

RESEARCH BRIEF

## The Devices of Satire in Bobis' *Fish Hair Woman*: A Call for Change

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According to Lumbera (1997, p. 58), reading a literary work requires one to “engage with its language as the social practice of individuals, groups and institutions.” He referred to Philippine literature as that which “may be produced in the capital city of Manila and in the different urban centers and rural outposts, even in foreign lands where descendants of Filipino migrants use English or any of the languages of the Philippines to create works that tell about their lives and aspirations”(p.59). This goes to show that the novels though written in another country and in a foreign language may still serve as good sources of material on Philippine studies. Furthermore, Lumbera (1997) said:

The forms used by Filipino authors may be indigenous or borrowed from other cultures, and these may range from popular pieces addressed to mass audiences to highly sophisticated works intended for the intellectual elite. (p. 2)

This paper highlights the work of Merlinda Bobis. She is a poet before she became a fictionist. She is a transnational artist whose works primarily concerns Philippine culture. Bobis' prose, such as short stories and novels, was published when she was already working in Australia as a Creative Writing professor.

She left for Australia in 1991, under a scholarship to pursue her doctorate degree after her 11 years of teaching in different institutions in the Philippines. On the third year of her doctorate program in Australia, she applied for a teaching job, got it, and at the time of this writing, she is still working at Wollongong University.

I focused on Bobis' (2012) *Fish-Hair Woman*, that may somewhat fall under an epistolary novel. The epistolary technique is evident in the first part of the novel which is called the longest love-letter to her “beloved.” The novel has five parts and the other two later parts are told by an unknown narrator, from an omniscient point of view. Just like the other two earlier novels, it can be identified as a social novel. It emphasizes the influence of the social and economic conditions of an era in shaping characters and determining events. Often, it also embodies implicit or explicit problems recommending political and social reforms.

Satire, as Abrams (1999, p. 275) defined it, “is the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation.” It is differentiated from the comic which comedy evokes as laughter serving mainly as an end in itself while satire ridicules and uses laughter as a weapon, and against a butt that exists outside the work itself. The

aesthetics of satire can be identified through the theme and tone. Abrams (1999) further explained this view in the following statements:

Satire occurs as an incidental element within many works whose overall mode is not satiric in a certain character or situation, or in an interpolated passage of ironic commentary on some aspect of the human condition or of contemporary society. The most common indirect form is that of a fictional narrative, in which the objects of the satire are characters who make themselves and their opinions ridiculous or obnoxious by what they think, say, and do, and are sometimes made even more ridiculous by the author's comments and narrative style. (p.277)

It is evident that Bobis experimented on forms and applies whatever she thinks is useful in her craft as a creative writer and professor. In whatever form, she has maintained a certain desire to criticize society. Her works consistently focus on the call for hope and change against the social, political, and cultural issues.

This study's objective is to identify the type of satire, style, and devices in Bobis' third novel. It also aims to reveal how Bobis literarily criticizes society through the aesthetics of satire and her adept use of tropes as the representation of ideas. I intended to prove that Bobis' novel presents criticisms of the society where her consciousness on the region, in particular, and the country, in general, is anchored. My point of contention is that Bobis writes literarily in a way that the readers see the flaws of the society, yet offers solution or possibility of cure and hope to the exposed social problems.

## Methods

This paper utilizes a formalistic approach in the analyses of *Fish-Hair Woman*, the third novel of Merlinda Bobis (2012). It won for her three awards such as the Most Underrated Book award in 2013, finalist for *Davitt Awards* under the *Best Crime and Mystery Books by Australian Women* during the same year; and winner of *Juan C. Laya Prize* as Best Novel in a foreign language in 2014. The applied approach covers the descriptive-qualitative type of literary criticism.

## Theoretical Background

This study employed Hornedo's (2002, p. 42) idea that "to an extent, the artist is an artifact of culture, and what art discloses is not an individual consciousness but a narrative larger than the individual's personal narrative of himself." Hornedo's statement asserts that a piece of literature reflects the worldview of its writer, which is the result of personal experiences, basically rooted from culture. I, therefore, anchored this study's argument on the idea that Bobis is a satirist, a Filipino expatriate writer who also considers herself as a transnational of Australia. Her novels are reflective of how she views Philippine society in general and the Bicolanos in particular. Through the aesthetics and devices of satire, this research sought to disclose that Bobis writes about her society for its people to recognize the need to change and become aware of the problems that arise from individual and societal behavior. Through her works, Bobis induces calls for change that may emanate from the people who may see themselves being implicitly represented by the characters in the novels.

## Overview

The novel starts with the "longest love letter" of Estrella titled "Beloved." She claims herself as the fish-hair woman who uses her 12-meter-long hair to retrieve corpses from her village—Iraya's river. The manuscript reveals her personal life leading up to the war and the war itself. Estrella is the illegitimate daughter of the former mayor Estradero (Doctor Alvarado). Her mother, Carmen, was only 15 years old and died during childbirth. Mamay Dulce, the attending midwife, adopts her after the death of her grandmother soon after her mother's. Being naturally bald at birth, Pay Inyo the gravedigger, *herbolario*, and perpetual suitor of Mamay Elena, helps grow Estrella's hair through his incantations and herbal medicines. The hair "miraculously" grows along with painful memories, after Estrella's near-death experience at the age of five.

Pilar and Bolodoy, Mamay Dulce's children, face life's turn when each chooses the "left", joins the communist insurgent, and "right" the private army. It breaks their mother's heart and literally kills her. Those incidents happen when Estrella and Adora, the orphan and niece of the *Jueteng* queen, are in Hawaii with ex-governor Estradero.

The rest of the novel, Parts Four and Five, are told by an unnamed narrator and examines how the events of the manuscript are dealt with in the present by Estrella (now as Stella), Luke, and a litany of other characters. By this time Pilar and Tony, the Australian journalist whom both Pilar and Estrella had loved, are among the dead or disappeared. The novel was centered on *Tony's* mysterious disappearance in the Philippines.

Tony's 19-year-old son, Luke, was lured to the Philippines on the pretext that his father is alive, by Kiko who wishes to "sanitize" history and facilitate his return to politics. There he met Adora, the mute lady, and fell in love with her silence. Dr. Alvarado's death puts the village at peace and the other characters at rest.

There are too familiar stories in the novel. They are stories of farmers' expropriation, being pushed off their land and turned into landless wage laborers by power-greedy *mestizo* elites like Dr. Alvarado, alias Governor Estradero and his private army, the *Anghel de la Guardia*. There are also stories of rape, torture, and murder by the State with the complicit backing of the West, including Australia.

The story transcends through three decades and continents. It covers events from 1977 to 1997, from Philippine village Iraya to Australia and Hawaii. The novel ends with an epilogue of father and daughter's vacation in Iraya, where Luke and Addie, Adora's daughter, were enveloped in the light of fireflies.

The analyses are divided into two parts, (1) the discussion of the techniques and devices of satire and (2) the presentation of tropes used in the novel. The second part is deemed important to identify the figurative representation of the ideas that the author would like to impart to her readers. The tropes are likewise used in revealing the satirical designs applied in the narrative.

## Results

### *The Techniques and Devices of Satire in the Novel*

**Exaggeration.** The length of Estrella's hair, 12 meters long, is an exaggerated representation of the span of her memory and how long it grows with one handspan. Moreover, the connection of the hair to the heart is an example of the exaggeration technique in the novel that satirizes history through hair as memory and

the heart as longing for love. The following excerpts express the said ideas:

Everytime I remembered anything that unsettled my heart, my hair grew one handspan. Mamay Dulce was convinced of this phenomenon when I was six years old. 'very tricky hair, very tricky heart', she whispered to me in her singsong on mornings when I woke up to even longer hair on my pillow after a night of agitated dreams. (Bobis, 2012, p. 3)

You see, Mamay Dulce, history hurts my hair, did you know that? Remembering is always a bleeding out of memory, like pulling thread from a vein in the heart, a coagulation so fine, miles of it stretching upwards to the scalp then sprouting there into the longest strand of red hair. Some face-saving tale to explain my twelve meters of very thick black hair with its streaks of red and hide my history. (Bobis, 2012, p. 4)

How much can the heart accommodate? Death and love, an enemy and a sweetheart, war and an impassioned serenade, and more. Only four chambers, but with infinite space like memory where there is room even for those whom we do not love. (Bobis, 2012, p. 142)

The philosophical representation of the capillaries of the heart, love and hatred are connected to the veins of the scalp where the hair meets with memory that tells history. Estrella reveals the history through her memories and nostalgic stories that aim to provide justice to the oppressed. Ten years after the Total War in the Philippines, stories written in Hawaii were sent to the Philippines through an Australian character. He was asked to open the case of a lost Australian reporter, who is apparently the letter sender's lover.

**Incongruity.** The use of "my house" referring to the place where one of the political characters, Mayor Reyes, stays shows a paradoxical idea. He offers his house as open to the people, claiming himself as the people's mayor who came from the hills and served their cause. "My house is open to you" (Bobis, 2012, p. 263). This house is actually the Alvarados/Estraderos' which was vacated when the former governor fled to Hawaii. Being the biggest house in Iraya that boasted power, the newly elected mayor, once a revolutionary,

requested “to rent” the ancestral house. The following lines may strengthen the abovementioned ideas:

Mayor Reyes is not quite a tenant. He arranged the transfer of domicile with Iraya’s local government six years ago. After he was sworn on his first term, he argued that the mayor must be stationed in the most presentable house in the village, for the time being, of course. Until he has arranged for a residence that is worthy of the position: something with a decent representation to the public. (Bobis, 2012, p. 259)

In the Philippines, particularly in rural areas, political figures are always expected to have a better kind of living than their constituents. In the case of the current mayor, he uses his position to meet his personal needs and at the same time enjoy the “power” given by the mass of people.

The character of Rizalino “Bolodoy” Capaz, labeled as “Bolodoy the terrible” clearly manifests an example of incongruity in his mental ability as well as physical aspect. The name *Bolodoy* either suggests a hill-hillbilly or a dumb-dumbbell. His real name, Rizalino, was patterned after the Filipinos’ national hero known as intelligent in all aspect. In one of Bolodoy’s third-grade classroom experiences at 12 years old, he associated letter B for *buyod*, a local term for shrimp. When he was told by the teacher to “go and plant kamote” he proudly responded that he was already doing it and he produces the best *duma*, or sweet potatoes in their farm. Below is the excerpt of the narrative that describes the said classroom scenario:

An uncouth, ignorant, atrocious hick, de primera clase, one of his teachers confided to a colleague during his third grade, after he came to class with a bag of shrimps. The story goes that he sweated over the alphabets beside that poor teacher who, while agonizing over his total inability to recognize the strange markings on paper, also suffered a jumping thing inside her blouse. Which he quickly retrieved with his hand in a flash. B is for buyod- shrimp! Between his teacher’s bosom!

Sorry ma’am, sorry, they’re very fresh that’s why, just caught them in the river this morning, ay so very sorry ma’am.

Thus he was expelled during his third grade; he was twelve.

You better go home and plant kamote, the teacher screamed.

I’m already planting them ma’am. But in my family, we call them *duma*, more proper that way. (Bobis, 2012, p. 184)

It was further mentioned in the narrative that the worst insult anyone can receive at school is “you better go home and plant sweet potatoes.” It meant that one’s intellect was as lowly as the humble tuber, which does not need any particular mental acumen to grow. Agriculture is considered as a low type of occupation in the country; thus, the insult goes with the idea that planting is the only possible occupation in his lifetime and the person is not meant to do other complex human concerns.

Another instance that shows incongruity is when Pilar uses teasing ditty as one way of getting the attention of her Mamay Dulce. Pay Inyo serenades his love with the help of the three children to no avail. This is the teasing ditty that Pilar sings at the top of her lungs:

Mapula-pula pisngi ni Dulsora  
Very red the cheeks of Dulsora  
Tugtog mambo-jambo the music is mambo-  
jambo

Kabit ni Pay Inyo  
She’s dancing with Pay Inyo (Bobis, 2012,  
p. 141)

In the Philippines, it is unusual that children tease the adult in an uncourteous way. In that instance, it was effective because Mamay Dulce appeared at the window to find and punish Pilar, an action which confirmed that the latter’s intention was served. The “serenaders” saw her apparition at the window. It is a common fact that the children’s favor is first sought in wooing the adult, such as the case of Mamay Dulce and Pay Inyo. The narrator recounts the process in the following lines:

The serenade went on for too long and too desperately. We nearly outgrew the old man’s

stratagems in the art of village courtship. Turutalinga, dilimon, labyu, tira-tira, balicucha and all delights available in his glass jars were the palate-sweeteners for us children. Flowered housedress, tortoise-shell comb, rosy lipstick or sequined velvet sandals from the city were the heart-implorers for dear Mamay Dulce. These were the gifts that he brought on his regular courting hour, three to four on a Saturday afternoon. He never visited without presents. (Bobis, 2012, p. 141)

Despite the long and extended courtship, it was not reciprocated. Ironically, because of love, Mamay Dulce cannot accept the offered love of her only suitor. She considers it sacrificial not to marry and as she explains to Pay Inyo, "because of the kids; I'm afraid the heart has very little room" ( Bobis, 2012, p.142).

**Parody.** Estrella is literally born bald, which troubles people around her. They provide collective efforts to help grow her hair. There are several suggestions, mostly to pray novenas to particular patron saint along with the concoctions of herbs in her head. One of the raised options is to offer five novenas to Santa Maria Magdalena. Another option is to pray a novena to Saint Jude, the saint of lost causes, and the other is to pray to Saint Rita, the patron saint for impossible wishes.

All the said ideas were opposed with different reasons. It was considered that while Santa Magdalena is in the Holy Book, she is also the whore, referred to as "the fallen woman with beautiful hair"(p. 61). "She became a saint when she washed His feet with perfume and her hair" (p. 62). It angered Mamay Dulce the idea that the hairlessness of Estrella is a lost cause and an impossible case.

It was emphasized in the above discussion that people offer novena prayers for specific intentions, but faith may only help if there is acceptance along with it. For every patron saint suggested, there is always the opposing idea that argues with the intention. It is a bitter fact that the believers have their own arguments between logic and faith. It can also be noted that rural folks in their desperation, have nothing else to rely on but the medicines from nature and what was left of their faith.

An example of travesty evident in the narrative is the idea of "angelhood." It was described that

"angelhood is every little girl's dream in Iraya" ( p. 69). The angel's task is to unveil the mourning Blessed mother with hands folded in prayer while she is being lowered in mid-air, a rope tied on her waist and sings *Salve Regina*. In Iraya, "angelhood is expensive" because the search for the angel is done through money-contest. The details are presented in the following excerpt from the narrative:

The race towards angelhood was expensive and ate up precious time. It meant winning a money-contest or, kindly put, assisting the church in its fund-raising project. In this worthy task, the stage mothers of the six-to eight years old aspirants compete in selling the most number of tickets, in the name of their daughters. The biggest earner wins the title of "angel." (Bobis, 2012, p. 70)

The grandiose idea of being an angel is sought, but the significance is sacrificed and neglected in the process. Popularity and finances count the most rather than the essence of the angel's representation. The adults promote their children, which results to boost of pride or disappointment, either way of their own children or the others. The supposedly religious activity expected to promote values encourages the opposite. Being an angel does not require excellence in attitude or character, as long as their parents have enough money. The church initiates if not tolerates the said practice.

**Reversal.** The use of a white man, Australian writer Tony, to dig up and search for history instead of a native Filipino, such as the self-acclaimed fish- hair woman's very own sister, Pilar, is a manifestation of reversal. The first-person narrator, the letter sender writes stories about her village and persuades Luke, the son of Tony, to visit the Philippines. The ulterior motive is not for Luke to search for his father but to seek justice for those who have been victims of militarization and insurgency. If the stories in the series of letter intend to trace the history of the Philippines using a native Filipino who has been lost, nobody may lift a finger, but if it concerns a white man, it calls attention; thus, the strategy of Estrella. Notice the following lines in the narrative, a conversation scene between another Australian, Mr. Baker, and a Filipino professor, Inez Carillo:

But Estrella Capili's story is bigger than the white man, the white man is no hero here, the white man is only a prop to tell her story. And he's stereotyped, even ridiculed, so shouldn't I then complain as a white man? I mean- this is not his story! For once, he reverses the lecturing tone. This, Professor, is the story of a whole village, about someone's memory. (Bobis, 2012, p. 228)

The professor also claimed that Estrella turned her back from the village, from her family, and her country. Prof Carillo believes that her high school classmate and best friend left her and her own heart, off to another country with her biological father who is considered as the most corrupt governor of the country. She considers that the stories are intended for Estrella's vindication and not to serve justice to the victims. It is very evident that Prof. Carillo is not convinced of Mr. Baker's assertion on the fish-hair woman's letter. Instead, she let logic be carried away by emotions. These are her words to Mr. Baker:

Remember this: she wasn't even here during our Total war. She left us all in the seventies, then wrote herself clean in this manuscript. She has written herself in the place of her sister, and in the place of a myth- you know, Mr. Baker, in 1987 Iraya did believe in a Fish-Hair Woman. Despair makes you believe in anything. It fuels fervor, it is its own religion. (Bobis, 2012, pp. 228–229)

Reversal as an idea can be figured out from the style of the author in presenting the details in the narrative. A Filipino highlights a foreigner, a foreigner who rather believes a Filipino, and a Filipino who despises another Filipino.

The definition of the word *salvage* as presented in the narrative is another example of reversal. Accordingly, its original meaning comes from the Latin word, *salvare*, referring to rescue, retrieve, or preserve from loss or destruction. It was mentioned that in the narrator's village, the word is "whispered with a weigh in the tongue, sinking the word like a body thrown into the river" (p. 38). The new definition of the word *salvage* is the opposite of its actual meaning. In Iraya, it refers to liquidated, made liquid, or made to disappear and summarily executed.

**Defamiliarization.** The use of magico-tale of a woman with 12-meter long hair is, by itself, a defamiliarization. The use of magic-realism is evident in the narrative. Notice in the following excerpts:

We went, a grim recession to the river, guarded by flying lights and the soldiers who held my hair like a bridal train. Again, I remembered his lips and the precious stones on my back and the river in my pelvis and his lemon grass fish swimming from the belly of a dead girl now growing her face and nipples back and her grandmother rubbing her feet as if trying to remember something and the soft mound of earth singing the ten-year old bones to sleep. (Bobis, 2012, p.16)

A strung of hair is flung out the window. It gets caught in the wind. (Bobis, 2012, p. 52)

He is at sea with Adora. He has just shampooed his hair when they set afloat in what looks like half a boat. No, it is a couch with a sail. They reach the middle of the sea where the water is clear and still. He wants to wash off the shampoo from his hair, but there's only salt water and it won't do.

He asks, 'Does my father know about me?'

Adora does not answer. She jumps off the boat and disappears. He is suddenly alone, holding a little bucket. The sea is so clear, it will suffice. He dips into it with his bucket and pours the water on his head to wash off the shampoo. His head begins to itch. He scratches it, but itches even more. The itch is growing bigger, the itch infects his fingers. He looks at them- there are maggots under his nails! His hair is full of maggots! He must wash them off, so he dips for more water, but it's no longer clear. It has dimmed with maggots. He panics. He must wash his hair, he must!

But each time he dips into the water, the maggots multiply. He begins to howl. Then he feels a faint tickle in his ear.

It is a maggot whispering, "Does your father know about me?"  
(Bobis, 2012, pp. 99–100)

The first excerpt refers to the collective memory of Estrella about the military, both the government and the revolutionary side. They both abuse their power to the wanton loss of civilian lives. It emphasizes that the victims are still very young but have been deprived of a good future.

On the other hand, the maggots represent the secrets or hidden ideas from Luke which he starts to uncover and realize. They are the truth behind the letters and the stories he receives. They are just in front of him and even if he tries to avoid, he has already committed himself to know and expose them.

### ***Tropes in the Novel-Hair and its Contextual Representation***

The novel talks about memory as presented through hair and river that refer to glamour and source of life or living. It is ironic that the river, which supposedly represents life, is the place where the dead bodies can be found. They are fished-out by the hair which symbolizes memory. The hair also called the "crowning glory" of every woman is deliberately used to trawl the corpses from the river. The tropes are used to recount the different periods in the Philippines and the influences of other countries. The dark and the bright sides of the Philippine experiences, as well as the negative and positive culture of people, are highlighted through the representation of hair as memory and the river as a continuous battle for liberation from the past.

### ***Hair for Memory***

Estrella's hair is a metaphorical allusion to memory. Her entire history is represented through the length of her hair. The "longest hair" is a combination of social and magic realism. She helps find and give justice to the oppressed from far Hawaii to the river of Iraya through the stories created out of her memory. At the beginning of the novel, the first-person narrator describes Estrella and her hair in the following lines:

Hair. How was it linked with the heart? I'll tell you- it had something to do with memory. Every

time I remembered anything that unsettled my heart, my hair grew one handspan. Mamay Dulce was convinced of this phenomenon when I was six years old. "Very tricky hair. very tricky heart", she whispered to me in her singsong on mornings when I woke up to even longer hair on my pillow after a night of agitated dreams.  
(Bobis, 2012, p. 5)

Estrella was born bald which signifies that, at birth, she is free from any story or memory. "It is 1959, summertime and I am born bald" (Bobis, 2012, p. 29). As she grows older, her hair grows along with stories. In her letter to Tony, it says, "I want to wrap you in my hair, these strands that would not stop growing into story after story, into all that I remember of my village in 1987 and the years before. Stories that can save, that can kill" (Bobis, 2012, p. 137). Her scalp aches with the torture of stories which identify her roots.

### ***Hair for Cure***

Just as hair represents memory, it also symbolizes remedy or cure. Estrella is labeled as The Fish-Hair Woman, who trawls corpses from the river Iraya through her 12-metre hair. The narrative describes her in the following verses:

Lambat na itom na itom	very black net
pero sa dugo natumtom	but blood soaked
samong babying parasira	our fisherwoman
buhok pangsalbar- pangsira	hair to save-fish
kang samong mga padaba	all our beloved

(Bobis, 2012, p. 5)

"I trawled not the Australian but history" (Bobis, 2012, p. 201). This statement of Stella as the first person narrator directly reveals how she uses the hair as a representation of memory to provide a cure or help the victims of power abuse attain justice. The following lines strengthened the said idea:

It was the Total War. The military's operation Lambat Bitag: Fishnet Trap. Our village was trapped between the military's purge of the insurgency and the insurgents' purge of their own ranks, which extended to the cities and throughout the country. Between the right and the left ventricle of this constricted heart of a

nation, the village conjured another net. Ten years after my brother died, I became their Fish-Hair Woman. (Bobis, 2012, p. 200)

## Conclusion

In the novel under study, love is the probable cause of every event and action of the characters. The narrator's love for her village obliges her to claim herself as the "fish-hair woman." Her intention is to liberalize the victims of oppression and provide justice through stories written from her memory.

This narrative of Bobis (2012) serves as communicators of Philippine culture and history that emanate from the type of love that a Filipino has to offer and yet to have. She uses the characters and events, although fictive, in revealing the ugly points of Filipinos. According to Hornedo (2000a) in his overview of Anthropology, "every cultural community, large or small, understands itself in the frame of its own narrative or account of itself. All cultures are assumed to have their own narratives of themselves. To understand them is to understand their narrative" (p. 20).

Moreover, based from Hornedo's (2000a) discussion of the theory and the genesis of a literary text, it was explained that "the creation of a literary work is guided consciously or unconsciously by what the author thinks literature ought to achieve, to be made of, to look like and by whom" (p.73). Hence, Bobis' (2012) novel appeal to the reading Filipinos to act on their societal problems presented in a literary way through intellectual humor, not only to laugh at their own idiocies. Likewise, she also targeted other reading nationalities for possible support.

Based on the abovementioned ideas, it can be gleaned that Bobis sees her country's need for liberation and search for cultural strength. Her being transnational motivates her to write from her perspective of Philippine culture associated with her personal experiences in another country. She wants her readers to understand the novels from the recognition of society behind the creative representation of political and cultural flaws.

This study may also be used as additional source material in the Philippine culture or related subjects offered in some academes/institutions. The tools of satire may be considered as effective methods of explaining and understanding Filipino culture.

## Conflict of interest

None.

## Ethical clearance

The study was approved by the institution.

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