

Women Wage War

Anger in Contemporary Cebuano Women's Poetry

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Abstract

Women's anger has been the subject of academic debates. The "angry woman" is often seen as irrational and acrimonious. Most women claim anger to be their only reasonable response to oppression. How anger functions alternatively outside the frame of this debate has not been studied. This paper explores how anger complicates binary logic and connects it to domestic violence in contemporary Cebuano women's poetry.

Keywords

women's anger, Cebuano poetry, feminism, textual vehemence, normative frame

The trope of the enraged feminist reminds us that women who show their anger like the madwoman in the attic are seen as uncontrollable deviants who should be silenced and shut away. The “angry woman” stereotype contributes to the derogatory description that marks “aberrant” not only women but also the organizations that validate their outrage. This stereotype extends to others who cast her as a “bitch” or “termagant” who cannot be silenced and exemplifies the reality that women have to control their anger when engaging in public debate.

For the purpose of this paper, I will postulate other meanings for anger as they come within the purview of contemporary Cebuano women’s poetry. Within the parameters of this discussion, I understand anger to be an emotional response that is both cognitive and physical as a reaction to a specific set of circumstances. Anger can take many forms, can erupt suddenly, fade quickly, or can operate as a constant emotional presence. Anger is also an affect that has many origins and functions. It is an unconscious force or the result of substantial mental consideration, or a reaction to injustice. It works together with other emotions and can be connected to sadness, compassion, yearning, and more. My aim, like that of feminist thinkers whose work is integral to this research, is to illustrate that anger is one of the many ways of interacting with and responding to the world. It is important to note that although this paper explores alternative meanings of anger, it is not an exhaustive study.

Binary logic¹ is the basis of the stereotype of women and their ongoing oppression. It situates people into distinctive categories based on their seeming difference from each other. They become “fundamentally different entities related only through their definition as opposites” (Collins 77). These ideas also imply unequal hierarchical relations that mesh with race, gender, and class oppressions. As such, there is a need to rethink bodies and subjectivities outside the binary logic so new ways of understanding can be developed and explored especially of marginalized groups.

The binary thinking that informs many canonical beliefs concludes in a construction of men as being aligned with reason and women as being aligned with emotions.² As a result, women are less rational and less moral.

Although this way of thinking about women are naturalized and used to justify the inequitable distribution of power, this divided way of thinking impact representations and social understandings of women's fury. In the Filipino context, males are traditionally considered dominant and superior over women. Philippine data on violence against women show quantitative evidence of physical injury as being the highest crime committed, followed by rape and acts of lasciviousness (Bernarte et al. 120). Scholarship on women studies highlight material conditions of a broad spectrum of women from various sectors to address their different concerns in order to empower them in many ways.³

Women's anger has been traditionally understood as inconsequential or unimportant. Frye discusses this as "a tiresome truth of women's experience that our anger is generally not well received. . . . Attention is turned not to what we are angry about but to the project of calming us down and the topic of our 'mental stability'" (85). Frye explains further that a woman's anger is acceptable if this is within spaces that are perceived as her domain such as the kitchen or the home. Amaryllis Torres and Rosario del Rosario note that although different family factors that affect violence against women are marital instability, conflict with partners that lead to physical abuse, and the lower economic status of women leading to financial dependence, another strong factor is the portrayal of women in media as sex objects (9).

Despite feminist critiques of the entrenched ways of thinking about women, it is difficult to recognize women's anger as a legitimate response to oppression. Feminists and activists have given considerable effort to addressing the problems that women confront when they express anger.⁴ Audre Lorde in *Sister Outsider* declares that anger makes way for political strength and focuses structural oppression within feminist organizations (124). This kind of intervention is suggestive of the bigger trend where feminist activists explore anger and its links with oppression. Sara Ahmed also reminds us that the combination of feminism and anger is not new; rather, it is politically significant given the reading of the feminist initiative as "a form of anger [that] allows the dismissal of feminist claims, even when the anger is a reasonable response to social injustice" (177). For Ahmed, anger

is a fitting political and ethical feminist response to historical violence and suffering. Anger is

a movement that interprets and transforms that historical violence and suffering; it is a way of moving from pain, to recognizing that such pain is wrong, to acting to transform the social and political conditions that gave rise to that pain. As such, anger is an attachment worth holding onto.⁵

Feminists have been perceived negatively and have been charged with being “men haters.” This situation calls for the following questions to be raised: What are the meanings of women’s anger that are concealed or obliterated in the debate on whether or not it is good to express such anger? How can anger be discussed if women did not have to be defensive about this reaction from the start?

In contemporary Cebuano women’s poetry, I read each poem as an example of “textual vehemence,”⁶ explain the ways the persona positions anger within the text, and explore how this anger transects with other emotions (Tomlinson 89-90). Tomlinson states that textual vehemence may emerge in arguments of social critique maintaining that current conditions are not equitable but damaging:

[T]extual vehemence can convey a sense of moral responsibility—and of moral revulsion—demonstrating the importance of the stakes of the debate. It can operate as a battle cry or rallying cry, drawing together into action those who already agree or who have been swayed by the argument. It can appeal to those who have not been reached by other methods. (110)

The significance of this “textual vehemence” is evident in the writings of women about the causes of their antagonism and fury. It is also a source of bonding and strength for them. This is specifically manifest in the Cebuano context as women poets wrote and expressed their fears, and to call attention to practices that oppressed women. For these writers, poetry was a vehicle for their political agenda and writing allowed them to create a strong community in the face of the huge challenge of speaking out. Within the constraints of the bigger feminist movement, the consciousness-raising activity gave

women the space to articulate their anger side by side with other women who would do the same. In the Philippines, Executive Order 348 also known as the Philippine Development Plan for Women was established in 1989 and its special concerns section addressed violence against women. This mandate was further strengthened by Republic Act 9262 Anti-Violence Against Women and their Children Act created in 2004, in response to the violence women and children experience due to unequal power relations, charging hard-hitting penalties for abusive husbands and men.

Judith Butler in *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* explains that normative frameworks shape how we see our bodies, how others perceive us, and how governments allocate resources and protections. For Butler, hegemonic notions of normalcy establish which bodies the government works to protect, offers resources to, and which aberrant bodies pose a threat to their normative peers and ultimately to the state itself (53). She further delineates that ideologies of normalcy eventually produce some bodies as real and worthy of resources, protection, and in the event of death, deserve mourning. In contrast to these real bodies are abnormal Others, whose injury or death goes unnoticed, or is even celebrated when these bodies pose a threat to hegemonic norms. In her book “Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence”, she expands her discussion, and goes on to explain that this negation of unreal subjects is a continuous process:

If violence is done against those who are unreal, then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated. But they have a strange way of remaining animated and so must be negated again (and again). They cannot be mourned because they are always already lost, or, rather, never ‘were’ and they must be killed, since they seem to live on, stubbornly, in this state of deadness. (33)

The violence endured by these unreal subjects, the innate violence of this erasure, the continuing dismissal of unreal subjects from normative frames, and the deep attachment these subjects have to normative frames are prominent themes in the poems of Cebuano women writers. For example, in Cora Almerino’s “*Unsaon Paggisa sa Bana nga Manghulga sa Asawang Dili Kahibalong*

Moluto [“How to Saute a Husband Who Threatens His Wife Who Doesn’t Know How to Cook”],⁷ the persona details the steps to be taken to deal with such a husband:

1. *Inita ang mantika sa kaha.*
2. *Gisaha and sibuyas bombay ug ahos.*
3. *Ilunod ang iyang kumo nga iya kunong isumbag sa imong nawong*
4. *Isunod ang iyang mga tiil nga iyang ipatid nimo.*
5. *Isagol’g apil ang ubang bahin sa iyang lawas.*
6. *Pabukali.*
7. *Tuslok-tusloka sa tinidor. Mas maayo kon kutsilyo.*
8. *Timplahi dayog pamalikas ug maldisyon.*
9. *Tilawi*
10. *Hauna*
11. *Kan-a. Kon way lami, ilawog sa iro.*

Given the hegemonic norms that function to allow women to speak only in a domain considered hers, my analysis of Almerino’s text explores debates surrounding normal behavior. The persona’s relationship to the construct of matrimony and normalcy forces her into the realm of unreal subjectivity which repeatedly erases the violence she suffers. Trauma as the place of affect is an important theme in this poem, as the persona responds to violence, to the ongoing re-articulation of social norms, with expressions of anger that range from indirect to overwhelming. The rage she expresses not only calls attention to what seems as the invisible process of putting social norms in another way, but it foregrounds histories of violence against women (read: housewives) and oppression that otherwise are glossed over.

The persona is unable to adhere to what her husband believes is a normal wifely duty—that is, to prepare the meals. As a consequence, she becomes vulnerable to abuse, the difference being inscribed on her corporeal entity as wife. Day in, day out, she needs to prepare the meals so there is repeated assault. She is caught in a self-perpetuating cycle until she fights back. Her anger brings her into view, and thus, we can start to make sense of the reasons why we receive the lives of those who suffer with indignation.

Butler explains that socially-produced norms play a key role in framing some lives as worthy of sympathy but she also asserts that these norms are continually in flux, and figure significantly in the process through which some subjects are recognized and others ignored (*Frames of War* 4). Butler argues that these frames are not static, but rather,

the frame that seeks to contain, convey, and determine what is seen [...] depends upon the conditions of reproducibility in order to succeed. And yet, this very reproducibility entails a constant breaking from context, a constant delimitation of new context, which means that the ‘frame’ does not quite contain what it conveys, but breaks apart every time it seeks to give definitive organization to its content. (10)

Within the continuous process of breaking from context in order to rearticulate their own parameters, these frames continuously change (11); the evolving frame is a little bit different from the one that preceded it. Butler explains that within this ongoing process, we can catch quick glimpses of the people and places that have been concealed by the frame as it breaks from itself to be reformed (12). In this case, the moments where the normative frame goes through this process of breaking and re-articulation, unreal subjects become visible, even if it is only momentarily. Butler goes on to explain that the question of whose lives are regarded as deserving of mourning, and which are included into the frame of what is visible, returns us to the question of the regulation of affect. If we accept that emotional responses are regulated through interpretive frames, then we can begin to make sense of the reasons why we greet the condition of some lives with sadness or rage, and others with indifference or even righteousness (42). As normative frames break and re-form, the anger that is expressed foregrounds experiences, histories, and identities that otherwise might be ignored.

The next poem follows the tone of the first poem. The title “*Nganong Naghilak si Loida nga Nagbatil sa Itlog*” [“Why Loida is Crying while Beating the Eggs”]⁸ describes the condition of “Loida”:

*Dili tungod sa sibuyas Bombay nga
Gihiwa-hiwa niyag gagmay.*

*Anad na man siya niini.
 Anad na pod siya manluto.
 Anad na siyang mohiwag mga lamas
 Ug sa uros sa init mantika inig pusak
 Niya sa iyang lutuonon.
 Anad man gani siya sa tuasik nga
 Komo ni Larry. Nakubalan na god
 Iyang nawong. Busa di siya mahadlok
 Mosilaab ang gasul. Hanas na ang
 Iyang mga tudlo mosagang-sagang
 Sa kayo, morag madyikiro.
 Naghilak siya kay karong buntag
 Inig kaon ni Larry sa itlog mangidlap
 Ang mga mata niini sa kahinam.
 Magpanilap sa kalami morag bitin.
 Unya di madugay mobula pod iyang baba.
 Motindog siya aron mokuhag tubig.
 Mobarag padulong sa banggira.
 Pero di kaabot si Larry sa banga.
 Mosulirap iyang mata
 Ug dayog kirig.*

Similar to the previous poem in terms of a battered wife's condition, Loida's continued oppression in the normative frame becomes the condition upon which the normative identities of Larry and Loida as a "perfect wife" rely. At the beginning of the poem, Loida's eyes water not because of the sting of onion juice from slicing them up, but rather from her rage at being beaten again. The logic of repetition: slicing onions, cooking, the sizzle of the cooking oil, her avoidance of the fire, suggests that these activities are an indicator of what her normal life is. The lines are followed by "She was even used to the dash of / Larry's fist. Her face had thickened to a / callus" and thus show that Loida seems to be a deserving target of her husband's brutishness. This abuse has a tremendous psychic impact on Loida because she already orchestrates her husband's demise in poisoning his food.

As Loida "avoids the fire . . . like a magician," and sees herself cry when Larry will die after eating the eggs, the frame that denotes normative femininity breaks. No longer is she the dutiful wife; thus we can read Loida's

act of “killing” her husband as the instant when the frame reforms, forcing Larry out of the frame as the spectacle of her rage, and the assumptions that surround her taking center stage. In this sequence of events, Loida’s anger while she cooks signals the moment when the normative frame rearticulates to exclude her and foregrounds Loida’s experiences that have, to date, been erased. As her preparation proceeds, Loida is determined to get out of the situation and the frame breaks.

Like those at play in the previous poems, normative frames are continuously in flux throughout “*Tambag kang Bertang Pakyas sa Gugma ug Uban Pa*” [“Advice to Berta, Unfortunate in Love, Etc.”].⁹ Like Loida, Berta feels anger at the sharp words directed at her. This anger points toward the moment when normative frames re-form at her expense. However, due to the complexity of her suffering, Berta’s rage also foregrounds alternative forms of handling such strong emotion:

*Ayaw itisok, Berta,
Ang maidlot niyang mga pulong
Sa gikapoy ug gikutasan mong dughan
Kay unya mag-ani kag mga bungang
Taya ug lansang
Matitanus ka pa
Maunsa.*

*Hinunua, Berta, tiguma sila
(Ayaw ikagut ang bag-ang)
Ug haggpati ginamit ang gwantis
Dayon ihapnig sa kolon ni Lola
Timplahi, ayuha
Pabukali, hulata
Pabugnawa, sala-a
Ang unod lubka
Isambug sa yutang luspada
Patambuka
Tamni
Mayana, yerba Buena
Gabon, sabila
Bahala ka.*

Dayon bisbisi
Sa gipabugnaw pinabukalang tubig
Resulta
Malingaw, mahupay
Ka pa.

For example, the advice is to gather all these sharp words and to select carefully with a gloved hand what to place inside the claypot to boil and cool to filter later. This concoction is to be used to water the pale earth where powerful herbs may be planted and make Berta happy. In this frame, what a disenfranchised woman can do has been broken and rearticulated to empower Berta. Where hegemonic markers of femininity allow some women to make a claim to normative female subjectivity, working to replicate these markers foregrounds the “quiet” woman as oppressed. Berta could have “killed” like Loida but she is not motivated by a desire to do this. As a means of survival and the culmination of anger following years of failure, her anger when normative frames reform to exclude her also point toward alternative successes, such as feeling pleasure with the growth of better things.

Although writing poems of alternative successes is an important part of social justice projects, Judith Halberstam also focuses on the probable weaknesses of this strategy. Telling unknown narratives and their ensuing memorialization has the tendency to tidy up “disorderly histories” by choosing what is important for public memory, and reorganizes muddled and conflicting events as linear stories of victory (15). Instead of participating in this effacement, Halberstam promotes a form of forgetting that actually paves the way for new memories that are complex and contradictory, instead of replicating accounts of oppressed lives (15). These poems call attention to significant narratives and histories of abuse that must not be forgotten. Not only do these examples and feelings destabilize the frames of normalcy that most take for granted, they also underline the tensions among women who continue to fight for gender equality.

Taken together, these poems illustrate the distressing violence that happens when individuals cannot follow hegemonic ideas of the ideal “wife” in these cases. It is important to note that as these angry women seek out

conditions of equality through domesticity, they question the unequal power relations that exclude them from normative frames from the outset. The three texts show that anger can call attention to this social inequality, and these stories foreground the political impact of effacing this affective response. While anger allows them to become recognizable when normative frames shift, the visibility on its own does not solve social inequities. The social construction of the oppressed subject will continue to threaten their truthful recognition. Visibility without social reform does little to alleviate the plight of oppressed women and those who suffer from discrimination (Harris-Perry 38). However, recognition can function as a meaningful beginning for social justice and anger as a means through which the disenfranchised becomes visible.

Notes

1. The logic that informs this debate is both based on and reflects binary thinking that creates and reinforces distinctions between reason/emotion, mind/body, higher/lower order, and ruler/ruled. This rationale functions as the ground upon which the binary male/female relies. Binary thinking is integral to many social institutions, and is the basis for the dominant model for sexual difference. The assumption that women are inherently more emotional than men by virtue of their bodily differences is a hallmark of a larger philosophical trend where men occupy the privileged part of the gender binary, and are aligned with mind and reason, and women become the repository for emotional traits.
2. The distinctions between reason and emotion, men and women, mind and body were articulated first by Aristotle then Descartes. The Cartesian view continues to inform the devaluing of women's anger. By explaining that the mind must rule over the emotions, Descartes legitimizes the subordination of individuals who are believed to be prone to emotional excess compared to their rational opposites.
3. Studies that have been undertaken in relation to the topic are the following: Amaryllis T. Torres and Rosario del Rosario, *Gender and Development, Making the Bureaucracy Gender-responsive: a Sourcebook for Advocates, Planners, and Implementers* (United Nations Development Fund for Women, National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women, and HR Specialists) Manila, 1994; Jurgette Honculada and Rosalinda Pineda Ofreneo, *Transforming the Mainstream: Building a Gender-responsive Bureaucracy in the Philippines, 1975–1998* (United Nations Development Fund for Women) Bangkok, 1998; Jeanne Frances I. Illo, *Workshops as Fora for Gender Advocacy: the 1991–92 IPC-CIDA Workshops* (Institute of Philippine Culture, Ateneo de Manila University) Quezon City, 1994; Jeanne Frances I. Illo, editor, *Gender in Projects and Organizations: a Casebook* (Institute of Philippine Culture, Ateneo de Manila University and National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women), Quezon City and Manila, 1996; Jeanne Frances I. Illo and Rosalinda Pineda Ofreneo, editors, *Carrying the Burden of the World: Women Reflecting on the Effects of the Crisis on Women and Girls* (Center for Integrative and Development Studies, University of the Philippines), Quezon City, 1999; Jeanne Frances I. Illo and Rosalinda Pineda Ofreneo, editors, *Beyond the Crisis: Questions of Survival and Empowerment* (Center for Integrative and Development Studies and University Center for Women's Studies, University of the Philippines), Quezon City, 2002; Odine De Guzman, editor, *Body Politics: Essays on Cultural Representations of Women's Bodies*, Gender, Reproductive Health, and Development Project Book

Series (University Center for Women's Studies, University of the Philippines), Quezon City, 2002.

4. Women have been pathologized as unstable, deceitful, and irrational.
5. Betty Stoneman, "Sara Ahmed's Feminist Attachment to Anger." *For the Love of Wisdom*. 1 Apr. 2017. <https://bettystoneman.wordpress.com/2017/04/01/sara-ahmeds-feminist-attachment-to-anger/>. Accessed: 10 Jan. 2021..
6. Textual vehemence is a term used by Barbara Tomlinson to describe "the tactical deployment of what often registers in public rhetoric as anger" and the ways this anger foregrounds the impossibility of objective knowledge.
7. The English translation by the author follows:
 1. Heat oil in frying pan.
 2. Saute onions and garlic.
 3. Immerse the fists that he will punch your face with.
 4. Do likewise with the feet that he will kick you with.
 5. Mix in the other parts of his body.
 6. Bring to a boil.
 7. Pierce with fork. Better with a knife.
 8. Season with curses and maledictions.
 9. Taste.
 10. Remove from the fire.
 11. Eat. If no good, throw to the dogs.

8. My translation into English follows:

It was not because of the onion that
She had sliced so thinly.
She was used to this.
She was also used to cooking.
She was used to cutting up spices
And the sizzle of oil when she added
The other ingredients.
She was even used to the dash of
Larry's fist. Her face had thickened to a
Callus. So she would not be afraid
When the gas flared up. Her fingers
Were very experienced in avoiding
The fire, like a magician.
She was crying this morning because
When Larry ate the eggs his eyes
Would sparkle with desire.

Like a snake's, his tongue savoring the taste.
And not long after, his mouth will foam.
He will stand to get water.
His steps will falter as he goes to the kitchen window.
But he will not reach the jar.
His eyeballs will move to the forehead
Then he will go into a violent convulsion.

9. The English translation by the poet follows:

Don't plant, Berta
His sharp words
In your tired and gasping breast
You'll only harvest
Rusty nails
That can give you
Tetanus
Or whatever.
Instead, Berta,
Hather them
Don't gnash your teeth
And pick out with gloved hands
Then arrange them in Lola's earthen pot
Mix with condiments well
Let boil, wait
Let cool sieve
Pound the meat
Scatter on pale earth
Let it grow stout
Plant with the herbs *mayana*, *yerba Buena*
Gabon, sabila
Whatever.
Then sprinkle
With cooled boiled water
Wait, don't hurry
The result
Will delight, and heal
You then.

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