

**Subverting Zsazsa Zaturannah: A Critical Analysis on the Gender Representations on Carlo Vergara's "Ang Kagila-gilalas na Pakikipagsapalaran ni Zsazsa Zaturannah" ("The Spectacular Adventures of Zsazsa Zaturnah")**

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**Abstract**

When Carlo Vergara's graphic novel, "*Ang Kagila-gilalas na Pakikipagsapalaran ni Zsazsa Zaturannah*" was published independently in 2002, it surfaced as an unexpected hit, gaining positive reviews from both mass audiences and critics alike. With its popularity, the graphic novel has been adapted to a film in 2006, garnering acting awards for its openly gay actor who portrayed the main character, Ada, an effeminate male homosexual who has a superhero alter ego, Zsazsa Zaturannah. Vergara's use of a bakla, a stereotyped effeminate male homosexual in the Philippines, has been celebrated as a fresh treatment - a repackaging of the gay persona. The bakla as portrayed by Zsazsa Zaturannah, a strong character with supernatural strength, is claimed as Vergara's way of "un-stereotyping" the stereotype. It has been created to serve as an attack to the common representation of gays by the Philippine media: drag, swishy, funny and weak. Using textual analysis, with gay and queer theories as frameworks, the paper seeks to figure out whether the creative work are aligned to Vergara's objective of representing the male homosexuals in a better light. Is the transformation enough to claim that the material is a reinvention of gay portrayal or did things remain only in the skin-level?

The Filipino *komiks*<sup>1</sup>, once hailed as the most popular print medium as it gained the highest readership level than newspapers, tabloids, magazines and other print forms combined (Mendoza, 1992:1) suffered a decline since the early 1990s as the television and the Internet replaced it as more popular forms of entertainment (Francisco, 2007:12). Once a well-established industry, majority of publications that offered “cheap, portable, accessible, easy to read, emotionally and psychologically gratifying” (Mendoza, 1992:3) *komiks* halt their operations, sending aspiring creators to publish their *komiks* all by themselves (Francisco, 2007:12).

It was until December 2002 when Carlo Vergara independently published the comic book, “Ang Kagila-gilalas na Pakikipagsapalaran ni Zsazsa Zaturannah” (“The Amazing Adventures of Zsazsa Zaturannah”) through Alamat Comics. The comic book (although the author would much prefer to call the book a graphic novel or *grafiction*<sup>2</sup> due to its length)<sup>3</sup> then has to accept an unanticipated sensation from both audience and critics alike and was noted as probably the last most popular superhero comic to date. Its circulation has catered for a larger readership with a publishing house, Visual Print Enterprises, now backing it up. It even received a National Book Award for Comic Books from the Manila Critics’ Circle in 2003.

The success of *Zsazsa Zaturannah* attempts to rekindle and reinvent the concept of a superhero in comic books with a prying implication. The brainchild of *Zsazsa Zaturannah*, writer and artist, **Carlo Vergara**, created a persona which no one has ever attempted in the Philippine comic book scene before: a superhero which germinated from a ‘*bakla*’<sup>4</sup>.

The first superhero in comics was introduced in 1938 by writer Jerry Siegel and illustrator Joe Shuster through **Superman**, a character which later spawned the creation of myriad other superheroes, most of which are patterned from Superman’s characterization: an identity gifted with human powers hidden beneath colorful costumes

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<sup>1</sup>*Komiks* is the Tagalog equivalent term for *comic books* or *comics*.

<sup>2</sup>*Grafiction* is short for graphic fiction.

<sup>3</sup>Interview with Carlo Vergara, 28 September 2007.

<sup>4</sup>*Bakla* is a generic Filipino term used to refer the effeminate homosexual male.

who keeps the ideal of being “the embodiment of the good, noble and just.” (Buluran, 1986:22)

In the Philippines, Mars Ravelo, hailed as the Dean of Filipino comics, created **Darna** in the 1950s, the first and the most popular superhero in the country, leading to the proliferation and popularization of other local superheroes such as Captain Barbell and Lastikman (both also by Ravelo). Early Filipino superheroes, however, were derived from American superheroes (Ibid.:4). Darna is actually an amalgamation of the distinct characteristics of two other American superheroes: her appearance and power derived from that of Wonder Woman, and her young girl alter ego is relative to the young boy alter ego of Captain Marvel (Flores, 2005:26).

Vergara’s *Zsazsa Zaturannah* paid homage to Ravelo’s Darna: both superheroes share physical (strong and beautiful superheroes clothed in revealing skimpy two-piece outfits) and the ideal (to side on the poor, weak and defenseless against the evil) characteristics. Darna in *human* state is Narda, a little orphan girl who was bestowed by the power of the magical stone which she pops inside her mouth and screams “*Darna!*” to transform to Darna. *Zsazsa*, on the other hand, is Ada, a lonely *effeminate* homosexual male (a *bakla*), a hair stylist and proprietor of a beauty salon, who becomes *Zsazsa* every time he swallows a lumpy rock the size of a fist, then screaming “*Zaturannah!*” after. The transformation should be noted as not as simple as changing from human to superhuman form, but also of an instantaneous alteration of the biological sex of a male to female.

Enrique Angeles tackled the gay in his thesis by asking why the Filipino finds the effeminate homosexual terribly funny as indicated through its representation by not only in the *komiks* but also in other media forms as well (1969:14). In a published interview with Ruel De Vera (2004), Vergara indicates his intention “to repackage the gay persona, giving it a few twists here and there, which veer from the way conventional media portrays homosexuality” by “reinventing” the tried-and-tested formula of gays: the stereotype.

Here in the Philippines, we familiarize ourselves to the idea of a gay as the effeminate, the cross-dresser, the loud *parlorista*, the gossip writer – the *bakla* – thus is the stereotype gay. Vergara’s aim in creating *Zsazsa Zaturannah* is the un-stereotyping the stereotype gay (Ibid.), to make a personal attack on how the media portrays the

homosexual by using a stereotype – a cross-dressing beautician – as its central character. The fact that stereotypes does exist, they must be represented in a new dimension, away from what the people normally perceive them<sup>5</sup>: hence, and the allusion of a “gay superhero”.

How does Vergara un-stereotyped the stereotype in *Zsazsa Zaturannah* by the way? I think it all lies down to the fact – or assumption - that *Zsazsa* is considered as the first “gay superhero” in the history of Filipino comics after decades of gays being basically humorized or lamented by the mass media. And since *Zsazsa* emerged from the identity of a stereotype gay, it probably made a difference by giving its readers a different approach to look at gays, that even the swardspeaking *bakla* are passable as strong superheroes.

Since we are talking about stereotypes, it would be much easier to arrive to a point by defining it. According to Bierhoff, the stereotype is “a set of *opinions* about the personal attributes of members of a definable social group.” (Bierhoff, 1989:108) Bierhoff cited Ashmore and DelBoca’s definition of it as “a set of *beliefs* about the personal attributes a group of people.” (1989:109) Beliefs and opinions: terms that signify constructions that we accept without even questioning why a certain group is represented by the acceptable representation because it has been naturalized by the society. The stereotypes themselves would even accept their being a stereotype because that’s what they think they really are, and they believe that they can’t contend with the setup because that what’s already engraved for them in this life. Defining a group through stereotyping however can yield negative effects, because what lies in every group is another set of members who totally deviate from the typical norms that the society has produced.

Apart from the physical representations of gays (I’ve been using this generic term for most parts of this chapter. As this study goes on, other terminologies will be used according to their significance) which is the effeminate and the cross dresser, a gay is always discerned as a woman trapped in a man’s body, and this man has always an aspiration of becoming a woman, definitely not true for all gays.

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Carlo Vergara, 28 September 2007.

Zsazsa Zaturannah is interesting because it succeeded in making it appear to subvert the image of the stereotype gay: the gay, whom we always recognize as weak but loud, can actually be typified in a strong image of a superhero. Is this representation of gayness enough to say that it veers away from the stereotype? Is Zsazsa Zaturannah, a biological female who transmorphed from an identity of a gay, can even be accurately classified as gay?

Probably we should start all the way from the roots of what does it really mean to be homosexual, gay, queer, transgender, transsexual and the other terms that lie in this continuum, discuss on their similarities and differences and what they are really fighting for. My own understanding of un-stereotyping the gay is to liberate them, to empower them, and this can only be achieved through the realization of the gay's aspirations on their positionality in this society.

This textual analysis of a graphic novel which has been very successful for its own good, which has traversed to a number of adaptations – from being the stage musical which has been staged the most number of times by a theater group<sup>6</sup> to a film which garnered a number of citations and awards<sup>7</sup>, would want to challenge the author and the readers' view on the gay milieu. It is focused just on the *written texts*, the dialogues alone and not on the visuals, since I believe that these words are the primary movers of the

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<sup>6</sup> After five stagings and a total of 59 shows from February 10, 2006 to March 5, 2007, Zsazsa Zaturannah: Ze Muzikal has been the musical which has been staged by Tanghalang Pilipino the most number of times. Credits include Chris Martinez (stage adaptation), Vincent de Jesus (musical direction) and Chris Millado (stage direction). Eula Valdez, who played the title role of Zsazsa Zaturannah won Best Stage Actress for a Musical at the 2006 Awit Awards.

<sup>7</sup> Zsazsa Zaturannah: Ze Movee, directed by Joel Lamangan was released under Regal Films, Inc. on December 25, 2006 as part of the Metro Manila Film Festival. Rustom Padilla, who played Ada, won Best Lead Actor in Gawad Urian and Gawad Tanglaw. Chokoleit, who played Didi, won a Best Supporting Actor award from Gawad Tanglaw.

whole story. It seeks to dig profoundly, swerve from what is invented skin-deep representations of gay in the media, and how this supposed advocacy of a novel to liberate gays is actually keeping them into the same big box it used to envision to tear down. In what way did *Zsazsa Zaturannah*, as a gay graphic novel, liberate the gays/*bakla*? Or does it even liberate at all?

My take on *Zsazsa Zaturannah* could be a very different one, a 180-degree turn from how the writer and probably, the majority of the readers treat the novel: the birth of a new gay icon, gay empowerment, funny, hilariously... gay. My subversion to it is the same way on how *Zsazsa* subverted its own point to un-stereotype the stereotype and to the ideals of the queer and gay theories, the frameworks that I've been basing my study upon.

### ***Zsazsa Zaturannah*: Summarized**

Ada, a lonely effeminate homosexual male (*bakla*), works as a beautician in a beauty parlor where he is also the proprietor. He has to make a big decision in his life after a lump of stone, the size of a fist with the initials, ZATURNNAH engraved on it, fell in his shower room. Didi, Ada's flamboyant gay (*bakla*) assistant and bestfriend, challenges him to swallow the stone just like what's being done in the comics. Persuaded by Didi, Ada swallowed the stone then screams "Zaturannah!" which transformed him to a beautiful woman with supernatural strength (minus the ability of flight), a feature of her (his) new identity that Didi discovered. Didi then named Ada's alter ego, *Zsazsa Zaturannah*, and clothed her (him) in a skimpy, revealing outfit (inspired by Ravelo's *Darna*). To their surprise, *Zsazsa Zaturannah* lost Ada's ability to style and cut hair, leading them to think that *Zsazsa* and *Ada* are two separate entities with one identity.

As absurdity seems come to play, a giant frog invaded their town which *Zsazsa Zaturannah* fought and defeated, thus led to Didi and herself (himself) to use her (his) powers to fight against the evil instead of the original idea of showcasing her (his) supernatural strength in a carnival, which Didi first propose to earn money (capitalizing on *Zsazsa*'s superhuman strength). The giant frog's existence is actually Queen Femina

Suarestellar Baroux's instigation, alongside her set of Amazonistas from Planet XXX: Sharon C., Dina B., Nora A., and Vilma S.

She is actually impressed with Zsazsa as a warrior but questioned her placement in an area where "male forms" thrive in abundance. Deep inside her is a mission to colonize their land. Zsazsa showed her (his) ignominy with Queen Femina's thrust and instead agreed to face her to a new challenge.

Zsazsa and Didi had the first chance to meet Dodong in the cemetery as they wait for the next challenge by Queen Femina. Ada seems to like Dodong from the start, but he chose not to talk with him perhaps for the fear of rejection which he experienced from a former affair. Dodong praised Zsazsa for the successfully defeating the giant frog. The conversation was directing on the right track when the undead started to left their grave and infest the whole town. A zombie punched Zsazsa on the nape during their fight, causing the stone to forcefully come out of her (his) mouth, thus the revelation to Dodong that Ada is Zsazsa's alter ego. Ada commanded Didi and Dodong to direct the whole community to evacuate and stay at the church while he fights against the zombies as Zsazsa. In her battle against the zombies, Zsazsa met her (his) father who has never accepted her for being *bakla*. She (he) told him that she has always loved him no matter what but her the father decided to end his life for the second time disarraying from reconciliation. Zsazsa undermined the rejection and continued fighting the zombies, now with the cooperation of the people in the community which led to the successful obliteration of the zombies.

Dodong asked Zsazsa if he can ask for the stone so he will be the one to fight against the Amazonista, emphasizing his concern to Ada. Zsazsa disproves with the idea, telling Dodong that his prevailing subtext that gays don't know how to fight afloat. Dodong left frustrated telling Zsazsa that he has no other intentions but to help.

Zsazsa and Queen Femina met on their last fight, Queen Femina revealed that the reason behind their anger against men (the male forms) is deeply rooted from the violence that the men did them in the Planet XXX which has caused them their freedom and near extinction. She recalled that on her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, she stood up and fight for the rights of the women in their planet, leading the massacre of the male forms. She told

Zsazsa that she just executed the same form of violence that she witnessed and experienced from the male forms that's why she offered them the same method.

Queen Femina proves to be a tough villain as Zsazsa had a hard time defeating her. Didi was almost killed when Queen Femina aimed a bullet on his chest but was luckily saved. The battle ended when Zsazsa can't handle Queen Femina and the Amazonista's "hypocrisy" on their hatred against the men because she (he) can't get the point of hating men while at the same time referring on men's violent ways to achieve their goal for female domination. She (he) revealed her (his) true biological sex, causing raucous to the Amazonistas. He threw the stone away, aimed directly at Queen Femina's mouth. While trying to answer the Amazonistas inquiry on who is the man in a female costume, Queen Femina's answered that the man is none other than Zaturannah. The utterance of the word caused her to transform to a pig with a body of a man. The Amazonistas tried to destroy the creature, causing them to retreat from the earth and return to Planet XXX.

Ada, now with the absence of his alter ego, returned to his normal life as a beautician and decided to move to Manila because living in the town proves too hard for him to handle. In a surprise, Dodong came and pledged his love to Ada, asked his permission for courtship, and a proposal to live with him. Ada, delighted with the proposal affirmed to all the questions and looked forward for a happy life with Dodong in their place of destination.

### **The "Derealized" Being**

What's a gay? How can one answer this question without referring to its widely viewed clue: a man's swishy persona, or more the least, his effeminacy? With that focal quality in mind, gays are much more accountable for being a "subgroup" or "minority" being guffawed at by the society for breaking the norms of the way a "real man" should live according to the roles related to being a male – the macho way. Gays have been ridiculed for not conforming to what the biological male's roles are.

In the opening scene of “Zsazsa Zaturannah,” a first-person narration of Ada, the main character of this graphic novel, makes a synonymy between the absurdities of life and his being gay or *bakla*:

*Ada: Sa buhay, may mga pangyayaring hindi natin maipaliwanag. Ang pagsabay ng buhos ng ulan at sikat ng araw. Ang pag-aaway ng aso’t pusa. Ang paglaho ng inasahang walang kamatayang pag-ibig. Gayunpaman, tuloy-tuloy ang buhay. Minsa’y hindi mahalagang malaman pa ang dahilan. Basta nangyayari na lang. Tapos. Tulad ko. Iling taon ko nang iniisip kung bakit malambot ang galaw ko. Kung bakit matinis ang aking boses. Kung bakit **hindi ako... normal** (my emphasis). Balde-baldeng luha na ang aking naiyak dahil dito. Nguni’t sa dulo, tinanggap ko na. Bakla ako.*

Ada: [In life there are a lot of events that can’t be explained. The rain falling while the sun is striking hot. The quarrelling of cats and dogs. An unexpected loss of supposed passionate love. Life however continues to move on. To know the reasons sometimes aren’t necessary at all. Things just happen the way they are. That’s it. Just like me. I’ve been thinking for years why I act so soft. Why I have a high-pitched voice. Why I am **not... normal** (my emphasis). I’ve cried a lot of tears thinking about it but I just accepted myself in the end. I’m gay.]

It’s notable how Ada describes becoming *bakla*, an effeminate male homosexual, as something that can’t be explained, not definitely a choice but a force of nature. The element of choice lies on his acceptance to his being a *bakla*, his coming out to himself after a long time of struggle of questioning. However, his self-approval should also mean embracing the *construct* that the *bakla* - and gays in particular, in our context – are not normal, an affirmation on how the society’s culture looks at gays and how gays understand themselves.

Let’s start first by discussing on the *social construction* that defined our gender. When we say that gender is constructed, it means that our understanding of the masculine/feminine is just created by our social group hence, the lifelong belief that men

are expected to act “masculine”, the same way that women have to be “feminine”. Feminists have been the first to point out, due to the eminent patriarchal culture that “any differences between men and women, beyond the strictly biological, are the products of culture and history”(Eipstein, 1992:242-243). Thus, women were ordered to stay and keep their family’s houses, bereft on the right to study and to work in the industry, weren’t permitted to lead on organizations and experienced a number of discriminations in various functions, as the result of a patriarchy that despite constructed has naturalized its relations.

Why in the first place gays are not normal for the eyes of many? The issue here is the generalized notion of the gays’ non-conformity to the supposed gender role of their biological sex. The most popular notion of a gay is that he is a man per se who regards and identifies himself as a woman, (a woman in a man’s body). Why refer “gay” to effeminate males alone in the first place whereas “gay” is actually the general term for the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) community? (Yes, even lesbians are referred as gays too). It was believed then that men who are sexually attracted to other men were actually female souls trapped in male bodies. Second, not all gays follows like and aspires to be that of the other sex, as opposed to what people generally familiarize themselves with their knowledge about gays. In the Philippine context, the most common representation of the gay is the *bakla*, which denotes an identity which is effeminate and sexually oriented toward other males. According to J. Neil Garcia, a gay writer who has devoted a significant research on Philippine gay culture, the *bakla* is oppressed because of his “being not simply effeminate and not truly female or feminine, and not a real woman either. In this equation, the *bakla* finally emerges as a doubly *derealized* being – that is unreal and/or a joke” (1998:53)

J. Neil Garcia added that *bakla* doesn’t necessarily mean *homosexual*, a term that relates to sexual orientation (1998:63). In other words, a masculine man who is sexually attracted to another man is not *bakla* if he isn’t effeminate and doesn’t cross dress, while a *bakla* is a male *homosexual* who is effeminate. He also mentioned that the word *gay* comes closer to homosexual in definition, as masculine males would rather call themselves gay than *bakla*. (Since a *bakla* is a male homosexual or gay male, I may still refer Ada and Didi through the term “gay” throughout the course of this study).

The media's usual representation of the male homosexual is through the use of the *bakla*, classic examples are the characters, Fefita Fofonggay, Facifica Falayfay (Both of which started as comics created by Mars Ravelo before they were adapted to movies; both the lead roles were played by Dolphy) Roda and Petrang Kabayo, characters who opened doors to a number of gay characters that proliferated on print, television and films. The treatment of the *bakla* has always been comical and dismissive, and most of the times, demeaning, rising up to the problem of the gay's representation. John Philips emphasizes the implication of the way we represent things: "in a sea of images, representation has in so many respects conditioned our view of the real to the point where it can actually replace it" (Philips, 2006:166-167).

Ada: *Maraming tanong hindi na mahalaga ang kasagutan. Ako si Ada. Isang bskla. Yun lang.*

Ada: [There's a lot of questions which need not be answered. I'm Ada. I'm gay. That's just it.]

In the line above, Ada exclusively shut the door in discovering more about his identity, totally accepting himself to become a gay beautician not just because it's the only way that he can render service to his community but because he was boxed inside the construct of a stereotype as a result of an "absence of more accurate self-representations" of himself (Garcia, 1998:2). Through Vergara's representation of Ada, he has reestablished the stereotype "in one's consciousness as truthful, and so they end up becoming part of the ideological apparatuses whose singular purpose is to effectively maintain the present gender" (Ibid.).

A pole apart from Ada is his best friend, Didi, a more raucously loud *bakla*, When a big lump of stone fell down in Ada's shower room, Didi pushed Ada's limits by convincing him to swallow the stone just for the fun of it and scream the word engraved on the stone. Ada thought the idea is ridiculous at first but Didi commented:

Didi: *Ada, tayo ay bading. Para sa karamihan nakakahiya na tayo anuman ang gawin natin kaya huwag natin silang biguin. Lingid sa kaalaman nila nakukuha*

*natin ang ating tanyag na lakas sa pagpapakapal ng mukha. Itaguyod ang bandera sis.*

Didi: [Ada, we are gays. Everything that we do is a shame for most people so let's not fail their expectations. What they didn't know is we get our strength through our guts. Let's wave and be proud, Sis]

Didi can actually be considered the more empowered *bakla* as exemplified by his pride of being one. While Ada resorts to live like a stereotype and accepts himself as it is, Didi actually tries to live himself through the same stereotype and comment on the society who boxed the identity of the *bakla*. What makes Didi an equally interesting character is that he has acted more than a sidekick but a key to a lot of discoveries that Ada wouldn't have known by himself. His intelligence and keenness are notable: without him Ada wouldn't have become a woman; that the woman wouldn't have learned that she (he) embodies supernatural strength; that Ada's alter ego wouldn't have been named Zsazsa Zaturannah. Upon realization, the story wouldn't have moved without the presence of Didi. The problem is that Didi's positionality in the story as a supporting character disguised him to be just like that – a supporting character that helps the satisfaction of the dominating idea of a *bakla* who wants to become a woman and his supposed liberation was overshadowed. In the scene when Ada transformed into a biological female, Ada displayed her happiness:

*Zsazsa: Didi!! Babae Akooh!!*

*Didi: Gaga! Isa kang baklahhh...*

Zsazsa: [Didi!! I'm a girl!]

Didi: [Fool! You're a gay...]

This throwing of lines is Didi's reminder to the female Ada that her (his) identity remains the same despite the physical change. Or didn't it actually change?

## Changing the Pronoun

Ada, as I said, is a *bakla*, and being one is an implication of him being a transgender. As a transgender, his gender identity is more closely associated with the other primary gender (Perry et. al., 2004:30), without actually the desire of *becoming* that sex. He feels that he is a woman trapped in a man's body, which tells that he is in any way, feminine from the very start. His being a transgender is more supported for him being a transvestite, as he dresses like a woman, and adopts the identified behavior of a woman while maintaining a closer alignment to the sex role identity of a female (Ibid.:30-31). With the swallowing of the stone Ada didn't just change his sex, his femininity has achieved its ultimate high and he discovered enjoyment through his newfound confidence as a woman. There is a problem with the use of my terminologies here because suddenly I realized that I might be wrong to categorize him as transgender at this phase.

When Ada became a woman, can she now be referred as a *transsexual*? In his book, John Philips cited Judith Butler regarding transsexuality as not transgender at all (2006:11-12). She reiterates that it is “a disturbance to the ‘performativity’ of gender” a broken rule in her claims that gender identities are a ‘doing’ and not a ‘being.’ Butler added that transsexuality is not merely a transformation of gender but of sex, an adherence to the heterosexist hegemony, and is not queer at all (I will discuss more about queer theory as we go in with the discussion). “Transsexuals can so strongly identify with the other primary sex's biology that he or she may elect to have *sex-change surgeries along with hormone and psychological therapies* (my emphasis)” (Perry, 2004:30).

The big question here is that since the procedures indicated above are required to refer that somebody is transsexual, can we consider Ada/Zsazsa as such? We can hardly think of Ada as a pre-operational transsexual and Zsazsa Zaturannah as the post-operational transsexual because first and foremost, the process that Ada undergoes does not qualify of his becoming a female, and second Ada's desire *to become a female* isn't that portrayed before the change. In this conversation where Didi teases Ada to their neighbor Dodong near the opening part of the novel, Ada even accepts that he is not a woman: a statement however that doesn't mean he doesn't act like (or aspires to be) one.

Didi: *Padenay-denay ka pa riyan. Kung alam ko lang nage-elesi na and matres mo.*

Ada: *Hindi ako babae, Didi.*

Didi: Don't deny anymore. If I just know , your ovaries are turning like windmills right now.

Ada: I'm not a woman. Didi.

Ada's transformation isn't a permanent impact at all because he can freely transfer from one body (repossessing his identity) to another if he needs or wants it. Ada becomes Zsazsa without the necessary procedures that I indicated above, only if we can treat the act of swallowing the stone as a symbolism for the extensive process of sex change. Considering the stone as a replacement for sex change, does this affirm that the *bakla* has an (subconscious) aspiration *to become female*?

Now I lead myself to another question: is a woman trapped in a man's body really a woman? Ada's identity does slide into the feminine side, the gender of the *bakla*. And taking into account that *Ada/Zsazsa could be* transsexual is another way of saying that the transformation of the biological sex leads to her becoming a *real* woman, now bearing both its biological sex and gender.

Or we could try to dismiss the idea of transsexuality and see how *Zsaza Zaturannah* employs the pattern of some superheroes with exact opposite alter egos: from a provincial young crippled girl Narda who transforms into a powerful woman (Darna) after popping a stone in her mouth and speaking a magical word; from a poor weak boy Enteng who upon lifting a barbell and shouting a magical word transforms into a strong muscular man (Captain Barbell); and here comes Ada, a *bakla*, who after swallowing a stone and shouting a magical word transforms into a powerful woman (*Zsaza Zaturannah*). Employing the concept of the alter ego, wherein "alter(ed)" means "modified" or "changed" and "ego" means "the self" then *Zsaza Zaturannah* is better defined as the physical modification of Ada's understanding of himself, a separate self indeed, just like Darna is a separate self of Narda and Captain Barbell is a separate self of Enteng.

Without resorting to thinking that Ada/Zsazsa is transsexual, then we have to start looking at them as two separate entities sharing the same identity. Ada is none other than a male who acts effeminately, in basic terms: *bakla*, still a **he**. Zsazsa Zaturannah, on the other hand, is an embodiment of Ada's feminine identity but is definitely a female, a **she**.

In the corollary, Vergara didn't create a gay superhero because Zsazsa Zaturannah is not gay at all; she is but a new female superhero whose alter ego is an effeminate male homosexual. The Zsazsa Zaturannah persona basically becomes a generalized representation of the fantasy of the *bakla* who becomes a reality in the world of Ada. It starkly shows how a *bakla* could possibly be empowered by becoming the woman that he dreams of being, a stand which may is not always be true for everyone in the gay community.

Probably Zsazsa Zaturannah's target niche is the *bakla*, but to say that it repackages the gay persona is a letdown of envision. My understanding of repackaging the gay persona is putting them in a position where they could reinvent themselves in the way that aren't misleading, and placing them in a new light that will veer them away from the stereotype.

### **Man-Haters Who Want To Become Like Men**

It's interesting how Queen Femina Suarestellar Baroux and her Amazonistas were represented in the novel as colonizers, whereas colonization is almost referred as a masculinizing project, since our constructions regarding to gender and sexuality, have been an influence from the West (Garcia, 1998: 91-93). A group of women from Planet XXX (in similarly revealing outfits such that of Zsazsa) arrived to invade the town. The purpose of their invasion has never been revealed but it shows that their main advocacy is of female dominion.

Zsazsa Zaturannah's triumph against the giant frog leads to Queen Femina's rather impressed response with Zsazsa's display of strength and the people's reception on her heroic act.

Queen Femina: Magnificent! Who would've thought that such a valiant female warrior could choose to live in a wretched place like this? And it seems that even your local male-forms applaud your triumph which is admirable but beware their deception.

The praise that Queen Femina gave to Zsazsa appeared to be genuine; emphasizing Zsazsa's being a powerful *female* and its correlation to her being a defender of a place where men (they call the men as "male forms") also thrive.

These women's purpose in taking over the land, despite undisclosed remains to raise my curiosity. Queen Femina in her narration of her history revealed the struggles that the women (she calls themselves "womyn") of her planet experienced after slowly getting their privileges in the government and the society. The men have been threatened by the women's increasing power, thus resulted to the mass abuse and massacre of the women up which cause their extinction. A few women were left, so that men can still breed. She grew up questioning her fate until the realization struck her, opened her eyes and staged a battle to stop their oppression from men, by castrating and killing them all.

To say that these women's campaign connects with the same ideology that feminism stands for may be even incongruous, but both did share the enlightenment of women to battle out *male* domination. Queen Femina and the Amazonistas' may have fall under the radical branch of feminism's aspiration for the separatism of gender, or the programmatic banishing of men to the female consciousness and the enshrining of women at the center of their own very energy and lives (Wilton, 1995:43-44) but they have pushed this concept a bit farther by the agitation for the literal and violent eradication of men. Whether the characterization of the Amazonistas is an exaggerated critique to or a misunderstanding of radical feminism is a major contention. Is this a way of saying that the radical feminists, in their pursuit to disestablish patriarchy would lead them to do things the way men do? Are these women feminists at all?

The Amazonistas, being the only representative of females in the graphic novel, were portrayed as if they actually aspire to become like men, embodying with them the convention of what is masculine, as it is told through Queen Femina's statement somewhere near the climax of her fight with Zsazsa Zaturannah. Queen Femina's

construction of the man is typified as nasty, violent, brute - and she is ready to embody these qualities to achieve domination. Then it just proves the “colonization as masculine” axiom: Queen Femina takes over the land to propagate masculinity, only that the masculine is personified in a woman.

Then it came to me: despite the fact that violence is very much appropriated to men, does it deemphasize a woman’s nature to be violent? Her attachment of violence as purely masculine is an adherence to the historical construction of men achieving power over women through violence. It seems that Queen Femina has attributed this trait so much to men that she religiously blames the men for her being violent as if men have taught women violence and women is never capable of being violent.

Queen Femina actually veers away from feminism. She doesn’t aim to empower women but she want to isolate them. She neither seeks for equality of men and women in the society nor did she fight against patriarchy, but actually stood for it, through embodying patriarchy through her female body with the vision of eradicating men completely so that she could be able to dominate. And feminism, in a radical sense, opposes patriarchy, not men. To equate radical feminism to man-hating is to assume that patriarchy and men are inseparable in principle (Lewis, 2007). One should always remember that both patriarchy and domination are just constructs which were made to be closely associated to men and the only way to revert the oppressing dangers of these concepts is to oppose them, not the people associated to them. One of the most significant scenes is when Zsazsa Zaturannah got fed up with Queen Femina in this statement:

Queen Femina: As I’ve said, it was the male-forms who taught us the art of *violence*. If we have to *act* like them to further our goals, then so be it (Vergara’s emphasis).

Zsazsa Zaturannah: *Ipokrita ka. Gusto mo palang tularan ang mga lalake. Baka mainggit ka sa ipapakita ko sa iyo.*

Queen Femina: [...]

Zsazsa Zaturannah: [You’re a hypocrite. You just want to be like men. You might get jealous if I let you see this.]

(Zsazsa then disgorges the stone out of her mouth).

Here arises a conflict between the philosophy of a woman who wants to be like a man (Queen Femina) and a man who wants to become a woman (Ada). In this stage of the story, both are already placed in the position where they are already in the fulfillment of their wants, however facing their disappointments that accompany their respective wants. Zsazsa Zaturannah's act of disgorging the stone and throwing it away posits a realization that there is an ambiguity in *Ada's* desire of becoming a woman, that in staying in the form of a woman that he can already attain any time he wishes to, he has to accept the fact that an image of a Queen Femina will have to materialize in his mind, the form of a woman that he has always liked of being, but in this woman is a woman who despite of her savage hatred of men, has a desire to be like men. Queen Femina's outrage upon learning that Zsazsa Zaturannah is actually an alter ego of a male form is a betrayal for her ideals that for a woman to be powerful, she has to inhibit the "nature" of a man, but the image in front of her is that of a man who has left his body to achieve strength in her becoming a woman, the identity which she's trying to depart away from.

An identity crisis suddenly afloat, ending the battle with the two women warriors both transforming into men. Ada returned to his original body after throwing away the stone, a choice that he made as a form of liberation of himself: that he doesn't have to become a woman to further whatever goal he has in mind as a *bakla*. Queen Femina transformed into a man with a head of a pig after Ada threw the stone in her mouth and forcefully went down to her esophagus. Her change caused raucous among the Amazonistas, causing them to beat her (him) down. According to Vergara, the pig's head symbolizes the male chauvinist pig, which is an actualization of the image that Queen Femina is actually aspiring to be.<sup>8</sup>

Vergara created a battle between two conflicting and extreme gender differences between a man who wants to become a woman (who really became a woman) with a desire to be loved and accepted (male but feminine transformed to female and feminine) and a woman who wants to be like man with a hunger to dominate (female but

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Carlo Vergara, 28 September 2007.

masculine). Despite the fact that Vergara continues to play with the emergences of constructions at this point, he represented them in a manner that showcased how these conventions of femininity and masculinity can lead to our possible misunderstanding of our positionality in this society.

Lest shall I not forget, what is the implication of Zsazsa defeating Queen Femina? Is this Ada/Zsazsa's direct opposition to patriarchy itself or just to the idea of women aspiring for their own patriarchy? Did Ada/Zsazsa have the chance to stand up against the gays' (or even the women's) oppression? The worst thing that I can think of if this whole battle scene is just a mere display of the good/bad dichotomy in superhero stories.

### **Just Another Heterosexual Romantic Story?**

Someone who would discover a "real man" or having a relationship with a *bakla* may assume that the real man accepts financial benefits from the *bakla*. In addition, the real man acts the role of the man and the *bakla* as the woman, patterning the relationship into the usual boyfriend/girlfriend, husband/wife partnership. This common way of thinking in homosexual relationships is further implied by Ada in his conversation with Didi regarding on the latter's suggestion to transfer to Manila instead of staying in the province for more opportunities:

Didi: *Malay mo, maging kostomer mo pa ang mga artista, makakuha ka pa ng boypren na mestisuhin*

Ada: *Hindi ko kailangan ng boypren, Uubusin lang nun ang kita ko.*

Didi: [Who knows, you'd have TV stars as customers, you might even get a white boyfriend.]

Ada: [I don't need a boyfriend. He'll just take all of my profits.]

It is therefore supported the impression that even the *bakla* themselves are aware that money could be the primary reason why these real men enter a (romantic) relationship

with them. These so-called real men need to be put into contention, especially on why the “real man” exists on a homosexual relationship, which is supposed to be, homosexual.

Ada’s yearning for the real man to love despite the number of times he denies that he is looking for one is nonetheless obvious all throughout the narrative. The only thing that keeps him from approaching the man he really desires is a traumatic ending of a romantic relationship with a man named Lester who was never introduced in the novel but was mentioned once during a dramatic dialogue between Zsazsa Zaturannah and Didi, when the latter received a gunshot from Queen Femina.

The man that covets Ada’s affection is Dodong, who exemplifies the image of the real man. He has the looks, the built and the body to die for, but unlike the typical masculine brute, he is gentle and nurturing. He even asked Zsazsa Zaturannah if he could have the stone, so that he would be the one to fight against the Amazonistas. In a mild interpretation, he asked for it because he’d like to take care of Ada, and he’s afraid that something bad will happen to him, comparing it to Zsazsa’s stark assumption that Dodong wants the stone because he undermines her capacity as an alter ego of a gay man. The difference with Dodong to other so-called real men is that he falls in love with Ada, without the economic benefits.

It’s difficult to understand for many that such kind of relationship will reach to actualization, even to Ada himself. The only thing that would stop relating this event to a mystery is to accept that Dodong, despite his macho physique and un-feminine acts is a homosexual himself, and that no one in Dodong and Ada’s homosexual relationship assumes the role of the man and the woman.

As it has been already mentioned in the previous discussions, homosexuality is simply a question of sexual orientation and not of gender and to say that Dodong is a homosexual yet is a masculine should not be debated otherwise. With Dodong who actually gets (sexually) attracted to and falls in love with another male, despite a stereotypical cross-dressing *bakla*, does affirm his being a homosexual. The fact that he resolves his love to Ada is a form of “coming out” to himself

To look at Dodong and Ada’s relationship as that of a “real man” and a *bakla* will fall it under a heteronormative, despite homosexual, type of relationship which is heavily laden with the patriarchy’s gender norms. This traditional view of homosexuality,

according to J. Neil Garcia, “is as oppressive as it is heterosexist: underlying the identities and relations of the *bakla* and the real man is the symbolic distinction between the roles of a dominant male and a dominated female” (1998:55). I share with Garcia’s advocacy of liberating gayness by veering away from the cultural hegemony, that by “getting the *bakla* realize that they are indeed physically male and that therefore they don’t actually need a real man to love them because they too, are just real and manly as he is” (1998:174) I will however approximate his statement which is directed only to the *bakla* but for all the people in the gay community to reject the idea of domination where oppression is next in the continuum. For a gay to think of himself as not real is a reaffirmation to the society’s dictation of what (who) is real and what (who) is not.

Ada’s unquestionable yearning for a real man that has been consistent from beginning to end thus proves that he’s not yet ready to step away from the conventions attributed to his being a *bakla*. While there’s nothing wrong with the Ada-Dodong relationship (which I believe is the best thing that happened in this book, despite predictable) it could have been an irrevocably homosexual love and rise as a challenge to the heteronormative.

### **Queer or Anti-Queer and Conclusion**

There is a big misconception that a gay reading of texts is equally a queer one. Well, queer ideology did root from gay/lesbian studies that focused largely on questions on homosexuality. Queer theory however expands its realm of investigation by critiquing, looking at a political stand on anything that falls under the normative and deviant categories, particularly sexual activities and identities. Queer theory rejects the constructed essentialism of sexuality. It promotes the idea that gender is broad, fluid and ever-changing, that gender is a performance: a doing, not a being (according to Judith Butler), that the idea of socially correct masculine and feminine must be dissolved (Basu, 2004:60). To put it short, queers are people “who do not organize their sexuality according to the rubric of heterosexual procreative monogamy” (Benshoff: 2004:1)

Queer theory criticizes gay theory’s look at the issue of homosexual liberation as one of securing minority status and “equal rights.” J. Neil Garcia cited Simon Watney, a

British AIDS activist and queer thinker, that homosexuals are a distinct species of people that should not be labeled as minority because they have guaranteed rights (1998:111).

So does the book advocate queerness? As I have said earlier, queer does not necessarily mean that it is gay. Garcia even noted that queer may not even be gay in the sense that queer doesn't suffer from the paranoia of having a "symmetrically opposite twin: straight" (1998:113). Queer climbs up the heights by embracing our uniqueness and not putting ourselves into conventions. I'm actually thinking that my purpose of this whole research is to advocate queerness, that I may have already had a queer reading in my discussion on the themes of *Zsazsa Zaturannah* in respect to my encouragement for the gay community to think and criticize their positionality in this society and do the move that will take them away from oppression.

So, who among the characters in *Zsazsa Zaturannah* queer? Or is there anyone who falls under the category? Ada, the stereotypical *bakla* isn't queer because he accepts his identity and homosexuality as well as he accepts and lives with the constructs that the society has labeled into his being a *bakla*. His transformation to a woman (as *Zsazsa Zaturannah*) after swallowing a magical stone is definitely not queer, because whether we accept it not a symbolism to transsexual transformation (which is totally rejected by queer theory because it is a cross of sex and not of gender) but of a mystical transmorphication, it sticks to the convention that a *bakla* dreams of becoming a woman, which is not always the case.

Ada did make a queer act in terms of his fantasy to become a woman when he threw away the stone that gives him the power to be a woman and decided to remain as *bakla*, without taking away his effeminate qualities. However, to remain *bakla*, he puts himself again under the category of a woman in his relationship with Dodong, whom he always sees as a real man. Dodong and Ada's relationship is physically queer *and* homosexual, taking away the idea that a romantic angle between a *bakla* and a real man can only be a factor economics, but Ada enters it as an ideally heteronormative couple.

Didi isn't queer despite his pride of being a stereotypical cross-dressing *bakla* because just like Ada, he remains on the continuum that the society is expecting for the *bakla*. Probably, he's being a sidekick puts him into a negative position in the story while

it's on its peak, regardless of his big contribution on the earlier parts. In short, his character did not germinate.

Queen Femina and the Amazonistas aren't lesbians, feminists and especially not queers. They don't embrace femininity to empower themselves but they fuel their aspiration to dominate through inhabiting masculinity in their ideology. Their awakening from oppression took them a different turn to become oppressors and their sticking on the conventions, by looking at masculinity as a source of power defeat the ideology of queer. Queerness doesn't aspire for domination but of equal footing of the people in the society.

Dodong is a butch homosexual whose character is distinctively queer from beginning to end. Unlike Didi whose character suddenly faded away and left us his traces of conventionality, Dodong's character remained a mystery until we reached his final blow in the end, revealing that he actually loves Ada. If observed properly, he didn't tried hard to keep his manly behavior all throughout (because if a homosexual doesn't act *bakla* at all, he is *pa-men*, *nagpapakalalaki*, trying hard to act like a man, and is always perceived as hiding his homosexuality) because it appears that he is confident of what and who he is and he doesn't need to conform with what the society's dictations. He came out of the closet, despite the queer's disapproval to the forceful outing of homosexuals (which I agree upon), but since he did it out of his *voluntariness* to declare his love for Ada, he remains queer.

Dodong's image of homosexuality is not the one that we commonly perceived in the Philippine media. Probably Dodong must be the one that Carlo Vergara should have been labeled as "un-stereotyped" stereotype and not Ada/Zsazsa because with Dodong, the typical idea of gays and homosexuals as *bakla* and the masculine as "real man" were broken. Vergara redefined the stereotype masculine and *bakla* through Dodong that a masculine man can also be homosexual at the same time, without resorting to effeminacy. Through Dodong the complexity of human sexuality was represented.

It's interesting to note that despite the proliferation of non-queer characters in the novel, I can still say that the narrative has led us to some queer understanding.

I raised the point of Ada's transgenderism which is not actually the point of contention but on the representation of the gays wanting to become women. Ada became a woman, Zsazsa Zaturannah (who is not a gay superhero at all) but decided to return to

her male form by throwing the stone to Queen Femina's mouth. This act could be the queerest among all realizations in the novel, that by throwing away the stone, Ada throws away the chance of him becoming a woman again, accepting what he is as a *bakla*, that for the first time, he broke the convention that the *bakla*'s fulfillment of his desires is rooted in becoming a woman.

Of course, the romantic relationship that arose between Ada and Dodong is in itself queer because physically, it rejected the conventions that consists a relationship especially that it is between a butch and an effeminate homosexual, which is again perceived to be always laden with economics, a factor that isn't existent in Ada and Dodong. Again, their relationship is however remained ideally heteronormative because of Ada.

Many have told me during the process of reading, re-reading and re-reading *Zsazsa Zaturannah* for the nth time that I'm complicating myself because a novel like this should be taken light-heartedly because it is treated in a well... light-heartedly funny manner. In my journey along this research, I found the pattern of an attempt to subversion: a subversion to gay oppression, a subversion to the concept of the superhero, a subversion to male dominance, a subversion to romantic relationships.

However, these supposed subversions were again subverted to go back to where it started. When the attempt to repackage the gay persona is actually a display and affirmation to their oppression; when a superhero who is supposed to be gay is actually a woman; when the battle used to stop male dominance is just another patriarchy in a different form; when a relationship bloomed between two men stay in the man-woman setup. The biggest subversion of all is that, despite all of these failed subversions is a novel that actually attempts and aspires to be queer despite its anti-queer characters.

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