



Tracing Womanhood in Three Movements: Reflections on Labor, Identity, and the Quiet Transformations of Aging

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ABSTRACT

This creative work focuses on presenting and discussing three poems about women in different seasons of their lives as viewed from a third, first, and second-person viewpoint. The poems reflect how women carry the invisible work and unspoken expectations in their identities, families, and social roles. In all the poems, the authors highlighted the pause, which reflects a turning point, a realization of what should have been. Following the poem is an exegesis of studies made regarding unpaid work, gender expectations, age stereotyping, and empowerment in the Philippines. The creative works highlight awakening and emancipation within a social landscape marked by inequality but also by resilience and hope.

KEYWORDS

aging, self-identity, women’s empowerment, women’s values

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Background and Description of the Creative Work

This creative work presents three poems that explore the experiences of women through the themes of labor, identity, caregiving, and aging. Written using different narrative perspectives, the poems reflect how women understand themselves at different stages of life and within different relationships, responsibilities, and social expectations.

The poems are connected through the recurring idea of “the pause.” In each poem, the pause carries a different meaning. In the first poem, it appears as a moment of rest and self-recognition in the middle of labor. In the second poem, it becomes a quiet act of resistance against expectations placed on women. In the third poem, the pause takes the form of memory, caregiving, and reflection as a daughter witnesses her mother grow older.

The collection is grounded in Filipino social and cultural experiences where women are often expected to carry emotional labor, caregiving responsibilities, and traditional gender roles. Through ordinary moments and personal reflections, the poems examine how women negotiate these expectations while also trying to create space for identity, dignity, and selfhood across different stages of life.

The Poems

1. The Day She Woke Up

She woke up to the uncleaned dishes at the sink,
But this time paused, allowing herself to think—
Her worth’s not chained to chores or anything she gives,
But in the truth of how she lives.

No titles bind her, not mother, daughter, wife—
She chose her joy, her soul, and her life.
The dishes could wait, her heart could not,
Today she chose herself—and that meant a lot.

A garden once shaded, now kissed by the sun,
She bloomed in the light of the woman she became.
No longer tending to what others sow,
She learned that her spirit deserved to grow.

2. My afternoon coffee

1. I brushed my hair like my mother used to—
tenderness is an inheritance too.
2. I wore the red lipstick my coworker once called “too much”.
I wore it anyway. Because it is exactly enough.
3. I walked without rushing, even when a man behind me sighed.
My pace was my own.

4. Smiled at the young man who tried to cut in line, not because I owed him warmth.
My mother taught me that kindness on my own terms is power.
5. Met my reflection at the cafe window,
I didn't flinch at the woman looking back.
6. Ordered my coffee– creamy, light– because
I don't have to erase every soft side of me to be strong.
7. I tipped more than expected,
because generosity is rebellion too.
8. I sat by my favorite spot at the window instead of the corner,
let the sun trace my wrists. Remembered that gentleness can burn just as bright.
9. I took a sip and smiled. My lipstick mark stayed on the rim–
proof I was here.

That I've always been here.

3. Before Mama Slept

My mama tucked me in to sleep, despite her own bones aching like old branches creaking in the wind. Her hands– soft, steady, once so sure. Now those hands tremble when the waiter ignores her. When the young doctor turned to me instead of her. When people look at her through as if time had erased her edges. Once, she had the loudest laugh in the room. Now, she clears her throat twice to be heard.

My mama tucked me in to sleep, whispering that kindness would make the world gentle. But the world isn't gentle to women “past their prime”. It hushes, murmurs, and tells them to sit and stay quiet, calling them sweetheart in a voice sharp enough to cut. She still smiles though, as if dignity were a thing she could fold and smooth– like linen– every afternoon when her family's gone.

My mama tucked me into sleep, told me a story, and I saw the girl she used to flicker beneath her years. I watched her, her eyes, her voice, speaking as if the rest of her life was to be spent wallowing in the woman she once was. She tells everyone these stories, giving them tinted glasses that this isn't her. But it is.

I tucked my mama in to sleep, the lamp paints her face in soft gold streaks. I want to tell her the world, everyone, is wrong, that she's invincible, that her light still finds me in the dark. But I simply just put the blanket up to her chin, whisper “goodnight, mama,” and hope this time, the world hears.

Description

I. Stopping and Appreciating One's Value

The Day She Woke Up began with a pause and an undone task. The pause was central to the story, a woman understanding the work she is doing for her family. This shows an individual's awakening from all things repetitive to redefining one's autonomy. The speaker's choice to let "the dishes wait" is one that redefines the value of the speaker, as the value of one is no longer measured by one's service but by one's authenticity. The reality of Filipino women is centered on work and unpaid work, where unpaid work takes up the most time (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2022); the issue of wage disparity still exists among women despite changes in gender and development policies (World Bank, 2023).

The poem presents a moment of pause in the midst of an expected routine, situated between domestic labor, caregiving responsibilities, and the implicit social expectations attached to both roles. The images of breath and quiet reveal a moment of clarity that allows the woman to finally hear what has been carried by her body for so long. In the context of Philippine culture, this is what it means to be resistant. The societal mores that place high value on *hiya*, *utang na loob*, and the code of selflessness have made women's work invisible, natural, and inevitable.

Women in Philippine families are doing more than 50% of the unpaid domestic work of men, and time studies carried out by the Philippine Institute for Development Studies confirm this phenomenon and emphasize its economic implications (Abrigo & Ortiz, 2019). According to their study, if unpaid care work were given a financial value, it would contribute around 20% to the GDP of the country. With women doing more hours of unpaid care work, they now have less time to devote to paying work (UN ESCAP, 2022), limited access to better-paying work, and fewer opportunities for professional growth and development. This imbalance limits women's access to economic and professional opportunities. At the household level, unpaid care work limits a woman's ability to earn money and consequently her financial security in the long run, and at the national level, these uncounted work represents a significant amount that, when accounted for, undervalues women's contribution to the economy and may also create distortions in policies formulated to address gender issues. It is through this poetic voice that one does not see the hand of the woman merely as a work tool for completing tasks; instead, it is a holder of unrecorded work, recognition of which encourages a new self-awareness attuned to theories on self-worth and self-compassion. It is, in fact, moments of reflection that will serve to raise one's personal agency, an idea emphasized by the works of Rogers (1961) and Deci & Ryan (2000). This moment of pause becomes more than a pause in activities; it is a reclamation of dignity, a return to self after years of subordinating self to others.

While pause is used as a device throughout the collection, the pauses described are not only periods of silence or stillness, but rather awakening, resistance, thoughtfulness, reciprocity, and change. The first poem features a pause during labor in the form of an individual stepping

away from work to acknowledge her value, while the second poem uses a similar device in the context of resisting the expectations placed upon her in the form of challenging voices. In the final poem, the pause is one of reflection, as well as reciprocity, since the daughter begins to understand the aging process and sees herself switching roles in relation to her mother as she begins to age and require care.

The movement of the poems from morning to evening mirrors the different stages of a woman's life. This change can be witnessed by the themes of the first few poems, focused on productive aspects of womanhood and self-definition, while the final one describes memory, aging, and intergenerational care. Through pauses, sighs, restraint in speaking, and stillness, the author manages to capture womanhood as an ever-evolving process determined by labor and intergenerational relations.

II. Asserting Identity in a Highly Stereotypical Culture

In the poem "My Afternoon Coffee," pauses are a way of resisting the norm. Unlike the first poem, where pauses came from being tired and then waking up, the pauses here interrupt the usual rhythm of daily life. They turn everyday moments into deliberate choices about who the female character wants to be. Each moment, numbered and slow, is a conscious decision to live life on her own terms. She puts on the lipstick that's been called "too much," walks at her own pace even when others are impatient, and takes up space instead of hiding in the background. Though quiet and ordinary, these pauses gradually challenge the expectation that women must constantly adjust themselves for others. Through these small acts, the speaker begins to reclaim her identity on her own terms.

The pauses become moments of self-definition and quiet resistance against prescribed forms of femininity. In a world where women are often expected to conform, these small acts of resistance are a powerful reminder that we all have the right to exist on our own terms. The poem shows how Filipino women feel trapped between being themselves and being the kind of women society wants them to be. They are expected to be gentle, kind, and accommodating, and these expectations affect how they behave at home, at work, in school, and in public. But the speaker in the poem is saying no to these expectations. When she says "My pace was my own," she is taking back control of her life and her body. She is saying that being slow does not mean she is weak; it just means she is doing things her own way. By pausing and taking her time, she is asserting her independence and ownership of her life. The gesture reflects the speaker's refusal to move according to expectations imposed upon her. This pause is a powerful statement; it is a way of reclaiming her agency and her individuality. This idea resonates with Judith Butler's (1990) theory of performative identity, which argues that gender is not fixed or natural but continuously produced through repeated social behaviors and expectations. Femininity becomes normalized because women are expected to repeatedly perform culturally accepted roles and traits. In the poem, the speaker resists these repeated performances by consciously choosing softness, visibility, and self-authored forms of femininity. Her resistance is not a loud rebellion but a quiet refusal. Choosing to be gentle "on my own terms" challenges the belief that femininity must always exist

for the comfort or approval of others. The repeated gestures in the poem, such as applying lipstick, smiling politely, walking at a measured pace, and choosing where to sit, reflect how femininity is often performed through ordinary public behaviors. These actions may appear simple, but they carry social expectations regarding how women should present themselves, move, and occupy space. By intentionally altering or reclaiming these gestures, the speaker resists the idea that femininity must always conform to what is considered acceptable or pleasing to others.

The poem also reflects feminist psychological perspectives on women's movement toward self-authored identity. Gilligan (1982) explains that women often develop voice and selfhood through negotiating relationships and social expectations rather than through separation from others. Similarly, Belenky et. al. (1986) describe women's journey toward constructing identity and knowledge from lived experience. The pauses throughout the poem become moments of self-authorship, where ordinary actions gain meaning because they are chosen intentionally. The final image of the lipstick stain left on the coffee cup serves as quiet proof of presence: "That I've always been here." In this sense, the pause becomes not silence, but declaration.

III. A Daughter's Poem for a Mother Aging and Changing With Time

In the poem *Before Mama Slept*, the pauses take the form of memory, caregiving, and reflection. Unlike the pauses in the earlier poems, which focus on labor and resistance, the pauses here emerge through the daughter's growing awareness of her mother's aging. The daughter notices the trembling hands, quieter voice, and slower movements of the woman who once cared for her. These moments of stillness allow the daughter to recognize not only her mother's physical changes but also the emotional depth of her experiences as a woman, caregiver, and aging individual.

The poem presents aging not as disappearance or irrelevance, but as another stage of womanhood shaped by memory, sacrifice, and resilience. The line "the girl she used to flicker beneath her years" suggests that identity does not vanish with age. Instead, the mother continues to carry the different versions of herself formed across time. This idea connects with Tornstam's (2005) theory of gerotranscendence, which explains that aging may involve deeper reflection, shifts in self-understanding, and a greater focus on meaningful relationships rather than external recognition.

At the same time, the poem reflects the realities of caregiving within Filipino families. Older women often remain the emotional center of the household even when society begins to overlook them. Fresnoza-Flot and Asis (2020) observed that caregiving and emotional labor continue to be carried by women across generations in Filipino families. As the daughter slowly takes on the role of caregiver, the poem illustrates the reversal of roles commonly experienced in Filipino households. Soriano (2015) explained that emotional support and caregiving responsibilities often move across generations of women within the family.

Across the collection, the meaning of "the pause" changes from one poem to another. In the first poem, the pause is connected to labor and self-recognition. In the second poem, it becomes a form of resistance against expectations imposed on women. In the final poem, the pause becomes

quieter and more reflective, centered on memory, aging, and care between mother and daughter. Through these shifts, the poems present womanhood as shaped by work, resistance, aging, and intergenerational relationships.

Significance to Gender and Education

Coming from the point of view of a poet who is entering adulthood, the poems are an invitation to conversations on womanhood, adult-life, and celebrations of gender. The discourse invites reflections on access to learning, identity formation, and self-expression because it highlights expectations, experiences, and gender roles (traditional and the transition to non-traditional roles), an example of which is the line, “Smiled at the young man who tried to cut in line, not because I owed him warmth. My mother taught me that kindness on my own terms is power.” The narrative perspective in the three poems offer empowerment themes of challenging cultural stereotypes, highlighting women’s worth, and acknowledging the changing roles of women in the different developmental stages.

The poems reflect self-awareness and voice, which are important tools in contextualizing gender concepts and advocacies. As a concept, self-awareness refers to an acknowledgment of one’s strengths and weaknesses, and to being able to grow from the two because some strengths are outcomes of weaknesses that were confronted. Being able to clearly view the self facilitates navigation in a role-changing world where multiple roles are handled simultaneously while prioritizing selves that need healing or selves that show courage. On the other hand, women’s voices as a tool in the poems are presented with metaphors expressed through smiles, pauses, sighs, and silence to convey the quiet negotiations they make with the expectations placed on them.

The educational viewpoint of this work focuses on how women see themselves in different eyes, of their daughters, of their own youthful eyes, and of their aging eyes. These perspectives may serve as developmental vantage points in examining gender and learning, and of spaces and environments where women are heard, acknowledged, and seen. Lastly, it puts importance in helping young girls transition into adulthood with the understanding that women should celebrate women.

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1. **Funding details.** This research received no external funding.
2. **Disclosure statement.** The authors report that there are no financial or non-financial interests arising from the direct application of this creative work. The authors further declare that there are no competing interests related to the preparation, conduct, or publication of this work. The authors also affirm that they had not been involved in any

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3. **Declaration of Generative AI in Scientific Writing**

During the preparation of this work, the authors used generative AI–assisted tools for grammar and language checking to improve clarity and readability. The authors carefully reviewed and edited the text after using these tools and took full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and final content of the manuscript. Generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were not used to generate the ideas, analysis, or creative content presented in this work. Likewise AI was not used in the development of the poems (an action deliberately decided upon by both authors for this creative work).

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Bionote

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