

# Women's Sexuality in Merlinda Bobis' *Banana Heart Summer*: An Intersection of Foucault's Transgressions and Punishment

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**Abstract**—Foucault maintains that power does not repress sexuality but rather amplifies it through discourses. This paper, however, attempts to present how Foucault's mechanisms of power: prohibition, censorship, and denial are, the very ideas, exercised from the individual to the community level to punish women's transgressions of sexuality and thereby disadvantage the full measure of her agency. Transgressions are maintained in line with his notion that such happen via the recognition of the boundaries and the crossing of the limits. A close reading of *Banana Heart Summer* reveals that the women characters can only safely explore and actualize the full measure of their sexuality within the limiting scope of an approved, legitimized union that is unfortunately anchored in an ideal age and within a prescribed social class. Acts outside of this terrain of control are considered transgressions and are met with prohibition, censorship, or denial that come at a great cost to women's full agency as experienced by Viring, Maring, and VV.

**Index Terms**—Foucault, punishment, transgressions, women's sexuality.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Philippine colonial apparatuses, as one can glean from the nation's colonial history, pave way for women's sexuality to be constrained, limited, and shaped by others, but not by her. Women's sexuality and sexual practices are socially constructed by competing yet colluding forces such as religion and the state. Sexuality as defined by the World Health Organization (2006) is "a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction." [1] Sex and sexuality are important human dimensions and are considered as the most private and personal. Control on women's sexuality is exercised through the limits that she must not cross. This, in effect, simultaneously provides an opening for transgressions of the terrain and boundaries of control. In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* Foucault clearly asserts that the act of transgression recognizes that a determined limit can be transcended [2].

Central to this paper are the ideas of Foucault on sexuality, transgressions, power, and punishment. Whereas Foucault dismisses the notion that power represses sexuality but rather promotes it through discourse, this paper explores how power works through the very ideas of his mechanisms of power: prohibition, censorship, and denial [3], and argues that these

mechanisms of power are, in fact, the measures of punishment attending transgressions of sexuality.

In the Philippines, for a woman to recognize her sexuality by exploration and actualization is akin to transgression, as such actions become a challenge to the prevailing heteronormative sexual script. Women's sexuality has been reduced to her reproductive capacity, and the limited and limiting terrain of her sexual agency can only be safely acknowledged and explored within the regulated space of an approved, legitimized union. Any act or exploration outside of this prescribed space pushes the terrain of her sexuality and is considered a violation- a transgression. The power of such transgressions is denied, countered, or limited in varied ways. As sexuality finds its most intimate articulation through the body, punishment is commonly enacted through the denial and censure of the body, its preoccupations, enterprises, and sensations. In *Discipline and Punishment* Foucault mentions that:

...in our societies, the systems of punishment are to be situated in a certain 'political economy' of the body: even if they do not make use of violent or bloody punishment, even when they use 'lenient' methods involving confinement or correction, it is always the body that is at issue - the body and its forces, their utility and their docility, their distribution and their submission (25) [4].

A body that does not conform with the prescribed limits of sexuality is disciplined through punishment. The attendant punishment must be manifold and must serve as deterrent to other women who find compliance with the societal sexual script restrictive. A textual analysis via a close reading of the transgressions of women's sexuality through the characters of Viring, Maring, and VV in Merlinda Bobis' *Banana Heart Summer* heavily manifests how transgressions are indeed countered through punishments in the form of prohibition, censorship, and denial that aim to limit women's full agency. In *Banana Heart Summer*, Nenita's small community illustrates how women's sexual transgressions are made as intolerable acts where punishments are meted out by the family and community at the disadvantage of women's agency.

## II. VIRING AND MARRY (AGE)

(Tya) Viring, a neighbor of Nenita, is a 38 – year old "sari sari" store (neighborhood variety/convenience store) owner who elopes with Juanito, 18 years old. Their elopement

becomes Viring's personal offence in the minds of her townfolk for "How could that poor boy elope with a spinster old enough to be his mother?"(136) [5]. A man having a relationship with a much younger woman is at most considered unconventional; on the contrary, Viring's marriage with Juanito becomes objectionable to the entire community and transforms itself into "a most terrible, terrible scandal!" (136) [5].

This societal sexual script more often rationalizes older men- younger women relationships. Belen Medina in *The Filipino Family* acknowledges this stereotypical construct and writes that in terms of mate selection:

*The norm is that husbands should be the same age or older than their wives. Moreover, marriage between younger women and older men is more socially acceptable than between younger men and older women. Thus, men are more in demand with advancing age, while for women, access to potential groom is highest in their 20s and decreases with advancing age. This means that the demand for women diminish with age* (106) [6].

In fact, a young woman in the arms of an older man becomes a trophy wife. In Viring's case being with Juanito becomes her scarlet letter. Nothing is ever mentioned of how Juanito is part of the elopement and that it is consensual for how could an older woman kidnap a boy who is described as "all of aggressive eighteen" and "had an oversupply of punk and rah-rah-rah"? (134) [5]. The relationship only becomes rational when attributed as an act of wickedness on Viring's part. The mother sees the elopement as a kidnapping with Viring being the mastermind of the crime for she has contrived everything being "that evil woman" (140) [5] who stole her son. The town even called it an abduction by someone "who missed the last trip years and years ago too" (140) [5]. The predator-prey dynamics can be gleaned within the community allegations with Viring being the predator. Mass media abound with images of the 'cougar' woman, an older woman who is sexually involved with a much younger man. The connection is easily visual as a cougar is a predatory animal. Given this, "older women who do express sexual desire are positioned as 'sexual predators' (94) [7].

In most cultures and societies, marriage and pregnancy, in this order, are the traditional life goals set for women. Yet in Viring's case love, marriage, and pregnancy have expiration dates that are most often not biologically or mentally set but culturally prescribed. The nexus of sexuality and aging provides more material to the disadvantaging of women. That older adults are asexual leads the stereotype and the effect "is even greater for older women who experience the cumulative effect of ageism and sexism" (Geneway 1978 in Jen 4) [8]. The burden of ageism and sexism works in such a way that "in many societies older women lose what little status they had with the disappearance of childbearing potential and the sexual allure of youth" (Owen 1996 in Doyal 433) [9]. Susan Sontag labels this as the phenomenon of 'double standard of aging' where as a woman ages "she is seen as less attractive because her years of social usefulness as a childbearer are behind her" (46) [10], unlike that of a man.

Viring's marriage and children with Juanito are

transgressions that go against the conventions of the immediate neighborhood. It was this small society that tagged her as an old maid. Nenita in her musings about Viring points out that:

*Where I come from, an old maid is an old maid. And that means, someone who has turned thirty. She 'missed the last trip', she is a 'frozen delight', she is a 'chassis that's kiribad, bent and unusable' (140) [5].*

The descriptions of being a "frozen delight" and of a "chassis that is unusable" are injurious on Viring's sexual agency for these are acknowledgements of her sexuality- her reproductive capacity, and her body- treated as inferior if not worthless because of her age. Yet despite Viring upending the stereotypes heaped on older women- being unappealing and unable to bear children- for she is able to bear Juanito 5 children, this does not make her 'sin' any lighter in the eyes of her townfolk. Her age will forever be her curse and disease. Her transgression is lifting this imposed curse. She transgresses the myth of an asexual old woman by having sex and having babies with a younger man.

More than the marriage, it is her age that breaks down the conventions of sexual relationships. Transgressions are enacted from recognized limits. Conventions and practices that have become deeply entrenched in the psyche of the nation and its subjects, and in due course have been considered as the normative, constitute the borders of the limits. Foucault elucidates that the prevailing system of beliefs is the material for transgression, "perhaps also its entire trajectory, even its origin: it is likely that transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses" (34) [2]. Viring at 38 transgresses the sexual script reserved for aging women- being asexual. In her town, a woman should and may only get married with the approval of the society until 29 years of age. A year older and a woman is already a 'frozen delight'. The sexual script is further perpetuated with sayings where old men are complimented for being "matanda na pero matulis pa" (old but still sexually able) while women turning 30, especially those who are single, are cautioned as their next age is "mawawala na sa kalendaryo" (eventually nowhere to be found on the monthly calendar). Growing old is inevitable; however, growing old for men and women are framed in different ways where, as Sontag further suggests, it "is predominantly experienced as shameful by women" (95) [11]. Such traditional perspectives permeate the collective imagination, become part of social beliefs, and serve as a guide in the historical and social understanding and approval of how men and women in different ages should behave.

In as much as Viring and Juanito are said to have found happiness in each other and in their family, Viring's agency could never fully recover from being an evil, old woman who corrupted a younger innocent man, and her transgressions must not be allowed to prevail. After the elopement and subsequent marriage, she is denied of a peaceful existence in her neighborhood. The community where she grew up in, established her roots, and found a comfortable level of financial security as an owner of a small variety store has denied her and her new family of an acceptable level of survivability. This denial of residence and, consequently,

livelihood has been done implicitly through complicit acts of incessant chit chats and innuendos harping on Viring as an immoral person whose debased values might contaminate the area and its people. The community wields its power in maintaining the social script of sexual relationships through a denial of Viring's physical presence within the community. The act of eloping and marrying Juanito is constantly censored by a negative discourse that lays blame on Viring and associates her acts with evil. The Viring-Juanito relationship becomes an example of a taboo that is not to be emulated and must be prohibited, as her plight and flight becomes the future of any old woman who follows her ways. The couples' flight from Juanito's mother and the town is an escape and a submission that they can only realize their full happiness elsewhere. Her sexual transgressions allow her to realize her sexual agency but at a cost to her image, representation, mobility, and even peace of mind. She and Juanito could never go back in peace to their old neighborhood so long as the people remember her transgressions.

### III. MARING, EMOTIONAL INTIMACY, AND SEXUAL (DIS) PLEASURE

Maring's marriage to Gable (Nenita's parents) can be said as very productive given their 6 children (one died stillborn). Maring following the dictates of her very young heart elopes and marries Gable at the age of 14 with her being only in 1st year high school. Her parents' objection to the marriage has been driven by class and social status, as Gable is a mason without any prospects to offer Maring. Her family is considered rich but she gets disowned upon her elopement leaving only her older sister to acknowledge her and occasionally help her. Their daughter Nenita narrates that her mother married for love. It is also this desire for emotional connection that disadvantaged Maring's entire sexual agency. An important part of a woman's sexuality is the need for interpersonal intimacy explored in varying levels from friendship to sexual activity. As Maring has been brought up by emotionally distant parents who are described as "a scarily formal, a couple of staunch believers in unbending discipline, which meant withholding traces of warmth" (72) [5], this makes it comprehensible that the need for her emotional cup to be filled becomes primary especially at her vulnerable age. Her cold parents are the opposite of the more sensitive Gable who speaks to her emotional side for "he looked at things closely, tenderly" (72) [5] and who is shown as physically affectionate to her and their children. At age 14, Maring might have needed a deeper interpersonal connection. However, a likely consequence of being in a relationship with Gable and physically exploring intimacy with him is pregnancy. With the birth of Nenita, their first daughter, their relationship becomes fully anchored on Maring having a baby one after the other. Maring at her young age and having grown up accustomed to a comfortable life could have easily given up a life of hardships with Gable if not for the babies. It then becomes apparent that the only tangible hold that Gable has on Maring are their children.

*She fell pregnant and fell out of her family's favor. I suspect she never wanted the pregnancy, but my earnest young father knew that a baby would make sure she could not leave him.... (113) [5].*

Eventually Gable's only source of confidence is whenever he gets her young wife pregnant.

*Father felt proud each time Mother fell pregnant. Many times I saw the slight change in the way he walked. He threw his shoulders back, his chin lifted and his shuffle became a stride, cocky, happy, pelvis slightly forward and feet with a half skip sometimes. And he loved our mother more (201) [5].*

It appears that the more Maring gets pregnant, the more she gets to be owned by her husband and the harder it is for her to turn her back on Gable. Her every pregnancy becomes more of a burden than a blessing as it sucks the life out of her- physically and emotionally- but gives life to Gable's manhood:

*While Mother grew more miserable, slow and 'overheating', Father glowered, as if he were the one bearing 'the promise of joy' for that was how he described it. As if joy were never present but was always in the offing. And nightly he gasped even more (201) [5].*

This is the sex life of Maring, in one continuous and torturous loop. As a young girl who feels emotionally disconnected, Maring explored her emotional needs through Gable and this becomes her transgression. Girls at Maring's age are prohibited from thinking, feeling, and acting on anything that has to do with their sexuality. At a young age, it is common for parents to censure their daughters if they show any signs of being conscious about their sexuality whereas boys are encouraged to explore. Girls are not allowed to discuss or even to admit of an awakening sexuality as it is considered shameful whereas for boys an awakening sexuality is a badge of honor and a rite of passage. This double sexual standard starts at a young age where boys get condoned for sexual experimentation, but girls are only allowed "to express their sexuality within the context of a committed, socially approved relationship" (Diamond 116-119 in Etaugh and Bridges 46) [12].

Unfortunately, Maring's need for emotional connection leading to physical intimacy does not equate to her sexual enjoyment, as she has never been shown to take pleasure in sex. While her husband's sexual pleasure is marked by sounds, Maring, on the other hand, seems to be a passive player in the act:

*Junior slept in my old place; he was the eldest now. From where he lay, he heard the scraping and shifting. He fumbled the fraying edge of the mat between his thumb and forefinger, in time with the rhythm at the other end. 'I love you, Maring, I love you, he heard Father whisper at each gasp. Junior his fingers suddenly still, waited for Mother to answer. She didn't. Then his fingers were fumbling again in time with Father's grunting, the grunting speeding up, then the gasp, the big one, the last one, and then the sigh, lengthy and drawn out, as if*

*trailing his relief from end to end of the ceiling* (201) [5].

And as to her response, “She didn’t even sigh” (201) [5]. Her silence is passive acceptance of her predicament, given that Gable seems to find his assertiveness only in the arena of sex, “I thought of my parents at night, their whispered altercations before Mother was hushed and Father started grunting as we tried to sleep” (214) [5].

Gable’s sexual satisfaction culminating in his orgasm becomes the asymmetrical trajectory of their sex lives. This comes at a disadvantage to Maring’s needs who, in the first place, elopes with Gable in the hopes of finding a more fulfilling emotional and physical connection that has been withheld from her by her parents. If one is to utilize Lawrence and Byers’ (in Lamana and Reidmann 125) interpersonal exchange model of sexual satisfaction where “satisfaction is seen to depend on the costs and rewards of a sexual relationship” [13] then Maring’s sexual agency is doomed from the onset given that emotionally and physically she is left constantly dissatisfied. What could have been a traditionally subscribed leverage on her part as a woman: her youth and fertility, ultimately become an important part of her undoing. Lamana and Reidman in explaining the exchange theory mentions “women’s sexuality and associated fertility are resources that can be exchanged for economic support, protection, and status in society” [13] but has only been exploited in Maring’s part, as she has negotiated her sexuality and fertility for poverty and emotional and mental unrest.

As sex is the most intimate actualization of a person’s sexual desires, Maring’s sexual discontent is anathema to her sexual agency. Gable’s pleasure and self-confidence become primary, being the articulation of his desires and masculinity. According to Patricia Jung, the preferential treatment of men’s sensual gratification over women’s can even be rooted in what the Roman Catholic church considers as good sex where “male pleasure and orgasm” [14] is considered one of the necessary elements completing the marital act. Generally, the pronatal function of sex within the Christian traditional perspective relegates sensual pleasure as secondary since the pursuit of pleasure has always been suspect if not within the procreative function of the act [15-18]; however,

*Although this suspicion about the pleasure of sex was applied to men as well as women, in fact the pleasure of the heterosexual male was privileged (it was after all, necessary for procreation), while (with exceptions) female pleasure was apt to be categorized as a foul trap for men...”* (5) [19]

The notion of women as being secondary to men is chiefly rooted on the idea that women are always defined in terms of her relationship to a man-as a daughter to a father or a wife to a husband- which precludes that even her sexual identity is inimically tied to that of a man and exists to serve his pleasure. From Aristotle to Freud and in between, philosophical and psychological writings exist that tell of the incomplete woman. Aristotle suggests that “male superiority is due to a greater possession of heat” (20) [20] while Freud theorizes that the inferiority of women stem from her discovery of a lack of penis and this “leads to the development of a father complex...She never fully resolves this lack and this slows

down her maturation and impairs her psychosocial development” (5) [21]. Aristotle and Freud in their theorizing center the woman’s body as site of subordination that is naturally and psychologically produced. Such idea foregrounds how she is not her own agency but becomes the property of the man in her life. This function is highly exemplified in women’s roles and tasks in sex and marriage.

Women’s sexuality and sexual desires are mapped out in relation to the articulation of men’s sexuality and desires emphasizing the active suppression of women’s sexual behavior. This underscores the supplemental nature of women’s desires and pleasure in the sexual act. Lorde asserts that the containment of women’s sexual desires is rooted in power and domination:

*There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a source within each of us that lies in a deeply female spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information in our lives* (53) [22].

For Maring to be sexually fulfilled is to have a semblance of power over her body and sexuality which can never be, as her sexuality, body, and fertility are also the foundation of Gable’s manhood. But the devaluation of Maring’s pleasure is also a devaluation of her sexual agency.

Maring’s transgression has been further magnified by eloping with someone below her social status thereby upending the social strata, “My mother’s marriage to my father had collapsed the social order beyond restoration” (70) [5]. Tagged as a “A gallivanting whore”! (112) [5] by her parents, Maring’s association with Gable also transgressed the space and place afforded to her social class where events and celebrations are attended only by people of the same social status. Class placement in the Philippines is conferred by the family where a person’s “position in the status-hierarchy is determined by his family’s standing” (60) [6]. Those who belong to the upper class would necessarily want to maintain the stability of their social status and would prefer interacting with people from their own social group. Because Gable is not part of their upper class social community, Maring’s elopement has been elevated from a familial misbehavior to a social affront. Maring’s transgression becomes a crime to an entire social group making her family accountable to everyone. According to Lindsey, different institutions provide different measures of social control “to ensure that people more or less conform to a vast array of social norms...Social control mechanisms...are often informal but powerful, such as ridicule, exclusion from peers, and loss of support from family or colleagues” (55) [23]. For Maring’s family to save face, disownment becomes the option akin to death.

Her family’s disassociation with Maring is her punishment which must be meted out to appease their class. To accept Maring is to condone her crime against their social class.

Maring's disownment is censorship of her agency essentially erasing her presence and crime.

Maring's successive pregnancy, her reproductive capacity being utilized even stretched beyond her limits, comes at a heavy cost: her physical and mental well-being chipped part by part with each childbirth. At 26, Maring's last pregnancy almost cost her life, as she had to stay two weeks in the hospital after the stillbirth. Her rage and violence that often lead to her beating her children, especially Nenita, might be symptoms of postpartum depression given what she goes through every day: the anxiety of not having enough food to feed her children, the physical and emotional stress of having to take care of the other children with another one on the way, and her simmering frustration with her constantly unemployed husband who always get his way in bed. In a literature review conducted by M. Norhayati and her colleagues on the risk factors for postpartum symptoms in developing countries, some of the significant co-determining indices are: unplanned, unintended or unwanted pregnancies, low socio-economic factors, and lack of social support from either the spouse and other family members [24].

Ultimately, Maring's vulnerability and need for affection become her undoing. Her decisions to forge emotional connections and to explore intimacy come at a grave cost to her over-all wellbeing. Elopement becomes her form of escape but a tragic escape from one emotionless prison to another of a different kind. Maring's successive pregnancies, her idle husband, their "one-room house plus a ceiling and six going on seven children" (133) [5], and her lack of enjoyment in sex also amount to physical and emotional imprisonment. Her family's disownment also means that she could never have any kind of support outside of Gable. Maring's exploration of a part of her sexuality brings her more trouble than what she has bargained for. But can Maring do otherwise? To deny one's need for love and affection is to deny being human. When Maring tries to acknowledge her sexuality, her human need for emotional intimacy- to be loved and to love- the punishment ends up spilling over her entire agency.

#### IV. VV AND THE (UN) HOLY TRINITY OF SALVATION

Violeta Valenzuela (VV) is an 18- year old nursing student who is the only daughter of one of Nenita's well-to-do neighbors. Over an afternoon of singing, VV who is said to have a beautiful voice to match her beautiful face gets the attention and interest of Mr. Augusto 'Gusting' Alano, husband to Corazon, much to the chagrin of Basilio Profundo, her radioman/disk jockey suitor. Tagged as the Roy Orbison and Patsy Cline of the jam session, their voices are said to have commingled in perfect harmony. VV and Gusting's flirtation shortly develops into a serious, extramarital relationship. Even with Basilio around, Gusting is the one who stirred VV's emotions and sensations:

*Then, cigar-breath on the ready, he growled 'Pretty Woman' too close to her ear and "Only the Lonely" inspired a gesture that brushed her shoulders. In turn, Patsy went all rosy and breathless through 'I Fall to Pieces' (15) [5].*

As VV appears to have been giddily affected, her body language susceptible and receptive to the older man's amorous moves, Gusting takes the flirtation to a higher level:

*I saw how he came too close, as if the cake were meant to sit not on her hands, but on the front of her blouse. His hands accidentally slipped here and there and his breathing grew funny, just as hers did. Then they disappeared from the room for some five minutes before the band reconvened (152-153) [5].*

The illicit affair becomes a transgression of state laws and religious sacraments as it acts as a travesty to the sanctity of marriage. VV's pregnancy adds a different magnitude of gravity to the already grievous act as a growing belly lends evidence to the crime. That both are at fault for they consciously plunged head on into the affair knowing that it is illicit is a given. However, VV's transgressions of having sex and getting pregnant by a married man are more injurious to her agency than it will be to Gusting's. Despite their illicit affair being consensual, it emerges that VV is the one to singularly deal with her predicament as upon informing Gusting of their 'Concepcion Immaculada':

*But we can't- you can't have that- Concepcion Immaculada, even if- here, he looked at me worriedly, then turned to her again, voice hoarse, if Saint Joseph loves Mary (213) [5].*

The immediate switch from 'we' to 'you' is already the start of the detachment on Gusting's part. VV is left alone to deal with the evidence of their affair even if the conception is the consequence of their mutual decision to have sexual relations. Gusting further abandons VV by blaming her for getting pregnant:

*No, wait, I mean it. Saint Joseph will always love Mary- but I'm sorry, I can't, we can't and you know that, but I told you to be careful, and you're in nursing, you should know these things. Oh, I'm sorry, I don't mean- but-but... (214) [5].*

The predicament of VV is the predicament of a lot of women who unfortunately find themselves a part of an extramarital affair. That VV is going to suffer more than Gusting is symbolic of Philippine laws and post colonial social mores where a philandering wife is treated with more severity than a philandering husband. According to Jeremy Morley, a New York based lawyer practicing International Family Law:

*The law discriminates against wives. The crime of adultery can be committed only by a wife and her paramour. The husband need only prove that his wife had sexual intercourse with a man other than him.*

*The crime of concubinage can be committed only by a husband and his concubine, but it requires that the wife must prove that her husband has kept a mistress in the conjugal dwelling, or has had sexual intercourse under "scandalous circumstances" or lived together with his mistress in any other place.*

*The penalties are also quite different. For adultery, the guilty wife and her paramour may be imprisoned for up to 6 years.*

*For concubinage, the husband may be imprisoned for up to 4 years and 1 day, whereas his concubine may be merely "banished" but may not be imprisoned [25].*

Noteworthy is that the current judicial provision and social treatment for adulterous women are polar opposite of pre-Spanish conduct. Miguel de Loarca, a Spanish explorer and one of the first who arrived in the Philippines, observes that for an unfaithful wife "action is never taken against the woman, but against the adulterer" [26], [27].

In the case of V, self-imposed but society-driven, banishment for her is an ominous fate that she is fully aware of given that Viring is her neighbor whose marriage to Juanito is still the talk of the town.

Having a baby with or without the support of the father who is living a short distance from them places VV, the baby and, by extension, her entire family in close proximity of a tragedy waiting to happen. Viring's fate would also be hers but doubled, as Viring is in a legitimized union whereas hers is an illicit affair. And because the affair started while VV is visiting the family house of Gusting for the band sessions, the entire blame would most likely fall in her doorstep. It would be an easy step for the people of the town to charge her as the one who initiated the affair by flirting and seducing Gusting. Accordingly, it becomes easier to blame VV for she is the one who physically transgressed the space and place of Gusting's marriage and household. The blame game has, in fact, already begun. Gusting lays the blame of the pregnancy on VV for not being careful when she is a nursing student who should know such things.

VV's predicament leaves her with difficult choices. If she wants to maintain her life directions: pursue her studies, stay in the same school and still reside in the community, she has no choice but to abort the baby. As to how, when, and where are also contingencies she must deal with alone but only after contemplating with the more important moral dilemma of considering abortion. VV knows that to abort the baby is to condemn her soul to hell, as the Philippines is a devout Catholic country where Christianity is the belief of more than 90 percent of the population. The state and the church judge abortion respectively as a crime and a mortal sin. VV, at home, must have been perpetually reminded of where her soul will spend the afterlife if she chooses abortion. According to Nenita their neighborhood is situated between heaven and hell, "...we lived between the volcano and the church, between two gods. The smoking peak, and the soaring cross faced each other in a perpetual stand-off, as if blocked for a duel" (25) [5].

Even if VV chooses her soul's salvation by keeping the baby, her fall from grace becomes imminent. Without a husband, VV effectively becomes a 'disgrasyada', a disgraced woman (someone who gets pregnant without a husband). Her disgrace is hers alone to bear, and the evidence of her crime is hers alone to carry. The term itself 'disgrasyada', a woman who has disgraced herself, is a pejorative word piling the dishonor and shame exclusively on the woman without the man to take half of the blame. After all, women, than men,

must adhere to traditional sexual behaviors as "it is an accepted belief that a man will go as far as the woman will permit. It is also commonly believed that a woman who gives in to a man, destroys her reputation and makes herself vulnerable to sex exploitation because very few men would respect her enough to marry her" (121) [6].

As a disgraced woman, all of the limited and limiting choices she can pursue affect her full agency as a person. To keep her baby, and to bring the shame she is going to heap on her family to a minimum, she must keep silent on who the father of the baby is. For them to know that the baby's father is a married neighbor, who they are very familiar with, is a source of unending dishonor. To further protect her family, herself, and her baby from the relentless tales of the community, VV must also choose to escape. Her presence as an unmarried mother and her baby's presence will only be treated with disdain by the entire community as with experience of Boy Hapon. As an illegitimate son of her mother from a Japanese soldier, Boy Hapon silently lives in their town. He has shut himself from the entire community, as he has been effectively treated by the townsfolk as a nonentity being a bastard. The censorship of Boy Hapon's condition happens through the denial of his existence which is also the impending future of VV's child in their community. Medina recognizes the traditional importance of marriage on a child's legitimacy as "one of the historic functions of marriage has been to confer legitimacy on the children born to the union and to give them the right to have socially-recognized parents, i.e., to have a legitimate position in the society...The fatherless child is likely to be both socially and economically disadvantaged" (120) [6]. Just like what Viring and Juanito did, leaving the town makes for an appealing option as opposed to censorship on VV's part and the denial of her baby's agency. Escape, if VV's choice, is not a surprising route. It is common for families in the Philippines, even up to this day, to ship their unwed pregnant daughter somewhere far away until she gives birth and acquires the willpower to return or if not to start a new life. To choose her soul's salvation is to accept her fall from grace as her punishment and with it silence and escape.

With these, VV may have considered it as providential that Ralph Mckenna, an older foreigner friend of her father who is visiting them, gets besotted by her. Her immediate acceptance of Ralph's proposal of marriage and subsequently moving with him to America become a way to rescue what remains of her personhood. Ralph effectively becomes VV's recourse. That Ralph is willing to accept her baby as his makes his marriage offer all the more suitable and convenient for VV. Yet even marriage with Ralph is not a seamless transition. Already, the town is suspicious of the haste of their engagement given that Ralph has only been staying with the family for a short time "Ay, isn't it too quick though? And with a man old enough to be her father!" (220) [5].

However, VV's only hope of redemption and acceptance is through Ralph. Aware that her neighbor Maring has been disowned by her parents, and that her community has treated Viring as an immoral and corrupted woman, VV's only measure of deliverance is, relatively, a stranger who is willing to take her to a foreign land. Lamentably, her agency's only salvation is the triumvirate of another man, a marriage, and a

new life in a distant land.

## V. CONCLUSION

Viring's, Maring's and VV's crimes – their exploration of sexuality becomes a contestation of the marked boundaries of being women in their place and age. The full exploration and experience of women's sexuality and its embodiments - expressions of desire, need for pleasure and intimacy, and potential and capacity for reproduction- can only be fulfilling and enjoyable through the confining scope of approval and legitimacy. However, approval and legitimization turn into a complex web of factors that aims to rest more control from women's agency. Women's sexuality is enforced and can only be safely explored through the intersecting lines of approval, legitimization, social status, and age. A woman should only explore and actualize her sexuality within a prescribed age range, in a legitimized marriage with a man of the same social status or higher, and as approved by the family and with the acceptance of the community. For a woman to do otherwise is to invite prohibition, censorship, or denial of her full agency. To affirm a woman's agency is to acknowledge the full measure and range of her sexuality. But for a woman to recognize and actualize her sexuality comes at a cost to her mental, emotional, social, financial, and physical well-being given the cases of Viring, Maring, and VV.

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