

**A FEMINIST APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF THE  
PRIZE-WINNING THREE-ACT PLAYS OF  
ELSA MARTINEZ-COSCOLLUELA**

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**A Thesis**

**Presented to the  
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Cebu City, Philippines**

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**In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS IN LITERATURE**

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**by**

**REOPER P. CEGAYLE**


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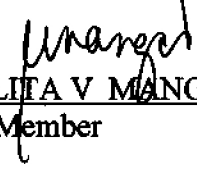
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## ABSTRACT

The name of Elsa Martinez-Coscolluela stands out from the list of Filipino writers in the Visayas. She has garnered twenty-three Carlos Palanca and other awards from different award-giving bodies. In her award-winning three-act plays, women characters are noticeably remarkable. They are the so-called "empowered women." They contend themselves with dilemmas that almost trapped their creativity, intelligence, and courage. It is interesting to note that these dilemmas have been intensified by the harmful effects of the patriarchal system.

The seven Carlos Palanca award-winning three-act plays of Elsa Martinez-Coscolluela namely *Comfort of Women* (1993, first prize), *Song of the Sparrow* (1987, second prize), *The Gemini Conspiracy* (1983, honorable mention), *In My Father's House* (1980, second prize), *Urduja (The Wounded Womb)* (1979, second prize), *Katalona* (1978, second prize), and *Katipunera (The Primordial Quotient)* (1977, special prize) were studied carefully to make a critical evaluation of women as literary characters using a feminist approach. Specifically, this study attempted to present the images/roles of women as portrayed by the author, trace how the dilemmas of women within the patriarchal system through the different periods of Philippines history, and identify the literary and dramatic devices used in her works.

In the analysis of the construction of woman characters, emergent and residual images/roles have emerged. Emergent images/roles in these plays represent a critical and feminist revision of the image of the Filipino woman. As to the dilemmas of women within the patriarchal system these have varied across the different periods of Philippine History. The playwright adapted several literary and dramatic devices to create a feminist material. The feminist presentation of these dilemmas is the playwright's strategy of resistance to the patriarchal system.

The writer recommends that further study be conducted analyzing Coscolluela's one-act plays, the plays of Magdalena C. Jalandoni, one of Iloilo's most revered writer, and the work of progressive women writers in the south using a feminist approach.

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## CHAPTER 1

### THE PROBLEM AND ITS SCOPE

#### Rationale of the Study

From the list of Filipino writers in the Visayas, the name of Elsa Martinez Coscolluela who is presently residing in Bacolod City, stands out. She has garnered 23 Carlos Palanca and other awards from different award – giving bodies from 1972 in poetry, short stories, teleplays, and plays (three-act and one-act). One of her plays, “In My Father’s House” was the entry of the Philippines to the Drama Festival in Singapore in 1989. This was put to life by the UP Playwrights Theater Company. In her award-winning three-act plays, women characters are noticeably remarkable. Most of the women went beyond the traditional roles of mothering and housekeeping. They took leaps to break away from the bondage of patriarchy. They are the so-called “empowered women.”

Women have many faces in the three-act plays of Coscolluela. She has a woman who suffers silently in the name of love, a woman capable of healing both body and soul, a woman who is an innocent victim of society, a woman in pain, a woman who transcends her sufferings, a woman who breaks her silence, to mention a few. In this study, the reader will find the many images of women as literary characters. This paper will study these images as vividly as possible against the times, culture, and events surrounding such images.

The silencing of women is just one of the many dilemmas of women Coscolluela had portrayed in her plays. Though the modern woman has the freedom to voice her sentiments, only a few have the courage to do so. What forces have curtailed her from

speaking her mind? Or is she simply contented with the kind of life she has under the shadow of patriarchy? It is interesting to note that these dilemmas have been intensified by the harmful effects of the patriarchal system

The problems of women exposed in the texts to be studied span across the periods of Philippine history. During the pre-colonial period, when the country was still free of the feudal-patriarchal system, women were already behind men. Despite the insistence of free status among women during this period, evidences prove that women were second to men. If ever they rose above men, such privilege was purely accidental. The problems became worse when the Spanish colonizers came to Philippine shores. They did not only bring faith, but with them was the patriarchal system that pushed women to the margins of society. The powerlessness of women was evident during that period. Their voice was the voice of their father at their tender age, and the voice of their husband when they were married.

The revolution headed by the Katipuneros remained blind to the plight of women, whose role in the revolution was limited to domestic work. They nursed the wounded when they did not prepare the food or clean the dishes left behind by the Katipuneros. When the Americans freed the Philippines from the Spaniards, the system of patriarchy remained. Women faced another dilemma when the Japanese occupied the archipelago. The evils of war made women the most vulnerable victims. Mothers grieved for their lost sons. Wives bore the excruciating pain of abandonment. MacArthur's liberation failed to liberate women from their dilemmas. The remnants of patriarchy survived even at the height of the installation of the first woman president of the Republic. Why? "Is this not proof that Filipino women have made it, and they already enjoy substantial equality with

Filipino men in this so-called age of modernity?" (Pineda-Ofreneo 1994: 45) In the contemporary period, when voices of women are heard if not listened to, the question remains: is she really free?

### **Theoretical Background**

The idea of studying literature in the understanding of history is not new. For example, Encarnacion in her article entitled "Literature as History," says that ". . . in a literary artist's unfolding of the human condition through a novel, a poem, or a play, or an essay and in a historian's presentation of man's experience, the affinity between literature and history markedly surfaces." In the same article she avers that "as both writer and historian venture into the intricacies of life and attempt to gain further insight into the welter of events, their records recreate the experience."

However she explains that "historians are limited by the problem of pastness and temporality. Not balked by the past tense, the literary artist is like a director of a play who can alter the position of his characters and is not limited by time or space." She added that "in the use of historical imagination, the rules of fact and temporality control the historian. Though the artist has also boundaries to his imagination, yet he may mix real with imaginary events, so long as he stays with the boundaries of the probabilities of human behavior." Moreover, she said that the literary artist while surveying humanity assesses life from his perspective, gives a criticism of man and his destiny, interprets a people's culture, analyzes tendencies of one movement to the next, of one period to the other." Finally, she admits that "as a portrayal of life, literature indeed explores the many dimensions of human experience. Always, there is the search for the meaning of life, for

reality. And with its grip on immediacy, fiction pursues history” (Encarnacion 1987: 147-152)

In an article entitled “Literature as History,” Dimalanta (1987: 163) declares

Clearly, the historical study of literature is a fascinating study and may offer valuable hints to the literary critic. The critic and the historian are not in competition with each other; indeed the good literary scholar must be both. Literature is a continuous drama with vital interplay between its episodes, and everything takes on a fuller significance viewed in the light of its point of emergence in history.

One emerging field in the study of literature and history is on the treatment of women. Feminist researchers have theorized on the sources of gender inequality as grounded in Philippine history. Quindoza-Santiago (1996: 170) for example, quotes the song “Silent Woman” as a springboard for such feminist study.

*“O silent woman  
Think and reflect  
Long you have been oppressed  
Long you have been subjugated ”*

The song quoted above echoes the many voices of women: voices of clamor, of protest, of a battle cry that is getting louder and louder. They call for political, economic, and social equality with men. These are the voices of feminism. The inequality was generally blamed on the patriarchal system that had taken root in society even before the Spanish conquest but ironically, was legalized by the Spanish *conquistadores*. It is interesting to see how women in Philippine history had traversed the road that almost trapped their creativity, independence, and freedom.

Women in Philippine history. According to Mananzan (1987: 8) in her paper “The Filipino Woman. Before and After the Spanish Conquest in the Philippines,” women in pre-colonial Philippines were regarded as the sole guardian of the perpetuation