

Depiction of Women's Empowerment in the Short Fiction of Filipina Writers: Pathway to Gender Equality and Development

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ABSTRACT

Literature is known to be “Dulce et Utile,” which means both delightful and instructive or useful. Its impact expands across cultural, historical, and educational dimensions, crucial in changing the national identity and development, particularly related to gender roles and women's lived experiences. In the Philippines, literature closely intertwines with the nation's history, serving as a repository of historical events, oral traditions, societal challenges, and moral and spiritual values. This study investigates how Filipina writers portray women's empowerment in their short fiction. Specifically, it examines the representations and attitudes of empowered women in the following works: “*Dead Stars*” by Paz Marquez-Benitez,” “*Desire*” by Paz Latorena, Estrella Alfon's “*Magnificence*” and Kerima Polotan-Tuvera's “*The Virgin*”, through a literature review, a selection of representative texts, and textual analysis. The study analyzes the structure of events of women's empowerment through characterization, structure of events using Aristotelian plot principles, and key themes. A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing a descriptive-interpretive, critical approach to examine the texts of the four fictions. The findings indicate that these fictions attest to the struggles and assertions of women in different social and emotional landscapes. Although written in earlier years, they demonstrate how empowered female characters act as transformation agents, challenging traditional gender norms and fostering social progress. Based on these findings, it is recommended to organize outreach programs, such as seminars and workshops, for literary enthusiasts. These initiatives, inspired by themes of empowerment, can integrate literature into the Gender and Development (GAD) frameworks, promoting societal transformation through the study and appreciation of empowering literary works.

Keywords: Women's Empowerment, female writers, Aristotelian plot structure, qualitative design, Gender and Development

INTRODUCTION

Reading literary pieces provides enriching experiences, allowing readers to appreciate culture, heritage, reflections, aspirations, love, and even grief. Bernardo (2013) defines reading as an interaction between the reader and the written language, through which the reader attempts to reconstruct the message from the writer. In the Philippines, Filipino writers take pride in capturing the emotions and realities of their readers through their works. They strongly believe that literature serves as a powerful medium for reflecting and challenging social norms, particularly related to gender roles and women lived experiences. In the selected short fictions of Filipino female writers, nuanced perspectives on women's empowerment emerge, as these authors craft heroines who exercise full potential across various spheres of life.

Historically, women in the Philippines have faced systematic inequalities, particularly in education, leadership roles, and decision-making. Even today, some people still hold the belief that women in earlier times embodied the “Maria Clara” stereotype – expected to remain in the shadows of their husbands, serve their men, manage household chores, and bear children.

In the chosen fictions that were studied and analyzed, the writers challenge the negative claims made by some people today. While these stories are set in earlier times, they depict women not as weak or submissive, but as strong, independent, and resilient. They powerfully demonstrated their full potential, expressing their thoughts and actions with firmness yet always with gentleness and patience. These attitudes and characteristics are found in the short fiction of Paz Marquez-Benitez in her *Dead Stars*, Paz Latorena's *Desire*, Estrella Alfon's *The Magnificence*, and Keriman Polotan-Tuvera in her *The Virgin*.

In the scrutinized short fictions, the authors portrayed women with these images: independent, protective, courageous, astute, and unbroken. Moreover, the women in the stories did not play traditional roles of being submissive, yet they assertively expressed their choices and decisions, conveying that women then had potential, fueled by a sense of character. Although they were not seen mostly in public or professional workplaces of society, they still carried themselves with quiet confidence and made their presence felt. With strength tempered by grace, they expressed their thoughts and intentions, whether through words or actions, with gentleness and patience.

This paper confidently argues that during the olden times, Filipino women were already aware of women's rights and took steps to eliminate discrimination. Through the masterpieces of these four lady writers, the readers are informed that years before, women had already wrestled against the Philippine patriarchal society and had struggled to fight for their rights long before the enactment of 9262, known as the Anti-VAWC Law. Additionally, this work, inspired by themes of empowerment, can integrate into Gender and Development frameworks, promoting societal transformations through the study and appreciation of inspiring literary works.

Admittedly, few decades ago, gender roles between men and women were entirely diverse in almost all corners of the world. Women were traditional and used to following men's leadership in building relationships and in decision-making (Lapus, 2019). Oftentimes, women blindly listened to men as they were either uneducated or their opinions were never considered. They were always dependent because they believed that they needed external help from patriarchs. Moreover, they would not have the courage to fight back as they feared society and their image (Raj, 2019).

In the Philippines, a similar thing was practiced in the olden times; women held traditional gender roles, and men were expected to be the providers and protectors of the family. Sometimes, in the poorest households, things go differently; girls are conditioned from infancy to accept the violent behavior of their fathers, particularly when they return home intoxicated (Leyson 2001). Machismo, a display of male superiority ranging from a personal sense and virility, was common during those days. Filipino women usually choose to keep mum about their sufferings because of their emotional and economic dependence on men (Leyson 2001).

However, the stories by Marquez-Benitez, Latorena, Alfon and Polotan-Tuvera challenge the machismo norms by rejecting the passivity associated with traditional femininity. Their protagonists do not merely endure. Still, they resist, confront, and make choices that reflect self-awareness and empowerment. These narratives serve as counter-discourses to the dominant patriarchal narrative, showing that Filipino women, even in the past possessed the strength and awareness to question and push back against oppression.

Lombardi (2023) explains that literature plays a crucial role in educating people in their personal and societal transformation. It fosters critical thinking, empathy, and a deeper understanding of the world.

Through reading and analyzing diverse perspectives, students and readers gain insights into cultural and historical realities, helping build stronger and more inclusive communities. Similarly, Gregg and Pacheco (2001) assert that literature allows readers to immerse themselves in the inner lives of characters, cultivating new ways of seeing the world and developing emotional intelligence and cultural sensitivity. The protagonists in these four fictions exemplify the transformative power of literature to reveal empowerment not only as an external struggle, but as an internal awakening. According to Schultz (2017), . Empowerment involves the capacity of individuals and communities to enact change. Though the term gained wider usage only in the 1970s, its essence uplifting the marginalized and enabling self-determination has long been present in both action and literature. As defined by Howard and Butler (2023), empowerment is the interpersonal process of equipping individuals with the tools, environment, and confidence to pursue and achieve personal goals. As

Showalter (1986) explains, feminist writers have long sought to deconstruct the stereotypical portrayals of women in literature. Through their works, female authors advocate for justice and equality, voicing resistance against the systematic oppression of women. The selected stories not only inform readers about the struggles of the past but also inspire ongoing reflection on gender roles and women's rights today.

In conclusion, this paper underscores that Filipino women, even in historical contexts often seen as oppressive, were far from voiceless. Through fiction, they have spoken with courage and clarity. These literary masterpieces offer valuable contributions to Gender and Development frameworks by promoting critical dialogue, societal transformation, and the enduring power of women's voices in literature and beyond.

METHODOLOGY

The study is qualitative in nature, using Descriptive-Interpretive-Critical Approach in analyzing the short fictions which are the *Dead Stars* by Paz Marquez-Benitez, *Desire* by Paz Latorena, *Magnificence* by Estrella Alfon and *The Virgin* by Kerima Polotan-Tuvera.

The Descriptive-Interpretive-Critical Approach is a qualitative research framework consisting of Descriptive, which involves presenting the subject matter, Interpretive, which involves the data, and Critical, which is the final stage that evaluates the subject critically.

The process of analysis involved a Literature Review, in which works of Filipino female writers were identified and analyzed, then the Selection of Texts to be studied came next, followed by Textual Analysis using character analysis, thematic analysis, and plot analysis, applying the Aristotelian Plot Structure. The last one was the Contextual Study, where historical, cultural, and social contexts of the fictions were scrutinized to find out how the stories illustrated women's empowerment.

From the four selected fictions, textualities are extracted and are investigated according to their variables. The analysis goes through three phases:

- a.) Characterization of Empowered Women
- b.) Events in the Plot Structure
- c.) Themes Depicting Empowerment

RESULTS

The process of collecting the data for this study involved a close textual analysis of four selected short fictions by Filipina authors. These literary works were cautiously read and examined to extract textual elements relevant to the study that focuses on women's empowerment. The analysis was conducted in three structured phases to ensure a comprehensive understanding of how empowerment is portrayed in the narratives.

In the first phase, the characterization of empowered women was thoroughly studied. This involved identifying the female protagonists or significant female characters in each story and examining how they were portrayed in terms of strength, agency, decision-making independence, and resistance to oppression and traditional roles. Particular attention was given to their thoughts and actions, relationships, and how they respond to challenges in their environment.

In the second phase, it focused on events in the plot structure that contribute to or reflect the empowerment of these characters. Specific scenes or turning points were identified where the characters demonstrate empowerment, assert autonomy, or experience a transformation. These events were analyzed in relation to their placement in the plot, such as exposition, climax, and resolution, to understand their significance in the narrative flow.

In the third phase, the study examined the themes depicting empowerment that emerged from the stories. Recurring ideas or messages related to gender roles, resistance, self-worth, and liberation were identified and

interpreted. These themes were related to the broader context of women's empowerment and aligned with relevant concepts from Republic Act 9262, or the Anti-Violence Against Women and Their Children Act.

Through this multi-phase analysis, the study sought to reveal how literature reflects, reinforces, or challenges the discourse on women's empowerment in the Philippine context.

Table I Characterization

Characterization is defined as a description of the distinctive nature or features of someone or something. In analyzing the empowered women in the four selected fictions, the method of characterization is done through the identification of the heroine's behaviors, attitudes, and actions (Holman & William, 1986).

Titles of Fictions & Authors	Major Woman Character	Behaviors, Attitudes, Actions
Dead Stars by Paz M. Benitez	Esperanza Julia Salas	decent, with a strong personality, levelheaded, non-conformist, determined, decisive, efficient, and literal-minded. With self-respect and self-worth, independent, I used to be a part of a love triangle.
Desire by Paz Latorena	She (unnamed)	determined, resilient, desirous, resourceful ,strong, independent
Magnificence by Estrella Alfon	Mother (unnamed)	protective, courageous, astute, defensive, brave, frank, straightforward, fearless
The Virgin by Kerima Polotan-Tuvera	Miss Mijares	dedicated, independent, strict, self-sacrificing, self-determined courageous, breadwinner, workaholic

Table I discloses the depictions of the empowered major characters in the selected fictions, namely: *Dead Stars* by Paz Marquez-Benitez, *Desire* by Paz Latorena, *Magnificence* by Estrella Alfon and *The Virgin* by Kerima Polotan-Tuvera.

In *Dead Stars* by Paz Marquez-Benitez, Esperanza, the main woman character, shows that she is an empowered woman by being levelheaded. She remains cool, though angry with Alfredo Salazar's flirting with Julia Salas. Moreover, she shows her decency even if she is offended by Alfredo's philandering attitude. During their confrontation, Esperanza, though almost in tears, remains smart and strong; the statements prove this :

“ Why do you get angry? I do not understand you at all! I think I know why you’ve been indifferent to me lately. I am not blind or deaf; I see and hear what perhaps some are trying to keep from me.”

“Why don’t you speak out frankly before it is too late? ”You need not think of me and of what people will say—what will they not say? ““Whatever my shortcomings, and no doubt they are many in your eyes, I have never gone out of my way, of my place to find a man.”If you mean you want to take back your word, if you are tired of- why don’t you tell me you are tired of me?”

The confrontation between Esperanza and Alfredo reveals Esperanza's strong personality and dignity. Though it pains her to know that her fiancé is seeing someone new in the person of Julia Salas, she uses her reason rather than her emotions. She never told Alfredo that she saw him waiting for Julia while the procession was going on. In like manner, she never quarreled nor threatened personally the girl who is mingling in their affair. She learns to wait until the time Alfredo visits her in their house, where they indulge in a heart-to-heart talk. Esperanza does not beg for the love of Alfredo; rather, she emboldens Alfredo to speak up, decide, and tell the truth as to whether they should cancel or continue their planned marriage.

Paz Marquez-Benitez in her masterpiece "Dead Stars" enunciates that women are not emotionally weak nor submissive to men. She boldly criticizes the belief that women are easily destabilized by the neighborhood's talk about a failed relationship. Esperanza is the mirror of a woman who is not afraid with what will happen to their love affair. She displays an absolute decision on her destiny. Nonetheless, there is some sort of emotional outburst which just signifies of her being a true woman in love. More so, it is an expected reaction of a woman who is already engaged. A woman who is down, since she is uncertain if their wedding vows would push through or would be cancelled. The incidents in the short fiction provide the readers with the empowerment of a Filipina. It doesn't matter what century a story is written, what is necessary is that there is always a significant point to be remembered by the readers. That in the year 1925, when gender equality was still out of bounds, and most women were submissive to their husbands, a literary piece contradicting women's dependence on men was already written. Paz Marquez-Benitez divulges that there are women like Esperanza who are not afraid to be left by their future financially able husbands. Esperanza, per se, is an epitome of an independent woman who stands for her principles and rights. This situation supports Showalter's stance that a woman shows a more independent attitude and resists the traditional roles given by society.

As regards to Julia Salas, this lady maintains her dignity and never shows any encouragement of a romantic relationship with Alfredo. She respects herself and refuses to become part of a love triangle or an illicit affair. The incident when Alfredo tries to confess his feelings to Julia, her response is "You have been very kind I shall not forget."

While Paz Latorena's *Desire* shows an empowered woman who struggles to face the reality that men do admire only her crescent-moon-like body and nothing else. The woman exhibits resilience and determination to hide her curves so she could find a man who would accept and love her the way she is. This is supported by the following incidents:

Men look at her homely face and turn their eyes away, but when they look at her body, they are enslaved. They forget her unpleasant face, all they have eyes for is the woman's striking body figure, the hips that almost like the curve of a crescent moon. Because of this, she does everything to hide her curves so she can find a man who will accept and love her with her ugly face, but not because of her stunning body.

This poignant fiction of Paz Latorena signifies empowerment through a woman who struggles against gender-based violence and discrimination. She displays her attitude being resilient among men's unjust and prejudicial treatment.

In *The Magnificence*, Estrella Alfon describes an empowered woman in the person of the mother with sublime characteristic who fights a man to defend her children, especially the little girl. In like manner, the mother personifies, too, all women who raise their hands against male abuses. The episode supports this claim:

The mother raises her hand and slaps Vicente full hard in the face. As the man retreats, again another slap lands on his face. The woman does the slapping alternately until they reach the bottom landing. of the stairs. After several forceful slaps, the man retreats and runs away. Then, she calls her little girl to take a bath, scrubs her, soaps and wipes her gently, and changes her with new clothes. She bundles the clothes that the girl has taken off, and together with the pencils, she throws them into the fire. In the end, she takes her little girl by the hand and leads her to bed, where the little girl drops off into quick slumber.

In the fictional story "*The Virgin*", by Kerima Polotan-Tuvera, the writer, features Miss Mijares as an empowered woman by being dedicated and supportive to her loved ones. She spends most of her youth taking

care of her old and sickly mother, sending her niece to school, and bearing household economic responsibilities. Similarly, Miss Mijares lives according to what society expects of her to do as a breadwinner of her family. Someone who always fills the needs of the members of the family, thus forgetting herself and being vocal about her needs as a woman. However, she realizes that she needs to be free and follow her heart, whatever the consequence whether losing her dignity as a virgin woman or giving in to the man whom she is fascinated with. This assertion is supported by these events:

Ms. Mijares has been working so hard to finish college and be able to help her loved ones. She can put her niece through school and care for her sickly mother for nine years, thus forgetting to give importance to her love life. Nevertheless, she realizes that she needs to be loved by a man, so she decides not to suppress her emotions by submitting to the carpenter during that dark, rainy evening in a side street. At that very moment, she forgets the societal roles that women are expected to wait for the right time and remain virgins before the wedding vows

Table II: Events in the Plot Structure

Depicting Empowered Situation

Plot is the sequence of events or incidents in a literary work. The two primary elements of any plot are the characters and conflict. The Aristotelian plot structure uses the following pattern: Beginning-Middle-Ending. Events in the four selected fictions are purposefully examined to depict the protagonists' empowered situations (Daiches, David,1981).

Titles of Fictions & Authors	Beginning Event (Protasis)	Middle Event (Epitasis)	Ending Event (Catastrophe or Denouement)
<i>Dead Stars</i> by Paz M. Benitez	Alfredo Salazar & Esperanza are long time sweethearts and the long table is soon to happen, but Alfredo Salazar seems not yet ready for the incoming event since he is not a bit in a hurry. On the other side of the coin, Esperanza seems not in a hurry either because the guy does not seem to hurry her.	During the Holy Week there is a procession of different images. Esperanza and her mother are pacing behind the image of Our Lady of Sorrows. Esperanza congeals self-consciously and tries to look unaware when she sees Alfredo Salazar waiting for Julia Salas while the procession moves on. On the contrary, Alfredo tries to confess he has feelings for Julia, but the latter never reciprocates the feelings because she knows that he is engaged to Esperanza and is soon to be married.	Final confrontation between Esperanza and Alfredo about their long engagement as to whether it will break or will end up in marriage. Esperanza assertively asks Alfredo to decide if he is to take back his words and breaks their engagement. Moreover, Esperanza declares that she is ready whatever will happen and will accept whatever people will say.
<i>Desire</i> by Paz Latorena	The woman has an unpleasant masculine look, her nose is broad and flat, it's nostrils always dilate. She has a big mouth with thick	As days pass by the woman notices that every time men look at her face, they turn their eyes away, but when they look at her body, they are	She wants to be loved like other women are loved so she wears disfigured dresses to make her shapeless, and she accomplishes her desired

	<p>lips; her big jaws make her face angular. Yet, her body is fashioned with unusual beauty. From her neck up to her small feet, she is perfect. Unmindful of her looks and the unjust and prejudicial treatment of men, she does her work every day.</p>	<p>mesmerized and enslaved. They forget her unpleasant face, all they have eyes on is the body, with her hips that almost curve like a crescent moon.</p> <p>For this, the lady hates her body; she hates the gift of nature given to her. So she does everything she can to hide her curves by wearing large and disfigured dresses. She does this so she can find a man who will accept her the way she is, regardless of how her face looks, and not because of her beautiful body.</p>	<p>result.</p> <p>She meets a white man through letters and dates for the first time, but later, as they go on several dates, the white man discloses to her that he, too, adores and loves her body. There is regret in her eyes, with a weary smile while hearing the declaration, but bravely she utters</p> <p>“You have just been yourself....like other men.”</p>
<p>The Magnificence by Estrella Alfon</p>	<p>There is a man named Vicente who appears to be gentle and so kind, who offers help to tutor the two children in answering their homework. The boy is eight and the girl is seven, both love to be given pencils as a reward when they can work on their homework smartly.</p>	<p>One evening, Vicente comes earlier than usual. He tells the boy to get a glass of water, then he holds the girl by the arm, promising that he will buy more pencils for the girl. Then he takes the girl up lightly in his arms, holding her under her armpits, and holds her to sit down on his lap. The girl feels uncomfortable sitting on Vicente’s lap because she says she is heavy yet Vicente insists that the girl sit on his lap. The little girl feels very queer with the actuations of Vicente so she jumps up away from Vicente’s lap. The mother comes bringing a glass of sarsaparilla. Vicente is frightened, and he snatches at the papers that lay on the table and holds them to his stomach, turning away from the mother’s coming.</p>	<p>The mother puts the glass of soft drink down on the table and commands her little boy to finish his lessons. Then she calls her little girl to turn around, and she passes her hands over the little girl’s back and tells her to go upstairs. Also, she asks his little boy to go to his room. Finally, the woman raises her hand and slaps Vicente full hard in the face. As the man retreats, another slap lands on his face again. The woman does the slapping alternately until they reach the bottom landing. Of the stairs. After several forceful slaps, the man retreats and runs away.</p> <p>Afterwards, she calls her little girl to take a bath, scrubs her, soaps and wipes her gently and changes her with a new dress. She bundles the clothes that the girl has taken off and together with the pencils she throws them into the fire.</p>

			In the end she takes her little girl by the hand and leads her to bed where the little girl drops off into a quick slumber.
<i>The Virgin</i> by Kerima Polotan-Tuvera	Ms. Mijares, a woman of thirty four works in the placement section of a woodcraft company. She is meticulous and strict in hiring workers.	Ms. Mijares has been working so hard to finish college to be able to help her loved ones. She is able to put her niece through school and cares for her sickly mother for nine years, thus forgetting to give importance to her love life.	Ms. Mijares meets a man who applies as a carpenter in the woodcraft company where she works. There is an attraction that she feels to the new worker, but knowing that he has a son, she is hesitant to show her real feelings. In the evening they ride in a jeepney and are together by chance. The jeepney driver stops from reaching the highway due to traffic and heavy rain, so the passengers go out one after another while the two of them are trapped on a dark, lonely sidewalk of a rain-beaten street. The carpenter moves and brushes against her and with her wet ruffles, she gives in.

Dead Stars by Paz M. Benitez

In Paz M. Benitez’s “*Dead Stars*” it can be understood that Esperanza maintains her strong character, belief in herself and decency by not asking Alfredo to hurry up and set their wedding vows as early as possible. This dialogue confirms:

Carmen sighed impatiently. “Why is he not a bit decided, I wonder. He is over thirty, is he not? And still a bachelor? Esperanza must be tired of waiting.”

“She does not seem to be in much of a hurry either,” Don Julian nasally commented, while his rose scissors busily snipped away.

Another incident that shows the decency of Esperanza

During the Holy Week, there is a procession of different images. Esperanza and her mother are pacing behind the image of Our Lady of Sorrows. Esperanza congeals self-consciously and tries to look unaware when she sees Alfredo Salazar waiting for Julia Salas while the procession moves on.

For Esperanza, though it pains her to know that her fiancé is seeing someone new in the person of Julia Salas, still she uses her reason rather than her emotion of not making a scene by calling the attention of Alfredo when he was waiting for Julia during the procession.

The confrontation between Esperanza and Alfredo reveals Esperanza’s resilient personality and high self-esteem:

Why do you get angry? I do not understand you at all! I think I know why you've been indifferent to me lately. I am not blind or deaf; I see and hear what perhaps some are trying to keep from me." "Why don't you speak out frankly before it is too late?" "You need not think of me and of what people will say-what will they not say?" "Whatever my shortcomings, and no doubt they are many in your eyes, I have never gone out of my way, of my place to find a man." "If you mean you want to take back your word, if you are tired of- why don't you tell me you are tired of me?"

Benitez, in her fiction, shows the culture of Filipinos when gender equality was still forbidden. Women were regarded as accessories to men, and decisions are initiated by men. Women's role then was to wait and be patient. Nevertheless, doing the analysis intensely, Esperanza is entirely a different woman. She is candid, she asserts her right but she maintains her decency and her regenerative virtue.

Desire by Paz Latorena

Paz Latorena reveals the tough personality of the protagonist in the fiction "*Desire*", where the woman struggles the best she can to understand men and accept their discriminatory attitudes. The episodes declare

The woman has an unpleasant masculine look, her nose is broad and flat, it's nostrils always dilate. She has a big mouth with thick lips; her big jaws make her face angular. Yet, her body is fashioned with unusual beauty. From her neck up to her small feet, she is perfect. Unmindful of her looks and the unjust and prejudicial treatment of men, she does her work every day. As days pass by, the woman notices that every time men look at her face, they turn their eyes away, but when they look at her body, they are mesmerized and enslaved. They forget her unpleasant face; all they have eyes on is the body, with her hips that almost curve like a crescent moon.

Because of this, the lady hates her body; she hates the gift of nature given to her. So she does everything she can to hide her curves by wearing large and disfigured dresses. She does this so she can find a man who will accept her the way she is, her homely face especially, but not her beautiful body. She wants to be loved like other women are loved. She meets a white man through letters and dates for the first time, but later, as they go on several dates, the white man discloses to her that he, too, adores and loves her body. There is regret in her eyes, with a weary smile while hearing the declaration, but bravely she utters, "You have just been yourself....like other men."

Additionally, the author demonstrates the protagonist as an independent woman. She goes to meet the stranger from the West alone and befriends him. She goes on several meetings with the man and thinks that he is different from the rest of the men, but she is completely wrong. The man confesses that he, too, loves her body, and she feels bad. Although she is frustrated by what she heard, still she maintains her resilience and accepts that all the men she meets, almost only see her body as a piece of enjoyment.

The Magnificence by Estrella Alfon

In the fiction "*Magnificence*" by Estrella Alfon, the author illustrates the image of a protective, courageous, astute, defensive, brave, frank, straightforward forward and fearless

mother. The incidents go this way:

There is a man named Vicente who appears to be gentle and kind, who offers help to tutor the two children in answering their homework. The boy is eight and the girl is seven, both love to be given pencils as a reward when they can work on their homework smartly. One evening, Vicente comes earlier than usual. He tells the boy to get a glass of water, then he holds the girl by the arm, promising that he will buy more pencils for the girl. Then he takes the girl up lightly in his arms, holding her under her armpits, and holds her to sit down on his lap. The girl feels uncomfortable sitting on Vicente's lap because she says she is heavy yet Vicente insists that the girl sit on his lap. The little girl feels very queer with the actuations of Vicente so she jumps up away from Vicente's lap. The mother comes bringing a glass of sarsaparilla. Vicente is frightened, and he snatches at the papers that lay on the table and holds them to his stomach, turning away from the mother's coming.

Estrella Alfon, in her fiction, articulates that children and women are vulnerable to abusers. At present, there are some abuses caused by men today, and that is what the story is trying to point out. She depicts that abuse can happen even with the most trusted person you have, and exploitation occurs anywhere, even inside your home. Back then, since there was no law eliminating violence against women and children, she just punished the man by slapping him several times. Such gestures display courage, bravery, and protection. All because a woman is indeed an empowered woman.

***The Virgin* by Kerima Polotan-Tuvera**

Women's empowerment is publicized by Kerima Polotan –Tuvera in her fiction “*The Virgin*” by stating these events:

Ms. Mijares, a woman of thirty four works in the placement section of a woodcraft company. She is meticulous and strict in hiring workers. She has been working so hard to finish college to be able to help her loved ones. She successfully puts her niece through school, cares for her sickly mother for nine years, but forgets to give importance to her love life. Nevertheless, she realizes that she needs to be loved by a man, so she decides not to suppress her emotions. One rainy night, when the carpenter and she are left in a dark side street, she feels hesitancy, but there is excitement inside her. She is about to move away, but when the carpenter brushes her hands onto her, she gives in.

This is amidst societal roles that women are expected to wait for the right time and remain virgins before their wedding vows.

Table III Themes Depicting Women's Empowerment

The theme is the central idea, concern, or purpose in a literary work, which is expressed indirectly rather than directly (Holman & William,1986).

Titles of Fictions & Authors	Conflicts Involving Women	Women's Empowered Principles Encompassing Gender and Development
<i>Dead Stars</i> by Paz M. Benitez	<p>Gender equality was not practiced in the Philippines, especially in the 1920s. Women then showed modesty by waiting for the schedule of the matrimonial vows, usually initiated by the man who was to marry. Similarly, it was a taboo for women to react to whatever wrongdoings their men were into while they were engaged. Nevertheless, such of situation did not happen to Esperanza. She boldly confronted Alfredo to tell the truth about his feelings and let him decide whether the wedding would go on or not.</p> <p>As to Julia Salas, this lady maintains her dignity and never shows any encouragement of a romantic relationship with Alfredo. She respects herself and refuses to become part of a love triangle or an illicit affair</p>	<p>Esperanza has the right to be strong and candid in asking about the situation of their engagement, which is in an uncertain position due to another woman.</p> <p>Similarly, Julia's rejection of Alfredo's emotional indecisiveness is a subtle act of empowerment.</p> <p>GAD promotes assertiveness, self-worth, and independence in emotional and social relationships.</p>

<i>Desire</i> by Paz Latorena	The woman longed to be loved and valued for whatever her face looked like, because despite of not being beautiful, she was blessed with a body that every man could desire, which led her not to experience having true and real love.	Objectification limits development by reducing women to appearance, and it is resilience to struggle against gender-based violence characterized by men's unjust and prejudicial treatment. GAD aims to redefine women's value in society , promoting self-esteem and societal respect beyond beauty standards.
<i>The Magnificence</i> by Estrella Alfon	The mother and all the family members trusted Vicente to be a friend who could be a good tutor for the children. However, the latter turned out to be a big disappointment to the family, especially to the mother of the children.	Bravery and courage are virtues exhibited by all women and mothers who used to stay in the shadows but raise their hands against male abuse The mother breaks the silence and takes control – she is a model of gender-responsive parenting and protection, aligning with GAD's goal of empowering women in domestic and community roles.
<i>The Virgin</i> by Kerima Polotan-Tuvera	Ms. Mijares struggled against “social dictates” that a woman should be pure and unstained before marriage. Added to it was her obligation to take care of and support her family financially, which led her to deny herself being loved and beloved by a man.	Freedom is liberation from coercion, necessity, and the power of another. It is self-determination to be free from long-suppressed emotions and societal roles. The protagonist's internal conflict shows the emotional burden of traditional female roles, which she eventually triumphs. GAD aims not to limit women's full potential in life.

DISCUSSION

Dead Stars by Paz M. Benitez

The confrontation between Esperanza and Alfredo reveals Esperanza's strong personality and dignity. Though it pains her to know that her fiancé is seeing someone new in the person of Julia Salas, still she uses her reason rather than her emotions. She never told Alfredo that she saw him waiting for Julia while the procession was going on. In like manner, she never quarreled nor threatened personally the girl who is mingling in their affair. She learns to wait until Alfredo visits her in their house for a heart-to-heart talk with her. Esperanza does not beg for the love of Alfredo; rather, she lets Alfredo speak up and tell the truth as to whether their affair would go on or not.

Paz Marquez-Benitez enunciates that women are not emotionally weak nor submissive to men. She boldly criticizes the belief that women are easily destabilized by the neighborhood's talk about a failed relationship. Esperanza is the mirror of a woman who is not afraid of what will happen to their love affair. She displays an absolute decision on her destiny. There is some sort of emotional outburst, nonetheless, it just signifies that her

being a true woman in love, engaged, and is going to tie the knot in a few months. The incidents in the short fiction provide the readers with the empowerment of a Filipina. It doesn't matter what century a story is written in, yet there is always a significant point to be remembered. Readers should know that in the year 1925, when gender equality was still out of bounds, and most women were submissive to their husbands, a literary piece contradicting women's dependence on men was already written. Esperanza is the symbol of a woman who is not afraid to be left by her future financially able husband, who is a lawyer. She is an epitome of an independent woman who stands for her principles and rights. This situation supports Showalter's stance that a woman shows a more independent attitude and resists the traditional roles given by society.

Through the viewpoint of the Anti-VAWC Law (RA 9262), Alfredo's actions can be viewed as a form of emotional and psychological violence, especially in how they affect the women involved. Although not overly abusive, Alfredo's indecision and lack of transparency cause psychological distress, particularly to Julia, who is left with no closure and no voice in the resolution of their emotional entanglement. According to RA 9262, psychological violence includes causing mental or emotional suffering-often through neglect, manipulation, or betrayal within intimate relationships. While subtle, Alfredo's actions represent the kind of normalized emotional harm that women endure silently in patriarchal societies.

Viewed from the Gender and Development (GAD) perspective, *Dead Stars* underscores the limited agency women often had in romantic relationships. Julia Salas, however, defies the expected role of a pining, passive woman. When Alfredo meets her again years later, she is composed, distant, and seemingly unaffected by his presence, demonstrating a quiet yet powerful form of emotional autonomy and self-respect. Rather than clinging to a man who once idealized her, Julia's demeanor suggests growth, independence, and the decision not to define herself by a failed romance. This reversal aligns with GAD's call to reframe traditional gender narratives, where women are no longer portrayed as victims of love but as individuals capable of choosing dignity over emotional dependence.

This *Dead Stars* offers a reflective commentary on gender dynamics in relationships. It reveals how women, even in early 20th-century fiction can assert strength through emotional clarity, resilience, and silence- qualities that resonate with both GAD's developmental vision and R.A 9262's commitment to psychological well-being and dignity.

Desire by Paz Latorena

This poignant fiction of Paz Latorena signifies empowerment through a woman who struggles against gender-based violence and discrimination. She displays her attitude as being determined, resilient, desirous, resourceful, and strong. The author pictures a woman who is determined and desirous to find someone who will love her for who she is but not just because of her beautiful body. She becomes resourceful by wearing long, wide dresses that completely disfigure her. At some time, men forget her stunning body, nobody notices her. Later, she longs for someone who will love her despite her unpleasantness, but in the end, she finally admits that it is impossible. So, she turns to writing little things, little lyrics, and little sketches that someone admires. She thinks that someone is the person she has been waiting for so long, and the answer to her yearnings. However, everything turns the other way around, opposite of her expectations. The man she thinks to be different is just like any other man, who falls for her beautiful body. Though she feels frustrated, she learns to admit that men are indeed looking for the outside appearance of a woman rather than her inner self.

The author Latorena explores the inner life of a woman considered physically unattractive by societal standards but rich in intellect and emotional depth. The story examines how society judges women's worth primarily through beauty, leading the protagonist to internalize shame and suppress her natural desire.

Under the Anti-VAWC law this portrayal reflects psychological violence as defined by emotional suffering caused by societal discrimination and objectification. Through the Gender and Development (GAD) lens, the story critiques gender norms that equate a woman's value with physical allure. Latorena gives voice to a woman who, though silenced by society, resists invisibility by affirming her emotional and intellectual identity. Her quiet strength and awareness embody GAD's call for redefining womanhood, moving beyond superficial standards and asserting self-worth from within. In *Desire*, empowerment is subtle yet profound: a

woman reclaims her inner life in a world that refuses her. This act of self-affirmation aligns with both GA's vision for equality and R.A. 9262 for psychological dignity.

The Magnificence by Estrella Alfon

Estrella Alfon's *The Magnificence* is a striking short story that captures a moment of attempted child abuse and the swift, powerful response of a mother who refuses to be powerless in the face of danger. Told from a child's point of view, the story builds tension through the deceptively kind and generous behavior of a family friend, Vicente, whose predatory intent is revealed in a disturbing yet understated scene. However, what gives the story its title *The Magnificence* is not the act of violence, but the quiet strength of the mother who, without dramatics, restores a sense of safety and order, asserting her protective authority.

In relation to the Anti-VAWC Law, this fiction presents a direct representation of sexual violence, one of the forms of abuse the law explicitly seeks to prevent and punish. Vicente's attempts to take advantage of the young girl in their own home, highlight the hidden, domestic nature of abuse that the law aims to expose and address. Furthermore, a mother's reaction shows how empowered women can act as first responders to violence, making choices that protect their children and challenge the culture of silence surrounding abuse.

From the GAD's perspective, the mother figure in the fiction represents the kind of female empowerment that the GAD program envisions, the one rooted in agency, decision-making, and the ability to uphold the well-being of the family and community. She is not dependent on a male authority to confront the abuser; she does so herself, showing that women can be protectors and leaders. This affirms GAD's value of modeling strong, capable women for future generations. Moreover, the mother in the fiction does not need to scream, yet her authority is intrinsic, her anger righteous, her power evident. In this way, Alfon's work, though written a long time ago, aligns with the goals of R.A. 9262 and GAD: to recognize the strength in women, protect the vulnerable, and cultivate a society where violence is addressed not with fear, but with firm, deliberate action.

The Virgin by Kerima Polotan-Tuvera

Kerima Polotan-Tuvera's *The Virgin* takes the readers into the silent, internal world of Miss Mijares, a thirty-four-year-old woman who has lived a life defined by duty, control, and emotional repression. This narrative is a powerful exploration of the unspoken burdens carried by women who are expected to remain pure, sacrificial, and emotionally subdued in a society shaped by patriarchal expectations. Moreover, Ms. Mijares' emotional martyrdom leads her to live in an environment that psychologically conditions women to equate self-sacrifice with virtue.

From the Anti-VAWC Law point of view, Miss Mijares's experience may not involve physical or overt emotional abuse. Still, her internal conflict reveals signs of psychological violence, a form of harm recognized in the law. Section 3 of 9262 states that psychological violence includes acts that cause mental and emotional suffering, along with intimidation, humiliation, and denial of dignity.

This fiction closely aligns with the principles of GAD, particularly in its critique of unequal gender roles and the limited emotional spaces women are allowed to occupy.

GAD challenges the idea that women should conform to passive, nurturing roles while denying themselves personal growth, fulfillment, and sexual agency. In this context, Ms. Mijares' internal monologue and eventual act of giving in to her desire can be interpreted as a form of resistance, a moment where she steps outside of the constraints imposed upon her by a gendered society. Her vulnerability and choices mark a shift, however subtle, toward self-awareness and empowerment. Although her actions may be ambiguous, the significance lies in the reclaiming of her body and emotions, which mirrors GAD's goal of allowing women to live freely and authentically. By presenting a protagonist who dares to confront her long-suppressed needs, even in a fleeting moment. Here, the author offers a nuanced portrayal of female empowerment not in grand gestures, but in deeply personal defiance.

1. Characterization

The four selected short fictions, namely: **Dead Stars** by Paz Marquez-Benitez, **Desire** by Paz Latorena, **Magnificence** by Estrella Alfon, and **The Virgin** by Kerima Polotan-Tuvera, have characters depicted as empowered women. The women in the short fiction express different personalities as decent, strong, level-headed non-conformist, determined, decisive, efficient, literal-minded, desirous, resourceful, strong, protective, courageous, astute, defensive, brave, frank, straightforward, workaholic.

The protagonists in the short fiction never adhere to the traditional role; rather, they assertively express their choices and decisions, conveying that women have potential and are fueled with a strong sense of character.

2. Empowered Events in the Plot

The empowered events are emphasized from the beginning to the middle to the ending of the four selected short fictions. The women exemplify empowerment by facing valiantly the dilemmas they met. Every woman in the four selected fictions exhibited determination, courage, independence, and intelligence in battling against the brutalities and dominance of men.

3. Empowering Themes

The four short fictions of Filipino lady writers break the stereotype that women are weak, submissive, and helpless individuals. The fictions disclose that women, even in the early years, use their expertise and know-how against male ascendancy and control.

Generally, the short fictions “*Dead Stars*” by Paz Marquez-Benitez, “*Desire*” by Paz Latorena, “*The Magnificence*” by Estrella Alfon, and “*The Virgin*” by Kerima Polotan-Tuvera portray nuanced journeys of Filipino women from silence and constraint to awakening and empowerment. Reading through the lens of RA 9262, known as the Anti-VAWC Law, these literary pieces reveal how literature anticipates or echoes the law’s advocacy for the recognition, protection, and assertion of women’s rights against various forms of violence, either physical, emotional, or psychological violence. Literature is not merely a reflection of reality; it is also a potent vehicle for critique, resistance, and transformation. Through fiction, writers expose hidden truths, challenge oppressive societal norms, and amplify the voices of the marginalized. The four short fictions of Filipina authors - **Dead Stars** by Paz Marquez-Benitez, **Desire** by Paz Latorena, **The Magnificence** by Estrella Alfon, and **The Virgin** by Kerima Polotan-Tuvera -vividly portray the nuanced experiences of women, highlighting their emotional struggles, inner conflicts, and moments of empowerment amid patriarchal constraints. These narratives defy the long-held perception that Filipino women in earlier decades were submissive and silently endured their suffering due to dependence on men. Instead, they reveal women asserting agency, voicing resistance, and promoting their rights. In this light, the literary texts do more than tell stories; they become culturally embedded and socially relevant instruments that advocate for gender justice. By reflecting the very issues RA 9262 aims to address, literature contributes to the broader discourse on women’s rights and supports the continuing struggle for gender equality in both private and public spheres.

CONCLUSIONS

Literature has remained a vital component of academic learning across centuries as it imparts universal themes and socio-cultural values that shape students’ perspectives. In light of this, it is a must that literature teachers include more literary works written by Filipina authors that focus on women’s issues and lived experiences. These narratives often reflect themes of empowerment, resistance, identity, and social inequality, which are crucial in fostering gender sensitivity and awareness among learners. Moreover, discussions of such texts should be aligned with Gender and Development (GAD) principles and contextualized within the framework of Republic Act 9262, or the Anti-Violence Against Women and Their Children Act. Integrating these elements in literature classes not only enhances literary appreciation but also promotes critical consciousness and advocacy for gender justice. Through this approach, students can better understand the socio-political realities faced by women and become more engaged in efforts to combat gender-based violence and uphold human rights.

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