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## DISSECTING THE IMAGE OF ELSA TOWARDS SEMIOTIC READING OF THE PHILIPPINE CLASSIC FILM ‘HIMALA’

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### Abstract

*Himala (Miracle)* is one of the Philippine classic films produced in 1982 by the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines. Aside from several local and international awards given to the film, it was also chosen as the Best Asia-Pacific Film of All Time in 2008 by the CNN and the Asia Pacific Screen Awards. The film narrates the story of Elsa, who induced the people of Cupang to believe that she had witnessed the apparition of the Virgin Mary in the hill during the eclipse. She also made the people believe that she can heal those who have diseases, that have resulted to many hopefuls flocking on her house. But who is Elsa? This paper focused on dissecting the character of Elsa to present new interpretations of the film. Through Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory, the study determined different images of Elsa such as Elsa is a god-like figure; Elsa is a curse, where the tough luck of Cupang came from; and Elsa is a religious prostitute that sells her so-called miracle for those who are hopeless. Using semiotics, it can be said that the film shows not only the socio-cultural, economic, and political issues in the country, but the dismantling of patriarchal society. The reading made to the character of Elsa shows the reconstruction of feminist culture in the film, which proves that women are more powerful than men.

**Keywords.** *Himala, semiotics, denotation, connotation, feminism, film, women in film*

### MENELITI IMEJ ELSA MELALUI PENGHURAIAN SEMIOTIK FILEM KLASIK FILIPINA “HIMALA”

### Abstrak

*Himala (Keajaiban)* adalah filem klasik Filipina yang dihasilkan pada tahun 1982 oleh *Experimental Cinema of the Philippines*. Selain dari anugerah dalam dan luar negara, file mini juga terpilih sebagai Best Asia-Pacific Film of All Time pada tahun 2008 oleh CNN dan Asia Pacific Screen Awards. Filem ini mengisahkan Elsa yang membawa kepada penduduk Cupang untuk mempercayai bahawa beliau nampak jelmaan Virgin Mary di bukit semasa gerhana. Dia juga dapat membuat penduduk mempercayai bahawa dia boleh memulihkan sakit yang membawa ramai orang berkunjung ke rumahnya. Namun, siapa Elsa? Kajian ini cuba meneliti watak Elsa melalui tafsiran baru. Melalui Teori Semiotik Roland Barthes', kajian ini cuba melihat imej Elsa sebagai figura ketuhanan; Elsa sebagai sumpahan dari Cupang dan Elsa sebagai pelacur agama yang menjual keajaibannya pada mereka yang tidak punya harapan. Menganalisis melalui semiotik, filem ini tidak hanya memaparkan isu sosio-budaya, ekonomi, dan politik negara tapi membongkar masyarakat patriarki. Penelitian yang dibuat terhadap watak Elsa dalam file mini menampakkan adanya pembinaan semula budaya feminis yang membuktikan bahawa wanita adalah lebih kuat dari lelaki.

**Kata kunci:** *Himala, semiotic, denotasi, feminism, wanita dalam filem*

## INTRODUCTION

The film is a form of communication that provides message and meaning through audiovisual presentation. But it does not only revolve around various images and symbols. It also employs different elements that contain hidden meaning that the creator wants to explore and experiment on through the film.

It is composed of different elements that have to be understood first by the audience for them to further appreciate the film viewing experience. Aside from the story (the backbone of the film), lighting and cinematography (the use of light and darkness in each scene and the use of camera techniques that provide a different meaning of the entire film), production design, sounds and music, and editing (the cutting and rearranging of images and additional effects), the roles portrayed by the characters are important to reveal the story that the writer wants to tell.

The characters are important because according to Casul, Garcia and Lim (2008): *“Characters are the heart and soul of a story. It is through your characters that viewers begin to feel, relate, associate, and empathize. It is through your characters do that people become excited or worried, delighted or disappointed, happy or sad”*. This is the experience of the audience when watching a film. The audience develops a vicarious experience because they may tell themselves “Well, I should have fought, too” or “I wish I was like that”. The viewers can associate themselves with the characters they are watching because they see themselves in the film they are watching.

According to Tolentino (2007), the reality offered by films merges with the personal life of the audience. They form identification through the characters and the conflicts they are facing inside the film. The audience loses their real identity as they place themselves in various identities of the characters in the film. The audience becomes the protagonists of their own films. Therefore, the moving images influence the audience to dictate that “This is the reality. Do this. This is where and what you live”. Through this, the audience breaks free from the real world and dwells on the constructed reality of the film.

*Objectives of the Study*

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The purpose of this paper is to scrutinize the character of Elsa to present new interpretations of the film. Using Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory, the study will attempt to determine different images of the character. It will be answered through the following questions: (1) How the film constructed/created the image of Elsa; and (2) What are the hidden images of Elsa in the film?

The relationship of the production and reception of the film – how the writer and the director conceptualized and created Elsa's character in the film and how the researcher will analyze the character as a viewer – would aid in the creation of new interpretations of the film. This study entails an interpretation of Elsa's character through analysis of different elements in the film and as to where she was a part of: (other) characters, cinematography, production design, sound and music, and editing. However, the researcher will not further analyze and criticize how the writer wrote the story.

#### *Theoretical Framework: Semiotics of Roland Barthes*

Semiotics is the study of signs. A sign is anything that represents a certain thing that has significance (Griffin 2012: 41). Also, semiotics includes the study of how meaning, which arises from the sign and symbol system, is constructed and understood during the perception and interpretation of sensory data. Semiotic analysis focuses on the cultural and psychological patterns that underlie language, art and other cultural expressions that are used as a tool for representing and interpreting phenomena (Yakin & Mahali, 2008).

Roland Barthes believes that semiotics is an adventure especially since it involves reading into non-verbal cues because a sign may mean lot things. Barthes illustrated in his theory of semiotics as an explanation to myths which he then changed into the word connotation in order to give the ideological loads enclosed in a sign a denominative meaning (Griffin, 2012). Using the images, dialogues, sounds and music, etc. used in the film, the researcher would read their denotative meaning in order to obtain their connotative meaning that would give answers to this study. In this way, the researcher can discover different meanings behind the film.

Through semiotics, people are able to create messages that are based on their personal experiences and culture. Although the image that was given meaning may not have a universal meaning, it may still be useful in making people receptive to new meanings and concepts.

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

### *The Power of Film*

Moving pictures have truly become a part of life. Everyone has a distinct preference as to what kind of film he would appreciate the most – drama (the most popular genre in the Philippine cinematic scene); comedy (entertainment in the Philippine cinema); or action (films that most features the physical confrontation of its characters). Aside from this, the viewers also take into consideration the actors in the films who serve as their main selling point. As told by Cruz (2012), film viewing can be considered as the national entertainment of many Filipinos.

According to Young Critics' Circle, films can create a discourse that can change society and history (2009). This means when the viewer realizes that what they are watching compliments with the problems or the events in their lives, they might be able to live by the messages expressed by the films. Film viewing provides value to its audience because of the reality it heightens through the different elements of the film. Films provide hope and the possibility of change in the world because it has the ability to weave meaningful messages. Aside from this, the films also expose realities that are not obviously present by revealing veiled truths.

Furthermore, Lumbera (2011: 59) stated that watching films is not just entertainment but education. Each film contains values, whether intentionally included by its creator or not, or presented outright or only hinted through select situations. Within the full hour that the audience was in the cinema, he will be shaped by the images and sounds that often have no intentional cause to educate. Therefore, film viewing has an immense influence to the audience because it does not only provide entertainment but also shapes their outlook and values. It teaches lessons that the audience may use in their everyday lives.

In this sense, film becomes powerful. It can easily move and direct us, especially if the intention of its creator is to present reality that the public usually not see or agree with.

*The Portrayal of Women in Philippine Films*

The researcher has come to learn to love the Filipino word *kumawala* (to disengage, break free). It has a power to liberate from the box and tradition of a society that cages an individual, particularly women. The root word is *wala*, or nothing, which also present in the word *nagwala* (gone wild), a word that in a way described a person who suddenly detoured from the usual path. Although negative in connotation, there is still a freedom in this concept. It is also in the word *pakawala*, or a woman who sells her body for money, a prostitute. When looked at closely, a prostitute has an admiral strength to break free from the traditional concept of women in the Philippines – *often are prisoners of their own genders and victims of norms that has long been ailing the society even up to this day* (Kintanar, 1992).

Moreover, according to Kim (2006), there are different ways how people see women. Many see women as being subordinated, oppressed and excluded from privileges bestowed upon men. Even in films, there are seemingly boxed portrayal of women – women without rights, women without voice and power, and women without the freedom to move around a society that is dominated by men that usually enslaves, abuses and violates women – the tragedy of Flor in Singapore because of a trumped up charge of murder of a fellow Overseas Filipino Worker in the film *The Flor Contemplacion Story*, the violence tasted by Curacha in the film *Curacha: Ang Babaeng Walang Pahinga (Curacha: The Woman without Rest)*, and the powerlessness of Ana from the slavery and abuse of a husband in *Sidhi*.

Nevertheless, women who saw themselves as being oppressed had began to raise awareness of their oppression and subordination, and demanded for elimination of all discrimination based on sex in various areas such as in the sphere of marriage, employment, education, policing of sexual morality and participation in the political process (Kim, 2006). In Filipino films, there are narratives that show empowered women like Josie in the film *Anak (The Child)* who took the risk to work abroad to support her husband and children, the involvement of a nun in a strike against injustices and government oppression in the film *Sister Stella L.*, and an

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ordinary woman named Elsa in *Himala (Miracle)*, who manipulated the people of Cupang while keeping herself in the heart of miracles.

### *Himala and Elsa in Three Decades*

*Himala* is an Experimental Cinema of the Philippines project which won Best Picture at the 1982 Metro Manila Film Festival and the 1983 Catholic Mass Media Awards. It was also an official selection nominee for Best Actress for Nora Aunor (who portrayed the role of Elsa) of the Golden Bear Award at the 1983 Berlin International Film Festival, and won the Bronze Hugo Prize at the 1983 Chicago International Film Festival. It was named as one of the best films of the 1980s by the *Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino*, and was awarded the Viewers Choice Award for Best Asia-Pacific Film of All Time by CNN and the Asia Pacific Screen Awards in 2008 (Cabanawan, 2010).

In a movie review of Ramos (2012), he presented ten best reasons to experience the “miracle” of the film: (1) the film proves that cinema is an art; (2) the finale is unforgettable as Elsa, the false faith healer delivers her timeless speech “Walang Himala!” (There are no miracles!); (3) the role of Elsa was portrayed by the Philippine Superstar Nora Aunor, which delivers what is arguably the finest performance by a Filipino actor ever recorded on celluloid; (4) a theatre actress, Gigi Duenas offers an indelible performance for the role of Elsa’s childhood friend-turned-prostitute; (5) the film is a religious experience with a twist for it is far more spiritual; (6) there will never be another Filipino film quite like *Himala*; (7) the film showcases the directorial prowess of the late National artist for Film Ishmael Bernal; (8) the film was penned by a Philippine screenwriting icon Ricky Lee; (9) three exceptional talents in one film: Bernal-Lee-Aunor; and (10) it is a must-watch for every movie fan.

*Himala* tells of ordinary young woman in a “cursed” town called Cupang who claims that the Virgin Mary appeared before her during an eclipse. She becomes a faith healer and almost overnight the sleepy town transforms into a bustling community of believers, kibitzers, miracle-seekers, and everything in between (Ramos, 2012). But what represents Elsa? According to Lee (in Lim, 2004), *Himala* is based on a historical precedent: a Marian apparition in a small

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Philippine town. In *Tungkol sa Pagsusulat ng Himala (About the writing of Himala)*, Lee relates that he conducted research on faith healers and women who had claimed to see apparitions of the Virgin Mary: *The primary source for Himala is what happened in Cabra Island in 1967 to Belinda, a young woman to whom, it is said, the Virgin made an appearance. Life on the island became commercialized.*

In a study of Cabanawan (2010) about women in religion-related films in the Philippines, she said that women rule in fictional narratives including the film *Himala*. To quote, “*in Himala, the resident albularyo (quack doctor) exorcises the bad spirits believed to be demonizing Elsa. The struggle to find and redeem the lost mother is hindered by the male – the symbol of authority and dominant ideology. The woman becomes the representation for a shifting and uncertain religious revolution, while the man represents the stable and sound religion.*”

Moreover, the empowered character of Elsa also revealed in several movie reviews and articles. Sison said that *Elsa becomes a threat to the powers that be and emerges as an emblem of social change. She stands firm in her dignity; she who is the oppressed woman refuses to be destroyed by patriarchal phallic-driven violence* (2004). In a scene where Elsa asked by Orly why the Virgin Mary is at work in these miracles and not Jesus Christ, Elsa simply answered, *Lumipas na ang ama. Panahon naman ng ina.*” (*It was over for the father to lead. It’s time for the mother to do so*). This insinuates the side of Elsa the idea of polytheism and the endeavour of women to escape male dominance (Lim, 2014).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The researcher used qualitative research in order to find the answers in this study. This covers a large scope of diverse meanings that aims to describe and give meaning to character of Elsa and to the film, apart from the usual meaning given to it. The researcher also employed descriptive research for the design of the study. The readings were laid down by describing, explaining, and giving interpretations based on the images brought by the film.

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This study scrutinized the image of Elsa from the Philippine classic film *Himala* and used Semiotics by Roland Barthes in order to read into its meaning. Also, the study was accomplished by following these processes:

1. *Gathering of materials.* The researcher secured a DVD copy of the film. Related studies and literature from journals, magazines, books, and other references were gathered from National University, De La Salle University-Manila and the National Library.
2. *Film viewing in order to gather data and evidences.* The film was viewed several times to analyze the character of Elsa. The researcher gathered information and evidences through different elements of the film to support the analysis.
3. *Analyzing the material.* At this point, the images, dialogues, and even the background music were used to portray the findings regarding Elsa and *Himala*. Using semiotics by Barthes, the images enclosed in the show were explained.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### *Constructing Elsa in the Heart of Himala*

The story revolves around Elsa in the cursed town of Cupang, as well as its people. Elsa made the people of Cupang believe that she had seen the Virgin Mary on the hill during the eclipse. Elsa was also successful in making the people believe that the Virgin Mary appears in her dreams, and that a miracle will descend from the heavens that will erase the curse in the land. She also made the people believe that she can heal those who have diseases, that have resulted to many hopefuls flocking on her house. But not everyone believes Elsa. Despite the succession of events that transpired in the film, the film ended with the people's never-ending faith to Elsa and her healing prowess. Who, anyway, is Elsa?

She came from nowhere, found atop the hills when she was an infant, 21 years-old, a small woman, one of the helpers in the big house of Mrs. Alba – this is how Lee describes Elsa. Elsa is a quiet woman. Elsa was as silent as loud the people of Cupang are from their ailments. She has a very inexpressive face that makes her somewhat of a puzzle – a mystery – that enabled her to weave a story, whether true or not – that everyone had believed.



Elsa feels that she is a stranger in Cupang because of where she came from. She's just on the lowest level in terms of social hierarchy. That is why when she said the Virgin Mary appeared from her dreams, she instantly thought of becoming a faith healer to be accepted by the society. Her plan was a success, not only was she accepted, she was worshipped and praised. From then on, her actions have changed and people treated her differently and with more respect. Her spotless white dress exemplifies the purity and nobility of the image she is trying to present, but inside, she is just as sick and ailed as the people of Cupang are.

Some characters in the film also view her differently (see Table 1).

Table 1 Elsa as perceived by the other characters of Himala

Characters	Perception to Elsa	Constructed Images of Elsa in the Film
Chayong	<i>She (Elsa) knows everything.</i>	Intelligent woman
Pilo	<i>She doesn't seem like a woman. She doesn't even seem like a person. She's like a... sorceress.</i>	Sorceress
Narding	<i>But that Elsa's crazy! Will her 'miracle' be a solution to all of our problems? Our mothers and fathers have died of starvation. Did God help them?</i>	Lunatic
Nimia	<i>You are blinded by those who surround you, Elsa, that's why you can't see. You have many followers, but you have no friends. You're the one who's sick, not the people.</i>	Sick person
Orly	<i>She's an excellent artist.</i>	Artist (actress)

The provided dialogues are a concrete proof of the other characters' perception of Elsa – sorceress, lunatic, prostitute, artist and holy. She served as a sorceress because she was able to make the people believe she has healing powers. And like the sorcerers, Elsa is the only person who knows the trick behind her magic. She was also a lunatic in the sense that she can heal people using their faith, and faith healing isn't a normal activity. She was also believed to be a sick person for she was blinded by the people surrounded her, by her followers, and by her fame. It is just that what she sells are miracles. And lastly, she is an artist because her acting has been "consistent" that she can indeed perform miracles and heal by faith, and that the Virgin Mary makes an appearance in her dreams. Her being a fraud artist became more apparent when she and

Chayong were raped once by men from Manila. She made everyone believe that they were attacked by demons and were saved by the Virgin Mary.

### ***Dissecting Elsa's Character and the Soul of Himala***

Dissecting the character of Elsa through semiotics is the method that the researcher employed to analyze her character in the film. It is important to scrutinize Elsa to get to the heart of *Himala* to further understand Elsa herself. Through this, it would be easier for the viewers recognize the symbols that may have been used to produce/present a new interpretation of Elsa's character, and even of the entire film.

According to Tolentino (2007), a symbol is a codification of meaning. Therefore, the various symbols used in the film will be helpful in giving new images of Elsa. The different elements of the film will also help in identifying the said symbols.

*The characters:* Elsa was surrounded by other characters that helped us see through Elsa's character – Nimia, introduced in the film as a prostitute who was once a friend to Elsa. She was shunned by the people of Cupang after she got pregnant by a traveling salesman; Chayong, Elsa's childhood friend who left teaching to help in Elsa's daily healing sessions; Orly, the director/producer of the documentary film who badly needed a big break to save his career; and Aling Saling, the woman Elsa treated as a mother. Each of the character mentioned has an important role in Elsa's life and served as an important key in the discovering of the miracle.

*Production design:* The hill as a setting has a pivotal role in the film – the place where Aling Saling found Elsa when she was young, the same place that witnessed everything that transpired throughout Elsa's life, the place where Elsa deemed she saw the Virgin Mary, the place where she and Chayong got raped, and the place where truth and lies lived and died. This served as Elsa's "dwelling place" – it nurtured and accepted her. Atop the hill is a leafless, decaying tree. Like Elsa, the tree is quiet and mysterious.

*Sound and music:* The music used in the film is also interesting to note. During the opening credits, we can hear a sound as the heaven opens. The sound warned of the revelation of truth. It is marvellous, but melancholic, mysterious, yet horrifying because you do not know what it means exactly – such as the expression in Elsa’s character. The film does not employ a lot of music to retain its realistic quality. Some of the prayers used also served as music and sound effects, as well as the chant of Elsa’s name, the wails of the people waiting for Elsa’s miraculous hands to heal them, and a repetition of the most popular *Aba Ginoong Maria (Hail Mary)*.

*Lighting:* The film is somewhat dark in terms of lighting, probably to sustain its mysterious theme, to symbolize the curse that enshroud all of Cupang, and for the viewers to watch intently and find the miracle – just as Elsa continues to struggle with her true identity.

*Cinematography:* Each scene was shot using a simple treatment. There are no complicated camera angles employed by the director. Eye level and steady shots were the usual techniques used. This simplistic approach to cinematography might stem from the philosophy of the one who shot the film, and the time it was shot.

*Editing:* Frames are weaved in a chronological manner. Like the other elements, the editing used is simple and without any unnecessary effects – cut, dissolve, fade in and fade out. The film seemed very realistic and truthful because no glamorous effects were used. According to Lee, the director of *Himala*, Ishmael Bernal, always wanted the truth. Every time the script needs a revision, Bernal always says, “*Ricky, let’s make the film minimalist. Let’s make it to the bone, straight to the soul. Omit the fats and the unnecessary jewels*” (2011: 141). However, the truth that the creators of the film wanted to reveal is different from Elsa’s character – vague and deep.

#### *Elsa is a god-like figure: The Discourse of People’s Faith to Elsa*

Elsa is a god-like figure. This phenomenon is explained through two different points: (1) the identification of Elsa by the people as a saviour of a cursed town, and (2) Elsa’s speech and

actions as a powerful manifestation of the Virgin Mary through her. Through the film, it may be proved in this study the discourse of the faith of the people to Elsa.

Based on the first point provided, the film depicted the people's perception of Elsa as a God that would save them from the unfortunate events and curse that has befallen on the small town of Cupang.

Table 2 The identification of Elsa by the people as a saviour

Sequence	Scene
10	<i>Chayong, Baldo and Aling Saldo fell on their knees for the miracle that is Elsa as a man from the town narrated that Elsa can heal a disease.</i>
24	<i>Many people – patients, spectators, and those who were praying. All of them hoping Elsa would treat their diseases.</i>
28	<i>Several stores have outlined the streets of Cupang selling various kinds of hope, tourists were also walking on the streets, riding cars or are in wheelchairs, T-shirts printed with Elsa's face and bear the words Elsa loves you are also sold.</i>
34	<i>The people show stronger faith to Elsa: everyone is crazed just to buy Elsa's homemade medicine, just to get a glimpse of Elsa, and on the chance of being healed by her.</i>
76	<i>Thousands of candles can be seen, held by Elsa's followers who are praising and praying their way up the hill.</i>
77	<i>This is the scene where Elsa was shot, which caused her death. As she dies, the film exploits on the grief that was due to Elsa's death. The people's undying faith was still presented despite Elsa's falseness. Sepa watched the people, and she shouted: Elsa is a saint!</i>

Meanwhile, this part also showed that Elsa will be known as a messenger of the heaven through her speech, actions and behaviour.

Table 3 Elsa's speech and actions as a powerful manifestation of the Virgin Mary

Sequence	Scene
5	<i>Elsa was on the hill and kneeling at the front of the dead tree. Baldo sees that there are wounds on both of Elsa's arms, the same wounds that Christ had when he got crucified.</i>
6	<i>Elsa was talking to the priest about the apparition of the Virgin Mary. Elsa also mentioned that There will come a time that the people with grave diseases</i>

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26 *will come to her to heal them.*  
*Orly had the opportunity to interview Elsa about her healing technique. Elsa said that she is not the healer. She's just an instrument of the Virgin Mary.*

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Being a healer, the use of Virgin Mary and the prayers, the wounds on her arms and palms that have healed, the recovery of simple diseases, her rituals, her words, the worship of thousands of people are proofs presented by people on how Elsa was a truly a god-like figure and saviour.

#### *Elsa is a Curse and the Curse of Elsa*

According to the film, Cupang has been under a curse that has caused an extreme drought at the town. The curse, according to the old locals, is because they turned down a man with a leprosy before, which turned out to be the Virgin Mary. They said the curse that caused the drought will be broken when the Virgin Mary returns – in disguise – and the people would accept her this time around.

Most of the people in Cupang believe that their land is truly under a detrimental spell, but some of them still refuse to believe. Little did they know that a woman has been raising a curse for many years now. It was found on top of the hills years before, a child in a basket with a piece of paper with its name on it. It was Elsa. Elsa will soon bring the most extremes at the barrio. She will be the cause of many deathly incidents that has never happened before in there – murder, suicide, epidemic diseases, prostitution, drugs, and theft. Should Elsa have not existed – none of those things will ever happen.

But that was just the shallow effect of the curse. Those incidents only existed in Cupang. What the major effect of the Curse of Elsa will be passed on to many generations, year after year, time after time, in all sides of the earth. It's what we call false religion. As Lolo Hugo once said in the film: *Evil was prophesized. The curse will be lifted only upon the return of the leper whom we drove out of town. She was the Virgin Mary in disguise. Here's the problem. When she returns, again disguised, the people might not recognize her and turn her out again.*

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Elsa is a curse. Despite the declaration of her followers that they were in fact healed and Elsa can perform miracles, crimes still escalated by the day. Despite Elsa's representation of the Virgin Mary, along with it is the escalation of crimes, murders, deaths, prostitutions and drug-related incidents. If Elsa was really believed to be an instrument of the Holy Spirit, why were the crimes still prevailing? Shouldn't it be the other way around? If Elsa hadn't started her faith healing, Cupang would've still be the peaceful, quiet town it was.

On the other hand, much of the blame can be placed on the people who blindly decided to worship Elsa. Instead of relying on themselves to enrich their lives, they instead chose to fully depend on their so-called "faith and religion". This is the more terrifying effect of the curse, for it consumes the heart and the soul of the people. With Elsa's death on the hill, she solidified the rumored curse in Cupang. Yes, she died. But the souls she have left that were desperate and bindedly holding on to their everlasting faith with the Virgin Mary, regardless of her false miracles, were not.

### *Elsa is a Religious Prostitute*

To *prostitute* means to use (something valuable, such as talent, body, etc.) in a way that is not appropriate or respectable and especially to earn money (Merriam-Webster, online). Therefore, prostitution is the act of abusive exploitation. Whether it is done by one's sole decision, or was being used/ initiated by a third party, it still falls for one category, that is, prostitution.

Elsa is a prostitute, perhaps not the ones who are popular in the Philippines who sell themselves for small cash in return. Elsa is not a sexual prostitute, but what she does as a faith healer possesses similar factors on what whores do.

These are the rough comparisons:

- a. *Feeding on People's Frustrations*

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According to George R.R. Martin's *Game of Thrones* (1996), men who go to brothels and whorehouse have poor performances in bed, and that they pick a prostitute who would make them feel more like a 'man'. The job of the prostitute is to satisfy the frustration of his/her customer, that is why they make louder moans and act like sex is a heavenly-experience, when it's not. They give a false hope that these men are good in bed, or will get better through them.

Whereas Elsa gives false hope that sick people will be healed, that they will get better through her. *Men go to prostitutes for self-satisfaction – people with diseases go to Elsa for self-satisfaction.* People with terminal diseases, those who are under extreme hopeless conditions – they actually believe they would get better because of Elsa.

*b. Nature of Business*

What prostitutes and Elsa does is the same – both are in the business of investing to people. Prostitutes have faith in their skill of pleasuring while Elsa has faith in whoever holy she believes in or maybe in herself. Furthermore, what prostitutes and Elsa do is touch another man's body to make it feel good. The prostitute touch a man's genital so as to pleasure him while Elsa touch a body part of a sick person to make it feel better.

Exploitation is the main factor of prostitution. Prostitutes let themselves be touched, their bodies be seized by a man's rude hands in return for money; their bodies were exploited. In the film, many characters have exploited Elsa in many different ways. During Elsa's faith healing sessions, many of the locals of Cupang have put up a business near Elsa's house due to the influx of people coming to their town. Elsa becomes the prostitute of the people for she's being used as a sacrifice for their personal endeavors. Her skills in faith healing – real or not, her energy, and her time were all used by the people for them to earn money.

Perhaps the most unobvious people who employ prostitutions are those most proximate to Elsa. Mrs. Alba, the woman whom her mother works for, apparently only uses Elsa because of her plans on putting up a resort. These businesses built after Elsa's healing success are also Elsa's doing in a way. Elsa cures people in the name of holiness yet she still permit into selling

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‘holy water’ and other religious antics. It was only later at the film when she told her 7 apostles to stop the dirty business, so later when it’s almost too late.

Orly, the director himself confessed on abusing Elsa. He used Elsa as he would have used a prostitute. Orly used Elsa for his craft, for his business, for his personal gain – and Elsa has none of the gain whatsoever. When Elsa was raped, Orly shot the whole crime as it happen instead of helping the victims. This is one of the direct comparisons of Elsa to being a whore. While prostitutes are shot in film to gain money, Elsa was shot in film for Orly’s gain.

Meanwhile, Elsa is the religious whore. While the other is consummated by her ‘evil deeds’, Elsa is consummated by the Virgin Mary. People believe that the Virgin Mary has ‘entered her body’, although there is no proof to that. But in a way, Elsa becomes a prostitute by letting her religion ‘use her’ in the form of her faith healing sessions.

Elsa is brandishing her product like an advertisement – herself. If she wants to spread the word of God, why use herself and not an image of god, or another saint, or a bible quote? Why herself? There is a scene where a jeepney with an Elsa banner roam around the town to spread her word. Of course the banner on the jeepney is not Elsa’s doing. But there are like a thousand of those banners everywhere without Elsa contesting about it that it would seem she has approved it. Elsa spreads her name like prostitutes spread themselves in the city streets at night.

Despite the popular representation of Elsa as a god-like figure, here comes a contradictory claim that Elsa is a prostitute. She is a whore because she possesses the same characteristics that are present with prostitutes. She is being exploited, one way or another, by many people for their personal gains. Many put up business in her name, many people depends on her capabilities – her religiousness is just a front.

Aside from this, both Elsa's faith healing and prostitution relied on one thing - that is bringing joy to the people. They both depended on faith; prostitutes depended on their faith to



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provide sexual and physical relief to customers, while Elsa depended on her faith to her imaginary Virgin Mary.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper is to scrutinize the image of Elsa to provide new interpretations of the film *Himala*. First, by constructing Elsa's image in the film, the researcher presented how the film writer shaped Elsa's character. Although Lee presented her as a false faith healer, one still cannot help but give her character a different interpretation, such as an intelligent woman, a sorceress, a lunatic, a sick person, and an artist. Second, by dissecting Elsa's character, the researcher was able to attach an entirely different interpretation of her character, including a god-like figure, a curse of Cupang, and a religious prostitute.

As a whole, the film *Himala* not only depicts Elsa's experience as a woman in Cupang, but also strives to bring out the truth behind another truth. This is not just about a woman who became a faith healer and then a god-like figure, a curse, and a prostitute; it also presented the reasons and causes why she became all of these. Religion and faith were not only the issues discussed in the film. There is also a strong sense of feminism. The dominance of female characters is notable, especially because they hold a position of power in the film – particularly Elsa. The men depicted served only as a supplement to female characters. This denotes the shift of power from the men to the women. Here we are being shown the possibility of having a matriarchal society from having a nation that is clearly patriarchal. The film intensifies Elsa's power to be dominant to everyone any time she pleases, and even the men in Cupang and the priest cannot stop her.

The film depicts the truth in the society – men always see women as an entity that can provide them with physical pleasure, entertainment, particularly from the prostitutes. If women are ordinarily perceived as inferior to men, in the film, what Nimia (the whore) did is a counter-culture. She used her body so that she would be treated as the goddess of the thirsty souls of the men in Cupang. She enticed men to their limit, men who craved for physical attention. The

notion of prostitution may not be a concept promoted by feminism; it became apparent in the film that women can use men's sexuality against them.

The film lambasted the patriarchal situation in the Philippines. Elsa declared a miracle – a rare power that can be possessed by an ordinary person. Her being a curse in Cupang became a powerful one. She has truly become a prostitute by providing relief through miracles, and she was worshipped like a god. She surpassed the highest being in the world. Elsa quenched Cupang's thirst – thirst for power, thirst for worldly activities, and thirst for faith.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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