

## Women's Memory in Sari Saysay's Plays

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### Abstract

This critical study seeks to analyze six selected plays of the Filipino playwright, namely Sari Saysay, using cultural memory and the Bikol indigenous concept, *baliana*--a precolonial female priestess of the Bikol Region, Southern Luzon, Philippines. It examines how his plays represent the memory of women by articulating their voice and redressing their silencing at the same time. By analyzing one female character per play who resonates the qualities of a baliana, this paper finds that the female characters can be classified into the following: *sugot* (libertine), *gerera* (warrior), or *areglador* (mediator). The *sugot* is a libertine character whose primary motivation is to just survive her corrupt world. Meanwhile, the *gerera* is a fighter, armed with guns or wisdom in going against the oppressors. Their decisions are driven by their desire to fight for the minorities or the powerless. The *areglador* is a mediator of two "conflicting" forces: the past and the present, the traditions and modernity, the dead and the living, and the invisible and the visible. In conclusion, this paper demonstrates the power of women in Bikol society in addressing societal problems, which must be preserved amidst the prevalence of patriarchy.

**Keywords:** Baliana, Bikol literature, Bikol theatre, Cultural memory, Sari Saysay

### Introduction

The Bikol drama is still finding its place in Bikol literature. Most scholarly works and publications in the region are centered on poetry and fiction (Barbaza, 2017; Conde, 2009). Although at present, many theater groups and dramatic activities have emerged in the Bikol region, Philippines. The Bikol contemporary drama has kept up with the growth of Philippine contemporary drama. Zulueta and Galan (2017, p. xiii) claim that the advancement of the country's contemporary drama is manifested on the financial capacity of theatre companies, the rising number of campus-based theatre organizations both in the National Capital Region and in the provinces, and the emergence of theatre festivals. The Bikolano artists have also

established their own festivals featuring emerging theatre groups, both campus-based and cultural organizations. The *Taragbo Bikol Theatre Network*, for example, was established in 2020 during the *1st Pista Nin Teatrong Bikolnon*, a festival sponsored by *Sining Banwa* that features experimental and short plays of Bikolano playwrights. All these contemporary dramatic activities in the regions have been made possible by the notable Bikol playwright, Roe Jalimao also known as Sari Saysay.

This paper argues that Sari Saysay is an important Bikol writer. His plays have been included thrice in a row (2017-2020) during the Virgin LabFest at the Cultural Center of the Philippines, Manila. His literary influences which include Filipina playwrights such as Malou Jacob, Gleyc Atienza, and Liza Magtoto have likewise molded Sari as a writer. In addition, being trained in community theatre, most of his works are generated from his immersion or integration among local communities. He is bringing to stage, through theatre, the fears, aspirations, and motivations of the people as he has observed. He derives his inspirations from public markets, schools, churches, neighbors, among others. His works, both in art and for the community, reveal his relevance in the development of Bikol society. This study then aims to analyze how Sari represents the past and the female characters in his writings using the concepts of baliana and cultural memory.

### **The Balianas of Bikol Philippines**

During the Spanish colonialism, many indigenous communities fled to the mountains to avoid being under the rule of the Spaniards. Some of these escapes were led by the babaylans--- the powerful women of precolonial Philippines. The Spaniards called her *aniteras*, *diwata* in Southern Philippines, or *babaylan*, *baylan*, or *balian* (Halili, 2010). Historical records show that the babaylans had very important role in the society, and that was being the spirit medium who could communicate with the divinities (Conde, 2009; Gerona, 1988; Lopez Ledesma-Tan, 2010, Realubit, 2001).

Villariba (2006), a sociologist, found in her immersion with Lumad communities that both a woman and a man can be babaylan as long as he/ she is inclined to determining and addressing societal problems. In addition, in some Lumad groups, the said man or a woman must be able to “wield a sword or a weapon in defense of the community” like a warrior (p. 55). Doing so qualifies him/ her further to be a babaylan who has the qualities of a “priestess, healer, sage, and seer.” She also regards the babaylans as peacemakers and ecologists defying the “power wielders of capitalism and materialism” (p. 56).

Abustan (2015, p. 3), quoting Strobel (2010, p. 22), also recognized the power of babaylans as leaders, mediators, and warriors: “Babaylans... are warriors when actively resisting systemic forms of oppression that seek to erase or devalue Indigenous Peoples, cultures, and practices.” Strobel added that this warrior consciousness of the babaylans is manifested to contemporary man or woman when he/ she calls for justice amidst oppression that the present society faces.

In addition, Lopez-Ledesma Tan (2001, p. 10) provided a comprehensive overview of the roles the babaylan played during the precolonial Philippines. She called them “the keepers

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of law and wisdom in addition to being spiritual leaders, counsels, and healers of the community." They were also the "mediators between the divine and the human." Furthermore, they kept the values and beliefs alive in the ways of the people ranging from planting season to harvest, from the rituals of birth to the burial wake. The babaylans gave voice and practice to the ancient truths of the human condition through their prayers, spells, lullabies, stories, poetry, art, and drama.

Lopez-Ledesma Tan further added the relevance of the babaylan in keeping the mythic memory of the Philippine indigenous culture intact through the epics that they chanted and stories they countless told making them the spoken historical records of the past (2001, p. 11). However, the arrival of Spanish conquerors took this power away from them. They were silenced, burned, and paganized especially those who did not allow themselves to be converted. Basco (70) elucidated how the balianas' good image among the locals had been tampered by the invaders by imprisoning them, feeding them to crocodiles, and imposing on them to embrace Catholicism. As a result, some of them have become "cantors" or chanters of the Jesus Christ's life. Fortunately, contemporary writers are using the babaylan figure again in their writings to retell their forgotten and silenced stories. Lopez- Ledesma Tan, for instance, analyzed the novel of Jessica Hagedorn titled *Dogeaters* where the babaylan narrative is eminent in the story. One babaylan element in the novel is the character of La Sultana whose location, the cemetery, indicated the novelist's foreshadowing of the fading or even the decaying traces of this once a powerful member of Philippine society (Lopez- Ledesma Tan, 2001, p.36). Yet, Hagedorn infuses her novel with the image of babaylan not only with La Sultana but also with Lola Narcisa who loves to listen to radio dramas and whose wisdom is highly influenced by myths, folklores, songs, proverbs, and folk sayings, among others. Tan added that her character reflects the orality of early Philippine literary traditions as well as the "epic stories of precolonial babaylans" (45). Despite the traumatic past and unfair treatment of the colonial masters towards the once highly respected babaylans, traces of them are starting to re-emerge in the consciousness of feminist writings.

In Bikol, the babaylans are called balianas. Conde (2009, p. 40) quoting Rebadeneira (1601) in Reyes (1992), wrote that the balianas were women of the native communities known for being the "most shrewd, libertine, and seductive." This reveals how women were empowered in the early Bikol society. Realubit (2001, p. 64) elaborated that they were priestesses who officiated rituals such as warding off evil entities. They were the ones who presided tribal rituals. Together with a chorus of women, they communicated with *Gugurang*, the divine deity of the early Bikol region, through singing employing a language that was known only to the female members of the tribe. Gerona (1988, p. 28) regarded them as priestesses who led various religious functions and acted as village doctors and counselors regarding matters that concern the life beyond.

Moreover, the study of Conde (2009) depicted Oryol and the balianas as powerful members of the society who can communicate with the supernatural realm through music and dances. This kind of ritual likewise indicates the Bikol early dramatic traditions. Both Conde (2009) and Villariba (2006) found that the core of balianism or the exercise of female power

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in communities is a form of love. Villariba (56) explained that “the belief in another life is at the core of loving.” It is with this spirit that a person can find a guide to assist him/ her to another life. This paper hopes to explore traces of balianism through the selected plays of the Bikol playwright, Sari Saysay. His immersion with the people through his community involvements surely has helped in the formation of his consciousness and understanding regarding the situation, culture, and literature of the Filipinos, more particularly, the female members of the Philippine society, who were once venerated for their supernatural prowess.

### **Cultural memory**

Cultural memory has been defined by Erll (2011) as the relationship of the past and the present and whatever process there is that links the two; it is also about remembering and forgetting, and it is both individual and collective. Some memory studies explore the link between cultural memory and theatre. The study of Šešić and Stefanović (2013), for instance, analyzed the importance of institutional memory and identity in organizational culture particularly on policies and strategies. Bernstein (2007), on the one hand, made use of the concept of constellation in determining the link among interdisciplinarity, cultural memory, and comparative literature. She cited three various kinds of dance or pantomime which carry cultural histories that are shaped by trauma. Meanwhile, Saro’s study (2008) has explored stereotypes as cognitive phenomena and cultural mechanisms of representations and memorization on film and theatre (2008). She emphasizes that theatre is considerable as an “art of memory” which remembers, recalls, reminisces, and reiterates which can lead to stereotypes due to repetitions of performances, thereby challenging and reinforcing individual and collective memories (2008). This paper seeks to provide its own analysis on how Bikol theater represents Bikol reality and its past, through the analysis of the female characters in the selected plays.

### **Methodology**

This research utilizes critical method in analyzing the selected plays of Sari Saysay in Bikol literature. This study analyzes, interprets, and evaluates the selected works using the concepts of cultural memory and Bikol baliana in order to determine how his plays articulate the memory of women. This paper analyzes how Sari Saysay, as a male Bikolano playwright, represents the memory of Bikolanas in his plays in terms of articulating their voices and redressing their silencing at the same time by analyzing one female character per play. The researcher categorizes them based on their characterizations, roles, and attributes as revealed by the plot, their dialogues, and their impact on the conflicts of the play. The categorization is based on existing theorizations on babaylans and balianas as advanced by Gerona (1988), Realubit (2001), Villariba (2006), Conde (2009), and Abustan (2015).

### **Scope and limitations**

The following are the selected plays for the purpose of this study and the year they were first performed: *Junkshop* (2008), *Emba* (2010), *1900's Mga Bangguing Bulanon* [1900s

Moonlit Nights] (2016), *Oktubre, Gulong ng Kasaysayan* [October, Wheel of History] (2017), *An Mga Aninipot sa Tahaw kan Salog* [Fireflies on the River] (2017), and *Wala Nang Bata Dito* [There is No Child Here] (2019). The analysis generated from this study is only limited to Sari Saysay's plays. The findings gleaned from the analysis do not account for all Bikol and Philippine drama. However, the conclusions and recommendations of this study may be utilized to understand the rich origins, influences, and traditions not only of Bikol drama but also of Philippine drama, and how they serve as quotation of Philippine society.

### **The Balianas in Sari Saysay plays**

To determine how Sari Saysay represents the women in his plays in terms of articulating their voices and redressing their silencing at the same time, the researcher used Bikol scholars' theorizations on the Bikol babaylans called balianas. Realubit (2001, p. 64) wrote that they were priestesses who officiated rituals such as warding off evil entities; they could also communicate with the almighty Gugurang through singing and employing a language that was known only to the female members of the tribe. Gerona (1988, p. 28) regarded them as priestesses who led various religious functions and acted as village doctors and counselors regarding matters that concern the life beyond. Conde (2001) found the balianas as powerful members of the society who could communicate with the supernatural realm through their music and dances. Conde (2009, p. 40) quoting Rebadeneira (1601) in Reyes (1992) wrote that the balianas are also the "most shrewd, libertine, and seductive" women of the communities who attended to the complaints of their people. The paper also included some theorizations on babaylans. Both Villariba (2016) and Abustan (2015) labelled them as warriors who are willing to defend their communities against oppressors. They also lead them towards freedom, away from the injustices and onslaughts of evil entities. The researcher combined all these descriptions in categorizing the female characters of Sari Sayay: *sugot* (libertine, freethinker, seductive), *gerera* (fighter against evil, leader), and *areglador* (mediator, shrewd, priestess-like, counselor).

### **The Sugot**

Aside from being libertine, freethinker, *sugot* in Bikol is someone who tempts, tantalizes, seduces, and it could also be someone who teases and taunts (Mintz et al., 1985, p. 493). This paper worked on all these definitions to discuss the two female characters classified as sugot: Lora in *Junkshop* (2008) and Dolor in *Wala Nang Bata Dito* [There is No Child Here] (2019).

The play, *Junkshop*, features only two characters, Lora and Erning, and how their lives have been affected by the physically absent character, Crispin. First staged in 2008, this play deals with the struggles of a couple who will be displaced due to road widening in Commonwealth Avenue, Quezon City, Philippines. Their source of livelihood is their junkshop which is not enough to sustain their daily needs. And because of poverty, the two characters are always in disagreement. Moreover, Erning is incapable of sexual activities due to his physical condition; hence Lora decided to undergo ligation. The story poses a question about

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the real ‘junk’ in the narrative whether it is the husband who works in the junkshop, contented as to where he is, who killed his friend and his wife because of their infidelity. The real ‘junk’ could also be the wife who betrays her husband by making the junkshop and their land in Quezon province as collateral for her loan and by sleeping with her husband’s friend, Crispin. The character of the wife, her motivations and decisions, developed the plot of the play. Without her infidelity, there will be no story. Some aspects of the play also made her a *sugot* in the story.

Survivability is one reason that triggered Lora to be *sugot*. Her hope and determination to live a better life has led her to some choices that hampered her relationship with her husband. One risky decision is to make their junkshop and land title in the province a collateral for a questionable business contract with a Chinese businessman. She keeps it a secret making her husband even more infuriated. Her husband offers her a chance to change by encouraging her to go back to the Quezon province with him and start a peaceful life; however, Lora dissuades him from doing so since she thinks there is no stable source of livelihood and opportunities elsewhere other than the city. Aside from this, Lora has an even deeper secret which her husband found out- she is having an affair with her husband’s friend, Crispin, and with many other men. This made Erning really furious so that he decided not only to kill his best friend but Lora as well. Yet, Lora was not repentant for her decisions. She stood by them, arguing that she did those for her dreams, “*Dahil marami akong gustong marating*” (Because I have many dreams) (Saysay, 2018, p. 148), and that she has no bad intentions. She thinks that without her illicit affairs and bold decisions, she would find it even more difficult to survive.

However, her husband is unforgiving of the said betrayal, hence, his decision to end the life of those who hurt him. With a gun in her head, Lora does not falter. Her last words before her death are *sugot* or provoking to her husband, “*Pero pinaikot-ikot ko rin kayo!*” (But I also fooled you) (Saysay, 2018, p. 151), referring to the male characters of the play. By being sly, she has satisfied her needs. She has successfully encouraged her husband to leave the province and seek for opportunities in Manila. Erning, out of love for Lora, gave up his life in Quezon and pursued many kinds of work in Manila which he regretted afterwards:

*Erning: Kung hindi mo ako itinaboy dito sa Maynila, hindi sana nagkaganito.* (If you did not force me go here in Manila, these things wouldn’t have happened.)

*Lora: Ginusto mo rin.* (You were okay with it.)

*Erning: Hindi ko gusto ‘yon. Mahal lang talaga kita at gusto kong pagbigyan ang mga gusto mo.* (I wasn’t okay with it. It is just that I loved you and wanted to do you a favor.)

(Saysay, 2018, p. 143-144)

More lines from Lora suggest that she provokes her husband several times which include attacking his manhood: “...Ang problema, kukote lang ang matigas sa’yo Erning, pero ang titi mo ang kailangan ko bilang isang babae... bilang isang asawa.” (The problem is, you are so

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hardheaded, Erning, but it is your cock that I need as a woman... as a wife") (Saysay, 2018, p. 145). She also called him "inutil" or impotent and useless for failing to give her a child. Lora's decisions and motivations triggered her husband to do the said unlawful acts.

It is different for the next character, Dolor, in the play, *Walang Nang Bata Dito* (There is No Child Here). This work is a long monologue of its main character named Dolor or Dolores Espino. She is addressing her nine-year old child, an unseen character in the play, who is framed up for murder by a soldier. The main antagonist in the play is a high-ranking official of the government army who is called Ninong by Dolor. The main character informs her daughter why the authorities framed her up, and why Ninong blackmails them. The story goes back to her father who was mercilessly killed by the soldiers of the government, for he would not falsely admit to being part of NPA as they had planned for money. Ninong wants Dolor to return the gun, the prop Dolor's husband was supposed to "surrender" to the authorities. Dolor decides to use the gun against the authorities and to protect her child at the end of the play, hence the last line, "Wala nang bata dito" (There is no child here).

The main character's decision to do the unlawful act is triggered by the unseen male character in the play, his Ninong. Dolor calls him Ninong because he offered to be their sponsor during their wedding. This usually happens in sponsored town weddings, where high ranking government officials would volunteer to be sponsors of the couples to establish relationship with them, so they could ask favors from them later on. In this case, Ninong offered Dolor's husband, Emman, an opportunity to earn forty-thousand pesos as long as he pretends to be a reformed member of NPA who willingly surrenders to the authorities. Out of fear and guilt, Emman did not go as planned; hence he was murdered, and his nine-year old child was framed up.

Dolor's similarity with Lora in *Junkshop* is her eagerness to survive. For the sake of survivability, she has also made choices that may be immoral for some uninformed viewers. She is sugot as she conceals her real emotions in her profession and masks it with being strong and libertine: "*Kelangan ko nang umakyat sa bangka. Kailangan ko pa ring mabuhay. Anim na buwan na, pero hindi pa rin ako nasasanay. Kinakabahan pa rin ako sa tuwing magbebenta ng puki. Pero ayan, tingnan mo o – pwedeng itago ang takot sa mukha*" (I have to go to the ship. I need to survive. It's been six months, but I'm not yet used to it. I still feel nervous whenever I sell my pussy. But look, you can always conceal your fear) (Saysay, 2018, p. 26). She is afraid and nervous, but she sets aside her principles and values in order to survive. The readers are invited, in this narrative, to suspend their judgment as well. Dolor's harsh world, which includes the oppression and injustices she experienced from the authorities that are supposed to help her and the big fishing companies that invade their island depriving the local fishermen of harvest, could make the reader sympathetic towards her but enraged towards the oppressors and the powerful who exploit the powerless. Therefore, being sugot allows the baliana characters at least confront those who deprive them of living a good life. Being canny in their harsh realities and not being submissive to the oppressors depict the spirit of those baliana who will not be faltered by those who pose threat in their lives.

### The gerera

Interestingly, *gerera* does not exist in Mintz et al.'s Bikol Dictionary (1985). Interestingly, *gerero* exists which means a warrior (Mintz et al., 1985, p. 207). *Gerera* comes from the Spanish word *guerrera* which is the female counterpart of the male warrior *guerrero*. For this paper, this refers to the characters who are using their physical strength and wisdom to fight against the oppressors and lead the people towards justice and freedom. They are also those who lead and join others into battles that could deter evil or any source of suffering from thriving.

The *gerera* character in the play *1900: Mga Bangguing Bulanon* (1900: Moonlit Nights) is Felomina. In this work, Sari Saysay provides a grand narrative of Legazpi City during the battle of the Filipinos against the American forces right after they have gained their independence from Spain. The story revolves around the two lovers, Felomina and Gregorio, and their plan to elope amidst the threats of war. The play ends with the two protagonists together in the battlefield. They realize that their love for each other is as strong as their love for the Motherland who needs them, the youth, and every Filipino to fight for its cause and survival in midst of colonialism, abuse, and exploitation of those in power. Felomina, at a very young age, who is in love and carefree has been molded into a woman who is willing to sacrifice her life for the Motherland. Her experience with the colonizers motivated her to set aside her personal desires and prioritize a bigger fight, that is the liberation of her countrymen from the invaders. She has also challenged her own father to think for his own fellowmen and to set aside as well his personal interests:

“Pay, narinig mo naman ang mga putok di ba? Ibig sabihin lumalaban ang mga kapwa natin Pilipino. Samantalang nandito ka, nandito tayo at naghihintay ng grasya mula sa mga dayuhan. Anong klase ba tayong mamamayan sa bayang ito?”

(Pay, you heard the gunshots, right? That means our fellow Filipinos are fighting. While you're here, we're here, waiting for the mercy of the foreigners. What kind of citizens are we, then, in this country?)

(Saysay, 2016, p. 38)

In a male-biased Philippine society, it is unlikely for a daughter to answer back and even question the decisions of the head of the family. However, Felomina is different. At a young age, she understands the clamor of the people for freedom and their yearning for retaliation against the colonizers, and she is willing to sacrifice her own happiness and comfort for them. She was raped by an American soldier, and that experience also fueled her desire to be a *gerera* and join the men in their cause. Together with other female characters in the play who are the legendary Magayon and Kakay, they sang:

“Dahil ang magtanggol at lumaban  
Ay tama at makatarungan  
Salubungin lupit ng kaaway  
S'yang tama at makatarungan.”  
(To defend and fight

Is just and right  
To welcome the foe's might  
Is truly just and right.)  
(Saysay, 2016, p. 45).

The other *gerera* character is Dolores of the play, *Emba*, a term that represents a big mall in Legazpi City, Philippines. The story revolves around the family of Dolores. They live in Victory Village, a walled area, near the mall, Embarcadero de Legazpi. It is set in 2010, and it explores the impacts of the growing establishments of malls in the city of Legazpi. One of its ill impacts is the displacement of the communities who have lived in the area as long as they have known life. Dolores remains firm of her desire to stay in the village and will not sell her share of land, unlike her son, Dondon, who is willing to sell their land to the rich for the belief that they could find a better place and start anew. Dolores is reminiscent of her past and of her memories which have been obstructed by the newly-built massive establishment.

Dolores believes that no one owns the sea; hence she will not give in to powerful people who want them out of the place in order to build their business establishments:

“Dai kita mahali digdi. Satuya an lugar na ini. Digdi na kita nagdarakula. Satuya an lugar na ini. Satuya an lugar na ini.” (We won’t leave this place. This place is ours. This is where we all grew up. This place is ours. This place is ours.)  
(Saysay, 2018, p. 27)

She allows the younger generations of her family to abandon the place if that is what they really want, but as for her, she will stay for that is her place. Her grandson, Dondon, has already given up to the powerful people claiming that there is no way for them to fight against them. However, Dolores is prepared and willing to die in the village, her home.

Consequently, being courageous and being a fighter amidst very difficult times is what is common among the five *gerera* characters. Despite being controlled and oppressed by the male authorities and / or by the government and the powerful businessmen, these female characters focus on helping others and contributing to movements and causes that are pro-people, and those that deter the evil or anything that brings chaos to the minorities by going against them.

### The areglador

The next female characters are called *areglador* for they serve as mediators and problem solvers in the story. They are generally in the middle of two conflicting forces. *Areglador* comes from its root word *areglar* which means, based on the Bicol dictionary of Mintz et al. (1985, p. 228), “to fix, arrange, to arbitrate, and mediate.” Using these definitions, areglador, in this context, means agents of settlements, arrangements, or deals between contrasting parties. They use their knowledge and their shrewdness to offer solutions to problems that harm the people as seen in the last two characters: Nadia and Mamay Luz.

In *Oktubre, Gulong ng Kasaysayan* (October, Wheel of History), Sari Saysay juxtaposes an event from Russian history to the present Philippines. It celebrates the success of the Socialist Revolution headed by Lenin. The story revolves around the three Russian

friends namely Egor, Demi, and Nadeshda and their present Filipino counterparts namely Goryo, Damian, and Nadia. The Russian friends became soldiers for the revolutionary government who fought with other rebels to seize the power from Tsar Nicolas. In the present Philippines, Goryo lost his parents who tried to fight for their land which was being claimed by the capitalist Don Rolando. Similarly, Egor lost his parents who fought for their rights. Nadasha, the daughter of the Russian landlord, Ruslan, is also like Nadia who used her education to fight for the people. In the end, the three Filipino friends decided to fight for the greater cause—that is to join the revolutionary army in order to help change the system that is anti-poor and anti-Filipino.

By using her education, Nadia has become more aware of the struggles of her fellow Filipinos; hence her decision to fight on their side. She helps other students understand the situation of the minorities by introducing to them her friend, Goryo, who has lost his parents from land-grabbers. She informs her fellow students about the parallelisms of the cause of Russian Socialist Revolution to the country's. She claims that people's submissiveness to foreigners hinders the country from becoming progressive. The play also shows how the government, the authority that is supposed to protect the people, tolerates the landlords who perpetuate the class struggle among the people. From this information offered by Nadia in her narration and sharing, the play invites its readers to help the masses in their fight to change the oppressive system, "*Pihitin natin ang gulang patungo sa kalayaan*" (Let's veer the wheel towards freedom) (Saysay, 2017 p. 55).

The next play, *Mga Aninipot sa Tahaw kan Salog* (Fireflies on the River), explores the role of rivers in keeping the memory of the people intact. The play specifically focuses on the story of Mamay Luz's family. At the beginning of the play, the baliana character, Mamay Luz has difficulties recognizing the people around her. For instance, she thinks that her grandson Samuel is her son, William. Nonetheless, it is revealed in the play that Mamay Luz's fading memories are like the fireflies in the river. Mamay Luz's singing parts in the play invite the audience to join her in remembering things that once had made the river full of life:

|                        |                     |
|------------------------|---------------------|
| “...Magrani kamo sako. | (Come closer to me. |
| Kuguson, kabiton       | Embrace, grasp      |
| Ining sakuyang puso    | This heart of mine  |
| Ta kun mawara,         | Coz if it's gone    |
| Ano na an tada.”       | Then what remains.) |

(Saysay, 2018, p. 34)

Sari used Mamay Luz's character as a metaphor for the river and the fireflies. Mama Luz's memory is similar to the river in which value is slowly diminishing due to human activities that bring danger to all the lives in the river. Likewise, the *aninipot* or the fireflies reflect those memories. Little by little, they are becoming more endangered as their habitat is being destroyed. Mamay Luz is an *areglador* who serves as a mediator between the past and the present, the dead and the living, as well as the forgotten and the remembered. Mamay Luz has become an agent between the nature and the humans. She offers a solution that is the value

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of remembering the environment and being stewards of it, so that nature and humans can co-exist with each other. Her name itself, Luz, also suggests how she is like the fireflies who will bring out enlightenment to others about the necessity of saving the river.

As a whole, the female characters in the plays of Sari Saysay are powerful agents who challenge and fight against those who try to destroy the lives of the people, their children, and their family. They can be *sugot* if need be, for they need to survive the harsh world brought by oppressors and the powerful. Unfortunately, going against the oppressors led to their demise which is also true among the early balianas who were imprisoned, burned, and fed to crocodiles for not submitting to the demands of the colonizers: (Basco, 2016; Lopez-Ledesma Tan, 2001; Realubit, 2001). In addition, they can be *gerera*, for there are enemies who can only be defeated by being armed with a gun or with knowledge that they acquired through experience. This is similar to the claims of Basco (2016) who explained the active involvement of the babaylans in leading the locals to the mountains as they fled from the invaders. Most especially, they could be as subtle as young students and mothers who use their memory, knowledge of the past, and education to impart values to younger generations. This supports the arguments of Gerona (1988; Lopez-Ledesma Tan (2001); Realubit (2001); Conde (2009); Strobel (2010), and Abustan (2015) regarding the important role of babaylans or more specifically the balianas in addressing the problems of the society through being a mediator, a healer, or a councilor among conflicting forces. In general, all these qualities of the female characters are balianic in nature for they resonate the power of the balianas in the early Bikols where they led the warding off evils that lurked in the ancient Ibalong. At present, the balianas are multifaced, and Sari Saysay has successfully portrayed different faces of contemporary women whose roles in the society are as vital as that of the balianas in the old times.

## Conclusions

Based on the analysis of the six selected plays of Sari Saysay, it has been shown that the female characters generally fall under these categories: *sugot*, *gerera*, and *areglador*. The *sugot* characters are those who defy the powerful through their canny acts or by being shrewd and libertine. Their harsh reality leaves them with few options to survive; hence they choose to do some unlawful acts. However, they do all those to protect themselves or their loved ones. On the other hand, the *gerera* characters also defy the powerful, particularly the oppressors by fighting against them through armed struggle and education. They do it for the general public or the masses who cannot fight for themselves. The last one, the *agreladors*, are those characters who try to settle the conflicts between two clashing forces. They are usually nostalgic of the past. They are tellers of the forgotten narratives informing the younger generation of their roots, and how they can protect such knowledge for future generations to also remember. They are also more focused on ecological concerns. Despite their differences in addressing the problems in their worlds, they share the spirit of the baliana. All of them have important roles in solving the problems in their own narratives. They all reflect the power of women in creating an impact to the society. Moreover, they reveal that their concern for the common good is driven by their love and concern for other lives, both the visible and the invisible. Finally, this paper concludes

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how Bikol drama serves as memory text that captures the culture and narratives of Bikol society. Bikol theater then provides a space for spectators to remember their roots, thereby, their identity not only as Bikolanos but also as Filipinos.

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