

FILM REVIEW

CRYING LADIES

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In the introduction to *Governing the Other*, Rodriguez meditates on why in particular the poor Filipinos in the city appear to be ungovernable. He says that it is because these people have their own rationalities or ways of thinking, which are different from the dominant rationality of the urban upper class that tries to govern them (Rodriguez, 2009, p. 4). He also states that the dominant rationality of the city and the laws that are created based on this rationality are things which the poor do not understand or recognize as something beneficial for themselves. They had no hand in creating such laws and merely see them as an imposition on their way of life which they must conform to lest they be punished. The dominant urban class, on the other hand, does not recognize the otherness of the poor and that the latter's rationality can be a legitimate way of life. They continually attempt to "convert" the poor into their own rationality and if the poor resist they punish them for doing so. This results in the poor being marginalized and continually pushed towards the "nowhere"

spaces of the city—spaces that Rodriguez argues the dominant rationality finds hard to reach because they are not ideally livable.

Crying Ladies is a film made in 2003 about three women based in Chinatown who get paid to cry and mourn at Chinese funerals . When I first heard the three women, Stella, Doray, and Choleng, wail loudly at the funeral of Mang Tony, I thought they were just bad actors. Apparently, they really must mourn loudly for the gods to hear them. According to Stella in the movie, Chinese families hire professional mourners so that the gods may hear the cries and allow the deceased to travel more easily to heaven. When a lot of people cry for the deceased, the crying makes it seem as if the deceased person had touched many lives and had done a lot of good. Upon research, people in Mainland China actually do this as the absence of tears means that the deceased person was not loved and such would bring disgrace to the family (“Actors fill in at family funerals”, 2014). Some Chinese also hire professional mourners to come to funerals they would be too busy to attend. The professional mourners are usually out-of-work actors. In the film, Aling Doray actually used to be an actress with her onscreen name, Rhoda Rivera, in Darna and the Giants, which she excessively mentioned. Professional mourners make it a point to wear white, as Stella and the other two women did in the movie, as a symbol of mourning .

The film is directed by Mark Meily, who was interestingly not only the writer of the movie but also the fire fighter who stopped Stella Mate, played by Sharon Cuneta, from entering the vicinity of

the burning building to look for Bong, her son.. I personally liked the film because it not only educates on a practice that young Filipinos like me might not necessarily be familiar with anymore but it also lays out a context of a Filipino society that still seems applicable today. The themes and elements of the film are what makes the film simple yet engaging.

Stratification

It is obvious that people like Stella, Doray, and Choleng are of lower economic standing. Five hundred pesos may have been a lot back then, but Stella seemed most desperate as she was willing to give up working on her regular job that demanded so much from her. Accepting responsibility as a professional mourner could have been a threat to her regular job as probably not finishing the heavy workload she said she already had in the first place could cost her her regular source of income. This has two implications. First, her financial situation could be so bad that she would be inclined to think short term and hold on to instant gratification out of desperation. She even asked for advanced pay because it was what she really needed at that time. Second, it shows that having one job will not ensure survival in our economy. Even at present, 15 years after the film came out, we can see that so many hardworking Filipinos take 2-3 jobs just to get by. The social stratification based on economic class limits opportunities for Stella, Doray, and Choleng to have a stable lifestyle, especially with Stella and Doray having kids, and such can be argued to be attributed to a structural

problem. Stella Mate is an ex-convict that got out after serving her time in prison for the crime of estafa. In the Philippines, ex-convicts are definitely not given many opportunities to reintegrate themselves into society despite the fact that they have already faced the necessary consequences in court and are willing to work to advance themselves. At the starting scene, Stella was at a job interview and it was only later on that I realized that she did not have an NBI clearance, which would be necessary to secure her a job, because she was an ex-convict. She knew that having her crime on her record either way would just taint all her possible opportunities even more. It could be seen that illegal gambling is tolerated in their community and Stella would even succumb to it from time to time despite the risk of getting caught. It can be argued that they should just be able to stop gambling altogether because it is illegal, but it can be that their economic conditions are so bad that they have to resort to such activities. A cycle of poverty is seen both in the film and in the Philippine society it wishes to reflect because individuals are pushed into making decisions that would systematically trap them in their current conditions of poverty. The cycle of poverty that can be seen in *Crying Ladies* can be compared to the cycle of poverty evident in *Rickshaw Boy* (1982). In *Rickshaw Boy*, life as a rickshaw puller is just bound to fail—one can work so hard to try to alleviate oneself from their current conditions but still fail because society is designed to give people of the lower class little to no social mobility. Even a “flourishing” industry of rickshaw pullers back then could not

sustain the demands of their declining physical health and ever-growing families. In the same light, it is both amusing and saddening to see that characters like Stella Mate represent the Filipinos that do crimes out of poverty to try to save themselves from poverty.

One of the scenes that left an impression on me was when Stella Mate got a karaoke machine for PHP3500.00 despite already having an overdue house rent and Meralco bill. She tried justifying the purchase by saying that it was for practice, but it seems to be a coping mechanism to distract oneself with entertainment the same way a lot of Filipino families have televisions, karaoke machines, and stereo systems in their households despite struggling financially. This coping mechanism or distraction can be likened to Meishan's singing in *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991). To an extent, she wanted to get attention and maybe also annoy fellow mistresses but she also sang to cope with the realities she was living in. Songlian even commented that her room may have decorations that make it look like a stage because Meishan would always wear a mask and live life as if it were a performance that always set aside the sad realities. More than a coping mechanism, Stella Mate buying a karaoke machine may yet again be symptomatic of the cycle of poverty. The economically challenged habitually buying things they cannot afford turns them into the phony middle class (or more aptly in Filipino, "*mapagkunwaring gitnang-uri*") controlled by capitalist markets. Products are constantly marketed to the lower class to make them feel as if spending would give them

the social mobility that they need. In the film, the man who was selling the karaoke machine even told Stella that she *needed* the karaoke machine for practice and this was not because he solely wanted to get it off his hands but because he wanted to make a profit. The more that the lower class are pushed to live a middle-class lifestyle that they cannot afford, the poorer they become.

The interactions between Stella Mate and Wilson Chua that eventually became friendship is a juxtaposition of two different lifestyles brought by their economic and social standing. Stella would desperately pretend riding the wrong jeepneys and join Salapi o Salakot even if she knew she was going to look like an idiot if she got in all because she needed money and opportunities to sustain herself and her son. Unfortunately, opportunities are barely made to be available to her because of her background as an ex-convict. Wilson Chua, a rich Filipino-Chinese man, can easily buy a two hundred fifty thousand-peso coffin for his deceased father and shell out as much money as he can for the policeman and tanod that would assist them and the professional mourners. Without him, Stella might not have even gotten a permanent job. It is important to note that in the end, Stella got a job because Wilson called her and told her to tell the employer that he referred her. His connections basically overrode Stella Mate's background and allowed her to move forward.

The Chinese-Filipino

The portrayal of the Chinese in the Philippines is not far from the portrayal in *Mano Po* (2002) and *Mano Po 2* (2003). They are seen as wealthy and would mostly respect Chinese traditions. There would always be the traditional characters that would not only push for Mandarin/Hokkien to be spoken instead of Filipino (Tagalog) but also actively try to exclude Filipinos as a matter of race. In the film, Wilson Chua's mother was scolding Wilson for not speaking Mandarin, not wanting to be Chinese, and even hating the fact that he is the eldest son. She was even wary of the fact that the professional mourners are Filipinos and not Chinese probably because she wanted to be faithful to tradition. It was interesting to see that the mother even made Wilson take note of the birth years of Stella, Doray, and Choleng to ensure that it was not bad luck based on feng shui. In the wake of Mang Tony, it was mentioned that monks were supposed to come when the mother was scolding Wilson under the speculation that he just did not call them altogether. After a few seconds, a shot of a priest was shown. It can be seen that the acculturation of the Chinese and Filipino identity have brought the two religions, Buddhism and Catholicism, to coexist. In *Mano Po 2* (2003), there were also monks and a priest during the wake of the father.

When Stella commented on Wilson's unshaved beard, he said that it was because they are forbidden to shave when there is a wake. In Chinese custom, having facial hair can bring misfortune to the family ("Chinese customs, superstitions and traditions,"

2014). Looking at the setting of the wake, there was a lot of food prepared for the deceased. The food serves as an offering to their deceased loved ones. The belongings of the deceased will also even be burned so that they may remain with him or her. Despite Wilson not wanting to be Chinese and hating the fact that he is the eldest son, he still had to carry on his special role during the funeral. As his father was buried, Wilson took the photo of his father and walked the opposite direction. I knew that it was always the eldest son who would push along the procession as the body is carried over and that he would usually hold the incense then bow, but it was only through this movie that I found out such practice exists for the next head of the family.

The film was educational in a sense that it revealed the existing narrative in most traditional Chinese-Filipino families. It was excellent in being able to tackle the social realities of lower-class Filipinos as it used relatable characterizations and scenes—Stella Mate was driven by her love for her son and later on lived a relatively frugal life as survival instinct. Tackling stratification and the Chinese-Filipinos were not only the film's selling points as it also did a good job in making the characters dynamic. Aling Doray was my favorite character because of the hopes and dreams of again becoming a star she always projected. In the end, the film had a happy ending for all three women and the happy ending can seem cliché to a certain extent but it was truly a relief to see the development among them. I am glad it did not end in a love story.

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