

The Presence of the Returnee in Contemporary Philippine Cinema

Eduardo Lejano, Jr. / University of the Philippines Film Institute

Abstract

Inevitably the local phenomenon of returnees has entered the collective consciousness of Philippine society through their presence in popular culture. Are their portrayals limited to the usual unsung heroes who come back to a dollar-strapped country? Do these returnees' newfound economic power change people's perceptions and attitudes about them? Do local films portray such characters in a positive light or are the harsh realities of abandoned families also reflected? This paper will survey a number of recent Filipino movies, representing the most popular genres in local cinema, that have featured balikbayans and Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) as leading characters. This paper aims to look at the uneasy combination of wealth brought about by the influx of foreign currency vis-à-vis familial disorder caused by the absence of the very same person who sustains the social unit. It seeks as well to form a composite portrait of the characters' areas of commonality and points of departure, and hopes to unearth certain myths about the overseas experience and reflect realities that emanate from a society's values and dreams.

The emergence of the Filipino Diaspora in the last few decades has spawned a regular flux of returning Filipinos back to their home country. Over the years these returnees have slowly manifested their presence in the collective consciousness of the country's psyche through its representation in the mass media.

With the Philippines' long history of migrations, the reality of returning Filipinos has been an inevitable result of such a phenomenon. For every Filipino who becomes part of this mass exodus, whether as an immigrant to another country or as a contract worker abroad, returning to one's homeland is an opportunity shared and cherished by most of them.

For the purposes of this study, the use of the term returnee pertains to those homecoming Filipinos popularly labelled as either *balikbayans* or OCWs. In "Trajectories of the Filipino Diaspora," E. San Juan Jr. (1998) explains how the term *balikbayan* was first used during the tourism campaign of the Marcos regime in the 1970s that combined two Filipino words – *balik* (to return) and *bayan* (town or nation).

Thus a word came to refer to visiting Filipinos (usually from North America) who become temporary or permanent visitors in their homeland. At the same time, San Juan adds, being a *balikbayan* depends on one's permanent residence abroad, meaning "...that one lives somewhere else and that one's appearance in the Philippines is temporary and intermittent, as if one were a tourist."

The economic plunder that ensued after the Marcos Regime hastened the rise of the contract worker. The last few decades saw the mass exodus of Filipinos searching for employment overseas, seeking a better future.

Whether as domestic helpers, healthcare professionals, seamen, blue collar workers, teachers or engineers, the phenomenon of the OCW is but a reflection of the country's increasing difficulty in providing well-paying jobs to many qualified & educated Filipinos.

More than 20 years have passed since the first wave of OCWs left for the Middle East, Japan, Hong Kong, and other countries. With the economic impact of their dollar remittances, these OCWs came to be labeled as economic heroes, evangelizers, labor martyrs, dollar earners and hope of the homeland.

In contextualizing the Balikbayan and OCW experiences to the country's social and political realities, San Juan explains how the Philippines has become one of the main suppliers of cheap migrant labor for the world that has led to "the development of the Filipino's revolutionary tradition that characterize their daily acts of resistance and economic survival."

In tracing the origin of the *balikbayan* phenomenon during Martial Law years when the Marcos regime aggressively wooed overseas Filipinos to come home to the Philippines as tourists, San Juan elucidates how the seeds of nationalist fervor found its roots in the midst of its welcome-with-open-arms reception that was accorded these visitors which could only provoke a backlash:

That the state succeeded in domesticating *balikbayans* into tourists can in part be seen in Filipino nationalist unease about them.

Nationalist writers often distinguish those who return from working temporary jobs in the Middle East and Asia from those who visit from the US. Whereas overseas contract workers are seen to return from conditions of near abjection, *balikbayans* are often viewed to be steeped in their own sense of superiority, serving only to fill others with a sense of envy.

In the article "Bracing for *Balikbayans*" by Conrado de Quiros (1990) he offers a critical perspective on how *balikbayans* are generally perceived by their countrymen. He writes how

They bring us stories about how much life in America has proved what the *Reader's Digest* says it is. They also bring us homilies,

delivered with the proselytizing zeal of Thomasites, which are forceful for their use of contrasts. It's too hot in the Philippines. It's nice to snuggle by the hearth in America. There's grime and smog in our streets. You can't drive without anti-pollutants in the States. Filipino drivers are maniacs. American drivers follow traffic rules.... You defer too much to authority here. You can talk man-to-man even with the president of the United States.

The perception that Balikbayans are admired and resisted in equal measures is anchored in de Quiros' thesis that *balikbayans* are like the Thomasites, acting like neo-colonizers whose ambitions lie in "setting themselves apart from the rest of the 'natives' rather than affiliating with them."

In the essay "Your Grief Is Our Gossip" by Vincente Rafael (2000), he focuses on events in mid-1990s Philippines with regard to the flows of immigrants and OCWs as he inquires into the "nationalist attempts at containing the dislocating effects of global capital through the collective mourning for its victims." In its effort to understand nationalism in a context of a community of longing, this study draws from its historical perspective on the Filipino diaspora in situating the phenomenon of the returnee.

Comprising an army of flexible workers, Filipinos abroad simultaneously signify the failure of the Philippine nation-state to contain its excess population and the success of global capitalism in absorbing and accommodating this failure...Though they originate from the Philippines, they can, thanks to the workings of global capital, now return to the nation in a form that is at once abstract and exterior to it.

Rafael situates the root of the ambiguous perceptions to these overseas Filipinos when they return to the native land when he writes how they are neither inside or wholly outside the nation-state as they hover on the edges of its consciousness, "rendering its boundaries porous

with their dollar-driven comings and goings.” He adds that in this sense “they take on the semblance of spectral presences whose labor takes place somewhere else but whose effects command, by their association with money, a place in the nation-state.”

With the country’s long history of migrations, the modern phenomenon of these overseas Filipinos may be understood in the context that the massive, state-encouraged movements of workers and immigrants have become part of the nation’s everyday life.

Returning to a home that is at once the same and yet different belies a shifting consciousness of a paradox: what used to be familiar now seems foreign. Not only is this true for the returnee’s point of view but more importantly, from the eyes of those around him or her.

For nowhere is this more evident than the fact that such individuals become perceived in perplexing binaries of familiarity and difference on one hand, and acceptance and resistance on the other. An overall countenance that reflects an ever-shifting image that, for the most part, spring forth mixed impressions and inevitable contradictions.

These returnees, whether as *balikbayans* or OCWs (overseas contract workers), certainly have made a dent in the people’s consciousness not only through personal interactions but also through the prominence of celebrity-returnees in Philippine popular culture and the growing body of texts on the socio-political and economic impact of these returning Filipinos in the mass media through the years.

It is but inevitable that such phenomenon enters the myth-making apparatus of a society through its emergence in popular culture. And film is an effective medium where such issues are realized, or for that matter fictionalized, as they are a reflection of a society’s construction of their multi-dimensional portrayals.

The varying facets of a character from three contemporary Filipino films show a range of characterizations that bring about certain myths of a nation beset with a colonial past and a third world reality. Three portraits of an archetype that somehow reflect a country’s varying

notions of an oft-misunderstood character type.

This paper analyzes the portrayals of these returnees in three significant Filipino films in the last few years and examines how such representations reveal facets of the returnee character: a caregiver who returns to her province to find that she's a carrier of a dreaded disease; a successful chef who comes home to marry his worldly girlfriend but falls for the charms of a barrio lass; and a visiting nurse who scandalizes the whole town when he returns a totally different person.

This paper tackles how the films portray the character of the returnee, seeking points of departure and convergence as it forms a composite culled from their characterizations in each of the three films' plot narratives. This study focuses on three fairly recent productions that range from 1998 to 2003, one from a major film company, the other two, independently-produced.

The films included in this study are: *Homecoming* from Teamwork Productions (2003), *Miguel/Michelle* from Forefront Films (1998), both of which are directed by Gil Portes and *Kailangan Kita* from Star Cinema (2002), directed by Rory Quintos.

Converging Patterns of Portrayals

The range of the returnee archetypes arising from the narratives of *Homecoming*, *Kailangan Kita* and *Miguel/Michelle* – from the fallen woman to the heroic archetype to that of the transgressive woman, allow room for convergence in its varying portrayals.

The fall from grace of the protagonist in *Homecoming* finds its equivalence in the trajectory of the returnee portrayals in the other two films. Aga Muhlach's Carl goes through a similar fallen state when he is caught romancing the disfavored sister of his soon-to-be bride. The scandal that ensues after the discovery of his liaison with Claudine Baretto becomes a predictable complication to his wedding plans which at this point has already made Carl to reassess the soundness of the idea in the first place.

That the sophisticated chef from New York falls in love with the domesticated Lena and having been caught in the act in a moment of romantic impulse right in the household of the older sister that he is marrying certainly makes for an ironic plot twist that seals his fate in a similar fall from grace, like that of the fallen woman albeit in male fashion.

The titular character in *Miguel/Michelle* finds himself in a more extreme fall from grace as he scandalizes his hometown with his new sexual identity and the more he is reviled for his deviancy, the more he becomes determined to confront such prejudices.

The heroic attributes that get foregrounded in the character of Carl in *Kailangan Kita* is shared to some extent by the protagonists in the other two films. Both leads in *Homecoming* and *Miguel/Michelle* come home as exalted figures in their respective familial and social circles by virtue of their being dollar-earning breadwinners. That Derossi returns home to a broken family makes her homecoming a harbinger of hope in healing the family rift that has deteriorated in her absence. Her mother is now a single mother, her father has since left the family abode and is now living-in with a woman almost as young as Abby, and she discovers her teenage brother to be hooked on drugs.

The timing of Abby's return couldn't have come at a more opportune time and the story premise could only pave the way for the family's healing process through Abby's heroic efforts of which her affliction was but a catalyst.

Miguel as Michelle wears her heroism on her sleeve as she is portrayed as a well-meaning goal-oriented protagonist in the film. Her mission upon coming home is almost messianic in that she uses her new found sexual persona as a means for asserting her individuality against the town's prejudices. When she comes home as Michelle, she finds herself solving the problems of her friends' personal crises with her own crisis becoming a counterpoint to theirs.

The transgressive nature of the protagonist in “Miguel/Michelle” is shared to a lesser extent with that of the other two films. As a romantic hero in a film whose twists and turns are largely seen from his point of view, Muhlach is portrayed to be feminized in a certain way that makes his aberration notable in the context of *Bicolano* machismo.

Typically garbed in pinks and floral prints and tasked to kitchen and marketing duties for the most part of the film, the character of Carl is more feminine than masculine as his sole focus throughout the narrative is his romantic pursuits. When Carl, the cosmopolitan chef that he is, falls for a “lowly” woman in the person of Lena makes for a character development imbued with transgressiveness as he violates the trust of his fiancée’s family.

Derossi’s Abby on the other hand is portrayed as sort of mannish in that her return as the sole breadwinner in her broken home makes for a not-so-subtle transformation from the simple dutiful daughter that she was to that of a father figure who makes decisions for the broken household that she now supports.

Certain patterns emerge that cut across to the three portrayals in synthesizing their characterizations into a grand narrative. For one, the issue of *displacement* recurs in the three films. This becomes a motivating factor in each of the protagonists as each one pursues his or her own character objective in the course of the films’ narrative. That all three films share the elements of the classical Hollywood pattern make for a more consistent analysis of its plot development.

Like a stranger in new surroundings not unlike a fish out of water, the returnee initially stands out from the pack in trying to re-adapt to the homeland. Sometimes the effort of re-assimilation becomes an occasion for humor as in the case of Carl in *Kailangan Kita*.

Sometimes as the native tries to re-learn the ways of his or her original home, the process becomes more like a debriefing session as in the case of Michelle. Her constant quest to prove herself in her new-found sexual persona puts her in situations that call to fore new coping.

In their long absences from the country make such characters pine for home, emanating from the returnee's remembrance of a place far different from what he or she had left behind.

Displacements and Character Flaws

The displacements that occur to all three manifest itself in physical and psychological nuances. This brings forth the second pattern that recurs in the three character portrayals – *the character flaw*.

Certain facets of each of the returnee surface as a result of their character displacements. The flaws become apparent in each one that render their filmic portrayal more complex in the context of the usual trajectory of the classic hero archetype, be it in literature or film.

Abby's character in *Homecoming* depicts her as the sole breadwinner of her lower-class family dependent on her caregiver earnings. By remitting dollars to support their needs, privileges Abby into a position of power that makes her stake in decision-making within the household more pronounced.

The transformation from the comely lass that she was to the assertive, confident dollar-earner she has become constitutes a character flaw and is a key factor to the film's plot. The dutiful daughter coming back as the family breadwinner marks a shift, presenting a microcosm of the effects of overseas employment on the Filipino family. Her affliction with SARS and eventual recovery turns the tables of her position of power to that of helplessness.

A similar flawed strain is reflected in *Miguel/Michelle* when its central character evolves into a determined and purposive individual in his "incarnation" as a woman. The old Miguel as the studious and obedient son gets buried six feet under to give way to the woman-of-the-world trappings of the new Michelle.

Such empowering traits similarly lead to awkward situations for Michelle. This forms

the crux of the film's cause-and-effect pattern leading to her eventual validation.

The flaw in Carl's character in *Kailangan Kita* surfaces as he asserts his idealism whenever he comes face-to-face with Bicol's backwardness and provincialism. Such fervor puts him at odds with the comely Lena and their ensuing spats form part of the film's romance plot. That he eventually falls for Lena and discovers her innate homespun wisdom puts as an ironic counterpoint to Carl's unabashed pro-Western bias.

All these traits that characterize the three leads usher in the element of superiority to their evolved natures. While their respective flaws reveal their human side, it also brings about their newly-acquired air of *superiority*, rendering each of the portrayal more complex.

Returning to the homeland is not always that simple a matter. In a country like the Philippines, where a better life is equated with overseas employment and where getting a green card is the ultimate Filipino middle-class dream, the returnee is most often looked upon as a success story.

Whether the balikbayan experience is indeed a success story or not is beside the point because he or she, upon returning, becomes subjected to such perceptions by their fellow Filipinos.

In 20th century Philippines, the *balikbayan* assumes a mythic stature – wrought unto him or her by the community at large. Perhaps due to shared expectations of succeeding in a foreign land that are borne out of tales from others who boast of relatives who have made it abroad. Those who don't are hardly mentioned at all.

Such myth-making can be the returnee's own doing. Exposure to foreign ways, supposedly more advanced and progressive, make the *balikbayan* itch to show-off his or her new-found knowledge and abilities and perhaps worldly stature. Their superior demeanor then is best explained in the context of the native vs foreign paradigm.

This is Odysseus, coming back to his homeland after his exploits abroad – going back to a household that must be put in order: a loving wife, an organized home, the start of a family, the assured continuance of the human race.

With such preconditioning, those who do come back a success are seen differently. With stories to regale, with wonders from other lands to exalt, the returnee's background sets him apart from his community whose world has been limited to the confines of the native land. This makes the returnee's myth-making more engrossing and their superiority complexes all the more understandable.

Binary Oppositions

In focusing on the overall character development of the balikbayan or OCW, certain assumptions are derived at based on the “eyes” that the theory of semiotics apply in interpreting the deeper meaning of such characterizations.

Claude Levi-Strauss analyzed myths in terms of their elementary components and fits them into patterns of opposition that reveal, Berger asserts, the hidden meaning of texts. Strauss's methodology may be adapted to look for a set of binary oppositions that inform a text and can reveal its latent or hidden meaning.

The binary of the *native vs. foreign* is reflected in the characterizations of the three returnee protagonists. Upon their respective returns to their native soil, each of them get to confront once again the third world realities they had all but left behind, thrusting them into situations where their westernized selves are put into conflict. Their assimilation of foreign ways have made them into evolved individuals and their newly-acquired worldviews somehow run against the parochial nature of the native folks. This becomes a key factor to the story premises of the said films from which emanate the problems that confront each of the returnee characters.

How they are received upon their return dramatize the shifting polarities of peoples' perceptions of their new status regardless of the archetypes they represent. That they are warmly received on one hand, and envied and sneered at on the other reveals another binary opposition of *acceptance vs. resistance*.

The film *Homecoming* presents its returnee heroine as the idealized family member who provides for the needs of her lower-middle class family and as such, privileges Abby in a position of power that makes people around her to welcome her with open arms.

Family, friends, neighbors and even strangers accord her with respect and awe at the beginning of the film by virtue of her being a caregiver to the world. A number of scenes show her being approached by different people, each of them articulating their material needs that she perhaps can provide. Midway into the film, as her SARS affliction becomes a burning issue in her provincial community, Abby is resisted and reviled by the townspeople, her privileged position devolving as she has now become the town pariah.

Carl's arrival in the household of his bride-to-be in *Kailangan Kita* is accorded with warmth by most of his future in-laws. Johnny Delgado, who plays the family patriarch, who openly expresses his disdain upon Carl's apparently Westernized ways and treats him with aloofness. Lena's initial encounter with Carl proves disastrous as well as he mistakes her for a domestic helper that triggers her negative reaction to the man that she will eventually fall for. Their succeeding spats are punctuated with barbs as she gets ticked off by his incessant complaints about the backward life in Bicol.

Since meaning in texts is always elicited and not readily apparent, the use of textual analysis in this study has unearthed an emerging image of the returnee, as culled from the portrayals in the three film narratives, that reflect archetypes and binary oppositions that share commonality in the three films.

The overall image then reveals an ever-shifting image that, for the most part, spring

forth mixed impressions and inevitable contradictions.

The study has unearthed the cinematic portrayals, whether the returnee is portrayed in a fallen and/or transgressive state, or as a heroic figure, that takes into consideration the functions of these images as contextualized in the film narratives.

Some come home like exalted heroes with gifts to bear and stories to tell. Some come home to revisit the land of their birth to renew ties with families and friends, rekindling a lost bond severed by time and distance, their long absences fragmenting temporal and spatial recollections of what was left behind and their return, more significantly impacting the lives of those they have left behind.

The prolonged stint abroad and the journey back to the native land lay bare certain transformations on the part of the returnee and their subsequent reintegration becomes an occasion for potential misunderstandings and misrepresentations arising from a society's shared expectations and stereotypes.

How characters are depicted in the narratives is an evolving process of representation that somehow affect general perceptions of what such characters signify beyond the confines of a plot's diegesis. The converging patterns in the range of returnee portrayals, from their character flaws, to their displaced natures and superior demeanors, reflect a commonality that is culled from a shared perception of such character types borne out of people's general impressions and perhaps existing realities.

The binary oppositions of native vs. the foreign and acceptance vs. resistance belie innate contradictions and complexities situated not only in the point of view of the returnee but also that of society's. It thus operates on the larger level of mythmaking of which film is an effective medium where such processes are realized, or for that matter, fictionalized.

The characters that are portrayed in the popular culture landscape of moving images then involve a complex web of myth-making, stereotyping and media representation and the

phenomenon of the returnee is just one subject that has slowly found itself portrayed onscreen.

This study lends credence to its emerging impact in the socio-cultural context of the Philippines where the resulting image somehow evokes and reinforces a stereotypical view of the returnee. This is better understood as a phenomenon that is culled from reality and, at the same time, a myth reinforced through the naturalizing function of the moving image.

In deciphering meaning in terms of their elementary components that fits into patterns of binary oppositions, this reveals the connotative and symptomatic layers of significance that surround the returnee persona. The conflicting dualities of the native vs. the foreign and that of acceptance vs. resistance reflect the ambiguity of its impact in economic, social and cultural means.

The cinematic portrayals of the *balikbayan* and the OCW, as evidenced from this study's textual interpretation of the films' plots, uncover the prototypical returnee's ongoing grand narrative that brings to fore a dynamic pattern of media representation that thrives in the interstices of socio-cultural formations.

Like a veritable Pandora's box, the returnees' image-making in movies are like unearthing a trove of representations and stereotypes borne out of a people's collective experience. Perhaps an odd mixture of perceptions to different people for whom the returning Filipino is like a lightning rod where conflicting and converging issues are personified.

These experiences run the gamut from the realistic to the mythic, coming from a people's shared post-colonial past and contextualized in the nuances of today's enlightened yet polarizing times.

Whether such images are indeed factual or not becomes insignificant because what becomes noteworthy is the multi-faceted nature of its characterizations that bring forth a richly-textured essence, sometimes contradictory and oftentimes complementary. Because the character of the returnee in its filmic portrayals of late are etched in subtle shades of gray than drawn in

stark contrasts of black and white.

The cinematic representations that this study has analyzed, that of the returnee as a balikbayan and as OCW, uncover an ongoing process borne out of reality, stereotype, and myth.

Works Cited

- De Quiros, Conrado. (1990). "Bracing for Balikbayans." In *Flowers From the Rubble*. Pasig City, Anvil Publishing.
- Portes, G. (Producer/Director), (1998). *Miguel/Michelle*. Forefront Films.
- Portes, G. (Producer/Director), (2003). *The Homecoming*. Philippines. Teamwork Productions & Cinema Partners.
- Rafael, Vicente. (2000). *White Love and Other Events in Filipino History*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press.
- San Juan Jr., E. (1998). *Trajectories of the Filipino Diaspora*. Retrieved March 25, 2004 from <[http://www.ices.lk/ESR/ArticlesJuly00/ESR\(2\)- Juan.4.doc](http://www.ices.lk/ESR/ArticlesJuly00/ESR(2)-Juan.4.doc)>.
- Santos, M. (Producer), Quintos, R. (Director). (2002). *Kailangan Kita*. Star Cinema Productions.



A current member of NETPAC (Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema), **Eduardo Lejano, Jr.** is a regular contributor to the Philippines' leading newspaper, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, where he writes about foreign film festivals and independent filmmaking.

He is a regular contributor to the Philippines' leading newspaper, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, where he writes about foreign film festivals and independent filmmaking.