attention of the listeners through their music video.



Picture 2. Iyak ni Maria Video Clip. Accessed from <http://i1.ytimg.com/vi/x1EIUKBkHeU/hqdefault.jpg>. Statement of Use: This material is included under the fair use exemption and is restricted from further use.

The music video’s opening scene shows five women, whose roles are played by the band members. They are dressed in the traditional Philippine dress ensemble called *baro’t saya* while eating in the darkness, with only candles to serve them as light. The scene immediately brings the viewers back to the time of the Spanish colonial period in the Philippines. The video is gothic in theme and darker shade of color contrasts is played upon. The video maximizes on the color sepia thus setting the tone of the video similar to what one usually sees in horror films. The first part especially sets the mood for this when suddenly one of the women draws the viewer in by suddenly staring at the camera for almost a minute and peering directly into the eyes of the viewer with a stoic but powerful stare that means “whether you like it or not, I am taking you with me.” After which, bodily forcing the viewer into the world that they are in, which is within the music video. This is effectively done by panning the camera to zoom towards the eyes of the woman in the video and making it seem as if the woman is getting closer and closer to the viewer and making them face to face. The viewer becomes part of the music video and through this Matilda is successful in putting the message across the already attentive audience. There are many scenes like this in the video where the artists stare out into their unknown audience. The video is not for the faint of heart as is stated by select viewers who commented on YouTube. (Statement of Use: This material is included under the fair use exemption and is restricted from further use.):

@glissando777: “disturbing, really...I like it though”

@dumonskiellaztig: “weird creepy video... pero astig... first time ko silang narinig sa nu rock awards 2004... astig performance nila....” (“Weird creepy video... but it is really cool...

I heard them for the first time in NU Rock Awards 2004... their performance was really cool....”)

@modottiph: “This is an awesome video. Absolutely captured the meaning of the song. You give justice to the meaning of womanhood and how we struggle in this world full of misogyny and sexism. I admire you guys the most because I know you write, arrange and produce your songs by yourselves without involving usual showbiz politics as evident by the ‘success’ of some wannabes who are dressed by men who fantasized about having girls who rock for years and then try to look as if they were real, rock goddesses.”

The video is indeed disturbing that even if I have watched the video numerous times, I always feel the urge to look behind my back. But isn’t that exactly the message that the band wants their listeners to comprehend? That the public should be disturbed that such unequal gender practices still exists and that we should be revolted by the continuing perpetration of negative representations on women which started to be apparent during the Spanish colonial period but is still persisting at present even if it has been more than century of independence from Spain.

After the drawing in the listener, the next scene shows a woman whose face is covered and wearing tutu while doing ballet spins. This ballet scene recurs in the music video. Since the woman’s face is covered, hence is unknown or unnamed, she could be said to represent Filipino women in general. Her movements indicate the expectation and ideals of Philippine society on women which is to be graceful and fragile, similar to what is thought of ballet dancers. The immediate shift from the *baro’t saya* clad women to the woman doing ballet spins indicates the sudden shift from an older time period to a more modern one. It is also in this scene where the cries and wails of Matilda begin. This shows that despite the different time period, similar conditions of how women are represented prevail under dominant patriarchal discourse which is something to scream about in frustration.

Another notable scene during the early minutes of the video is a woman staring at a peep hole, then being shocked on what she sees on the other side. The other side is not showed in the video, so it is up to the viewer to fill in what the women in the video saw. It could be that she saw the next scene which shows five people posing for what could be a group picture. In this shot, all are wearing a white top so the viewer might make a mistake of thinking that they are all women. Upon closer examination there are actually two men who sport long hair who also share the same unsmiling reaction towards the camera like the three women with them. This indicates that if we look back to our past we might be shocked to find out that men and women were co-equals even if gender differentiation is glaring at present (Jocano 1998).

After that scene, Tianzon is seen with her head tilted while murmuring words and seemingly in prayer. A few seconds later, the viewer is brought to a place with trees which could suggest a

forest. The viewer is dragged towards this scene where even the video shots seem unintelligible. I could best describe this as hanging a camera around one's neck then running around with that video camera turned on. The end result is similar to that scene in the video. In that forest scene, women in *baro't saya* are again seen together with close up shots of them tied in barbed wire and some shots of them trapped around roots of a tree. The symbolism here is easy to understand which is how women nowadays are not empowered and there needs to be emancipation.

3. Conclusion: Music as a form of counter-hegemonic discourse

The song and music video of “Iyak ni Maria” urges its listeners to think beyond the dominant discourse that is presented by social institutions. The in-your-face take on how anguish and lament is presented together with the visuals that come with their video are aimed for the audience to think in a critical manner and to be more engaged with the struggles that face women in Philippine society. The representations gleaned from the song are attempts to tear down dominant discourses molded by the patriarchal systems in several ways most notably in the arena of the male-dominated rock music industry by showing that women can opt not to follow the dictates of social institutions in order for an all-female band to be formed. It also opens our eyes on the uphill road leading to mainstream prominence if dominant discourses are decided to be vehemently rejected through alternative social and cultural subject positioning. This serves as an acknowledgement of how patriarchal Philippine society is and that a lot has yet to be done if we are to wish for gender equity in the Philippines.

Further research is recommended to look into how identity, nationalism, and gender studies are situated in music genres that are not as popular, such as rock music, because despite their relative unpopularity in terms of the dearth of studies made in the Philippines, a lot can be gleaned from such reading that could also be used to understand the how music figures in the everyday lives of people especially in terms of how they negotiate the representations that are presented. Further research can examine the political economy of knowledge production because while there is a clamor for all-female rock group, the song's lyrics and band image are dictated by patriarchal discourse.

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