

Shaping and Re-shaping Fernandez's Women Characters Through Domestic Fixtures

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Abstract. This study was conducted to identify and analyze the theatrical devices such as the sets and props employed in three one-act plays of Steven Patrick Fernandez that helped in the shaping of his women characters. It was aimed at analyzing the symbolism in the theatrical devices used that had given depth to the images of the women characters in the plays. It particularly answered the following questions: 1) What are the theatrical devices used in the three one-act plays? 2) How do these theatrical devices contribute to the shaping and re-shaping of Fernandez's women characters in his three one-act plays? This study is a literary analysis. It made use of the descriptive literary analysis guided by symbolism and feminism in analyzing and interpreting the theatrical devices that enhanced the images of the women characters in three one-act plays of Steven Patrick Fernandez. After the scripts and films of the three one-act plays were read and viewed not less than three times, the analysis was formed and the following findings were then revealed: The three one-act plays employed minimalistic theatrical designs that made the plays more appealing and engrossing. Because of this, more attention could be given to the characters as well as the sets and props which were composed mainly of domestic fixtures. In the plays, however, these fixtures such as a bed, a couch, a window frame, a telephone, a moon-shaped lamp, a table and a chair did not function as mere objects detached from the meanings of the plays but these were actually significant tools in the shaping and re-shaping of the women characters involved in the play. These sets and props brought out the women characters' traits like their strengths or weaknesses, confidence or vulnerability thus giving depth to the characters' images. In theater, sets and other devices are usually considered as external of the drama. Settings, properties, costumes may present internal, subjective vision but these are rarely significant in action. However, in the three one-act plays of Fernandez, the theatrical devices had profoundly filtered into the dramatic spectacle and has become an essential component in the shaping of the women characters.

Keywords: women characters, domestic fixtures, symbols

1. Introduction

Theater becomes more alive with the use of theatrical devices such as the sets, props, costumes, lighting and music. These devices play a major role in maintaining the illusion of the stage and screen. Often, the sets and props define the setting and the theme of the play. However, Carlson (1984) stated that sets and props must turn away from the reproduction of reality to conscious stylization. He said that instead of being cluttered with details of everyday life, the stage must supply only what is needed to evoke the spectators' imagination. He added that the obligation of the sets and props is to assist the actor to reveal his soul to the audience (Carlson, 1984). This is when symbolism in the theatrical devices used in plays becomes very essential. Symbolism in literature as defined by Chevalier and Gheerbrant (1996) is often a figure of speech in which a person, object, or situation represent something in addition to its literal meaning.

Conventional or traditional literary symbols work in much the same way, and because they have a previously agreed upon meaning, they can be used to suggest ideas more universal than the physical aspect itself. A symbol may appear in any work of art in a number of different ways to suggest a number of different things. Symbolism gave rise to an era during which the aesthetics of dramatic art assumed a new social and political significance (Fernandez, 1994). This type of theater does not discard reality but enhances

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it with symbol and metaphor, elucidates parable and allegory, deconstructs and reconstructs subjects through language, scenery, and lighting, and finally uses the theater's own theatricality explicitly.

Feminism is also used to identify and analyze the images of the women characters. Feminist theory explained by Lorber (2005), aims to understand the nature of inequality and focuses on gender politics, power relations and sexuality. While generally providing a critique of social relations, much of feminist theory also focuses on analyzing gender inequality and the promotion of women's rights, interests, and issues (Kintanar, 1992). Specifically, women get less of the material resources, social status, power, and opportunities for self-actualization than do men who share their social location. This inequality results from the organization of society, not from any significant biological or personality differences between women and men. Arambulo (1992) further cited that traditional literary writing especially drama is patriarchal in nature. Women are viewed as objects to be problematized, analyzed, mystified, woven or unwoven in the text, and where they function as muses in or out of text, they remain the objects of male fantasies and anxieties until the advent of feminist criticism.

The plays *Ming-Ming* (Cat), *Patas* (Equal) and *Isa Pang Kawing* (Another Wedding) are all written by Dr. Steven Patrick C. Fernandez and staged in the context of Mindanao culture during the contemporary period of Philippine theater with women as dominant characters. Staging and design were minimalistic and made use of domestic fixtures as theatrical devices.

2. Analysis

The three one-act plays of Steven Patrick Fernandez are all on the round plays employing minimalism. The dramatic devices used that composed mainly of domestic fixtures played an essential role in the shaping and re-shaping of Fernandez's women characters.

In the play *Ming-Ming*, the set design composed of only a white table, three white chairs, white telephone, white bed, white window frame and white moon-shaped lamp (Fernandez, 2004). These sets help create a mysterious atmosphere while at the same time serve as symbols that enhance the meaning of the play. The women characters involved in the play are Ming-Ming (eighteen year old daughter of **R**), **R** (the mother) and **I** (the grandmother).

R is a liberal-minded woman. Having gone to Manila to pursue her education, **R** has slowly adapted to the western culture which has contributed to her being confident, ambitious and adventurous. However, there are instances in the play wherein **R** becomes vulnerable and this side of **R** is often shown in scenes that occur on the bed. This bed is the symbol of **R**'s vulnerability. The emotional and passionate scenes of **R** and her lover take place on the bed. This is also the place where **R**'s personality shifts from being strong to vulnerable and where she allows herself to be the kind of woman who is willing to sacrifice tradition to pursue what she wants in life.

The window frame hung near the table is a domestic fixture that is often used in the play by **I**, the grandmother. This presents two symbols for **I**: First, this symbolizes her being tradition-bound. She is the only character who conforms to tradition simply to attain peace in the family even if it meant setting aside her personal dreams and aspirations. Second, the window frame serves as her exile. This is the same place where she lets herself be drifted to another world where she actualizes her dreams and aspirations.

The telephone is another domestic fixture that plays an essential part in the play. This is often used by **R** and **I**. The telephone signifies the generation gap between the two women characters. It also symbolizes the difference in the personalities of the two which means that **I**, on one side of the line is a character who belongs to the first generation and thus is more conservative and traditional while **R** who is on the other side of the line belongs to the second generation and is more liberated and head-strong.

The moon-shaped lamp symbolizes the femininity of the three women characters. In the play, the women are faced with a crisis of whether to conform to the norms set by the society or to defy these and seek for their self-actualization. In the end, the women characters acknowledge that they are women with different needs and that they are strong and confident in what they are capable of doing.

In the second play *Patas*, the set design includes only two office tables, one slightly bigger and more kempt than the other and a chair (Fernandez, 1986). Lea in the play portrays an ambitious and scheming

woman. The bigger table symbolizes the success that she has achieved. Lea is a strong character who does everything in her power to fulfill her ambitions whatever the stakes are. This strong character, however, was manifested by an unpleasant childhood having come from a poor, broken family. This rather awful past experience is symbolized by the smaller table with stacks of paper everywhere. Instead of feeling hopeless, she struggled to rise from the pit that she lived in and slowly made her way to the top. Lea has shown that her bad experience has not made her a weak woman who easily gives up. In fact, it is Lea's past experience that has driven her to be independent and ambitious.

Isa Pang Kawing is another one-act play that employs minimalism with only a matrimonial bed with a side table and a couch (Fernandez, 2006). The woman character, Aya, is a picture of a modern day woman who is not afraid to speak her mind. She is independent and liberal-minded. Aya agreed to marry Mike, a man she didn't love and a scion of another wealthy and powerful Maranao clan to pacify their family's long term "rido" or feud. She has agreed to it also because of her personal reasons. The matrimonial bed reflects Aya's cunning and overbearing personality over Mike's inferior personality as symbolized by the couch. In the course of Aya's and Mike's arguments, Aya often stays on or near the bed where Aya dominates over Mike while Mike often settles on the couch in resignation. The discrepancy in the sizes of the fixtures used in the play allows the audience to better understand and appreciate Aya's strong character.

Table 1. Theatrical Devices that Shape and Re-Shape Fernandez's Women Characters

Title of Play	Domestic Fixtures	Character	Symbol
MingMing	white bed	R	R's vulnerability
	white telephone	I and R	Generation gap between
	white window frame	I	I and R I's being trapped in their tradition I's second world where she often allows herself to be somebody else
	white moon-shaped lamp	I, R and Ming-Ming	Femininity of the women characters
Patatas	Bigger table with papers and folders neatly piled	Lea	Lea's success
	Smaller table with stacks of paper everywhere		Lea's unpleasant childhood/past experiences
Isa Pang Kawing	one matrimonial bed	Aya	Aya's cunning and overbearing character
	one couch	Mike	Mike's weak personality

3. Summary and Conclusion

The three one-act plays of Steven Patrick C. Fernandez employed minimalistic theatrical devices that composed mainly of domestic fixtures. In the play *Ming-Ming*, the set design composed of only a white table, three white chairs, white telephone, white bed, white window frame and white moon-shaped lamp. These sets help create a mysterious atmosphere while at the same time serve as symbols that enhance the meaning of the play. In the second play *Patatas*, the set design included only two office tables, one slightly bigger and more kempt than the other and a chair. Lea in the play portrays an ambitious and scheming woman and the sets reflect the kind of woman that Lea is. *Isa Pang Kawing* is another one-act play that employed minimalism with only a matrimonial bed with a side table and a couch. These sets feature the overbearing

and cunning personality of Aya. These domestic fixtures used in the three one-act plays may not only be seen as mere objects placed in the performance areas to provide color and beauty to the setting. These, however, served a more meaningful purpose in the plays because these devices have provided a deeper meaning to the different personalities that the women characters have displayed. Through these fixtures the audience gets a better understanding of the way women in the three one-act plays act and react to certain circumstances. These fixtures have magnified the dominant traits of the characters and have profoundly filtered into the dramatic spectacle and thus have become an essential component in the shaping and re-shaping of the women characters.

The theatrical devices, hence, must not be seen as an external component of drama. Theatrical devices are used to communicate meaning, particularly verbal and visual symbols. These devices should be able to work their way through the development of the characters and the drama itself.

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