

# I Want My Real Mommy on TV:

## Mother Images on Philippine TV in the Last Fifty Years

By Libay Linsangan Cantor

**T**elevision as a medium is young, and our history as viewers is also young. Only a few generations of our families have been exposed to more or less fifty years of television fare, compared with a hundred years of cinema and centuries of art and literature. Yet television is the medium that communication analysts say is the most “piercing”—we let television into our lives, in our living rooms, our bedrooms. The relationship between TV *and* viewers is intensely personal, intimate and immediate. No other mass medium has the same dynamic with its audience, and nothing like TV has had more obvious impact on us. Imagine, with one press of a button, we have a ringside view of the latest developments in the nation, pretty much around the world even. But do we really have a choice of what to watch on TV?

For fifty years or so, Filipinos have seen how their lives have been staged—correctly or incorrectly—on Philippine TV. We have both cheered and condemned these portrayals for different reasons. Sad to say, however, these portrayals still leave much to be desired. Different bigotries and prejudices remain, especially on local situational comedies (sitcoms). In this country, the tools for comedy often used are not wit and sarcasm, but one’s looks (or the lack of it) and deformities, as if these are something to laugh at. In dramas, the patriarchal system is reinforced whenever women are presented as objects that men should ‘possess’ and take care of, and the different stereotypical gender roles still exist in commercials.

### Mothers, this was Then

True, there have been some changes in the imaging of Filipino mothers, but feminist analysts still critique the propagation of stereotypes for women who choose to be mothers. For instance, mothers are always portrayed as the doting parent of lovable children, the faithful wives of

hardworking husbands, the neat homemakers who do not have or did not choose “careers” outside of their homes.

These ‘nurturing’ mothers are portrayed in a variety of ways. Early shows during the 1970s and 1980s reinforced the martyr-mother role, especially in the soap operas and tearjerker melodramas. There were also shows in the 1980s and 1990s that portrayed mothers-in-law as obese naggers always breathing down the necks of their sons-in-law. This caricature resurjects in both comedy and the drama shows over and over again. Meanwhile, step-mothers are wicked persons whose role in life is to make the children’s lives miserable.

Stereotypes like these are stuck in the Filipino’s psyche of what mothers are or ought to be, and how mothers should be and behave. And when these stereotypes are reinforced over and over in different shows, they become archetypes, or the norm. Marra PL. Lanot, a Filipino feminist writer and board member of the Movies and Television Review and Classification Board (MTRCB), confirms this. “Nothing much has changed in the image of mothers on television. Since the 1950s up to now, mothers are portrayed as obedient wives, caring mothers and grandmothers. There’s this ideal image that they have to portray—religious, god-fearing, very subservient. There’s nothing wrong with [being religious], but the image is so traditional and conservative.”

### Mom, this is Now

These days, we are witness to bigger changes due to the shrinking global community, globalisation, and advancements in technology. And because people change alongside these advancements, we see different types of characters emerging. If art imitates life, then television—as a medium for art works—should also reflect what goes on out there. But does this apply to Philippine TV?

Professor Armi V. Santiago, a faculty member of the University of the Philippines’ College of Mass Communication, sees trends changing. “Yes, we still see the same things we saw when we were growing up—the nagging mother, the martyr mother, the suffering mother who endures an adulterous husband. But now, we also see mothers who fight, who file for annulment when their husbands commit adultery, who have liposuction.”

It is true that we are seeing new and different types of mothers on TV. There are mothers who have no problem being career women and mothers at the same time. While the so-called dilemma of “balancing careers with families” remains, there are some shows that no longer portray such situations as angst-filled dilemmas—neither the business/career nor the family aspect is an issue that burdens the other. The women’s liberation movements during the 1970s have contributed much to this change, making people realise that women should not be relegated to the domesticated role of nurturers, that women, like men, have rights. Thanks to television’s partial respect for egalitarian principles, society now sees this aspect of women.

Social concerns have also crept into storylines, with social issues woven into the lives of characters on television, in a way mirroring society. Two prominent “mother figures” frequently tackled lately are single mothers raising their children with much difficulty (and usually without the help of fathers, or if there are fathers, the mothers do not seek their active help), and mothers who are overseas Filipino workers (OFW)—realities that exist even more so now than before. Even in comedies, these representations have been present in the past couple of years.

#### Echoes of Imports

It appears that TV has adapted current liberal trends. Lately, we have seen more mother roles that break out of stereotypical characterisation. Prof. Santiago explains: “Before, you are considered a mother only when you bear your own child. Images on TV these days show different types of mothers: You can be a surrogate mother or an

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adoptive mother. Also, there are mothers who are seen with non-human ‘children.’ I think it was in the local show *Attagirls* where the character of an elderly woman had a cat which she treated as her own child. Changes like these could be attributed to what we see from canned American programmes, to foreign influences that affect our psyche.”

It is no secret that Philippine television is to a large extent ‘inspired’ by its American counterpart, for America still supplies the dominant share of foreign programmes on local TV. The *Attagirls* show, for example, is a local version of American cable channel HBO’s *Sex and the City*, trying to portray Filipino young women like New York women in a local context. Yet no matter how local writers try hard to adapt the American way of life, culture and values on Philippine TV, some treatments are “incomplete,” almost always echoing American prejudices, stereotypes and tendencies, such as putting a premium on beauty over brains and women’s obsessing over their bodies.

The same can be said of the mother roles. Although more mothers are breaking out of the norm, somehow, they also do not stray afar, according to Lanot. “The images you see of a mom are not separated from the images of a wife, meaning they have a responsibility in the house, so this takes priority over other roles. If ever she had a career, it merely serves as a background. More important is her role as a mother and a wife. Women are not made to choose between being a wife and a mother. It’s a given that you have to be both. There are dichotomies that exist on TV. You have to be either or, either good or bad, mother or whore, virgin or vamp.”

However new or diverse some current TV mother roles are, there are still mothers in real life that we do not see on TV. An example is lesbian mothers. The image of gays and lesbians as parents still shock most people, but this is a reality that exists. Lanot concurs. “Where are the lesbians? They’re not portrayed on TV. And if ever they are, they are portrayed as abnormal, all the more because they are not ‘mothers’ in the traditional sense of the word. But what about the lesbians who are indeed mothers? I know a lot of them, but they are not acceptable [images] on TV. There are no alternative real relationships on TV other than the heterosexual relationships. The reality that bites is not shown on TV.”

Although lesbian visibility has increased in the last five years in Philippine society, they remain marginalised because lesbianism is frowned upon by the Catholic church (which dictates the country’s ‘moral standards’) and they are not encouraged as partners in all permutations of ‘nation-building.’ Thus, the same treatment is given lesbians on TV.

### The Writers' Dilemma

Prof. Santiago shed some light on why some images such as lesbian moms are absent on TV. "It's not possible that you will create shows that are 100 percent different from what is accepted. The network executives will not permit it, and they are the ones who own the station. The executives have the power to have shows aired or removed. However, writers have been putting in different things, injecting small things slowly that they think are new or different. But they also have to put in some of the traditional formula in order to anchor their story on the norm and keep the show on the air. That's their reality as writers. If they don't want that reality, then they better look for [other writing] alternatives."

There have been similar observations among writers, especially the gay and lesbian writers on television today. Some have been infusing small roles for lesbian characters in local soap operas, but rarely do we see these lesbians as mothers. Some gay writers have also created bisexual characters. The main reason why writers cannot fully pitch their ideas for trailblazing characters is the fear that they will immediately be shunned by the station's management.

Indeed, this has been an old dilemma of scriptwriters in the Philippines—how to please the executives while presenting edgy shows, or what they call "thinking out of the box yet somehow remaining within the concept of the box." In the film and television industry, there are more writers than producers—a situation that allows producers to shop around freely. Writers are therefore forced to conform to norms because sadly, this is the only reality producers are aware of, and they are scared of venturing into something new in fear of low audience share.

### The Networks' Final Say

The problem is complicated by the way television companies are run—that is, the star system and the networks' principle of 'synergy.' TV stations keep a stable of actors who are given exposure at different times, and writers always have to 'write-in' the quirks or limitations of each actor into the material. In short, the writers bend over backwards to create scripts that will fit into the actors, while the actors, on the other hand, are not prepared to stretch for the demands of certain roles, which makes one wonder why these stars call themselves 'actors' in the first place.

TV networks in the Philippines are owned by companies that own other large companies, some related to the film and TV industry. Often, the networks manipulate the operations of their other companies to maximise the returns on their latest TV products. A recent example is the F4 mania that swept Manila last year. F4 is the popular

Taiwanese all-male vocal pop group whose 2000 show *Meteor Garden* was aired on ABS-CBN channel 2 last year. Thanks to the heavy airplay on the network's FM radio stations, coupled with the release of the show's soundtrack and the group's old records by the network's recording company, the show and the boys became a huge national phenomenon. Never mind if the group disbanded a long time ago; the media-orchestrated frenzy helped revive the near-death careers of these boys.

Although not American, *Meteor Garden* was yet another import that showed stereotyped mothers. Whether local or foreign, western or Asian, stereotypes on TV remain very much part of the reality—and TV executives do not care one way or the other. The producer's favourite alibi is: "It's what the audience wants."

### Audience: Consumer Dictatorship or Sovereignty

According to Linggit Tan, a TV network executive, TV merely takes its cue from the audience, picking up from the viewers' preference of what roles of mothers they want to see on TV. "You also have to take in consideration the issue of class, the A-B-C-D-E demographics. How many women belong to the C-D-E part? They are the ones who watch the most TV. What kind of women and mothers are they? This is what we show on TV because they are the audience. If ever some non-traditional mother images make it on air, you will still inadvertently go back to portraying the usual images because those images reflect who your audience are."

Coming from a patriarchal society where men dominate almost all sectors—government, media, the church—and women are subordinates, media analysts observe that the Philippines has a long way to go in terms of improving the images seen on television. Women, especially mothers, have to fit a certain mould which could very well be a straightjacket to real, breathing women. Even if there are new trends emerging, they could only be fads that will disappear once the audience tires of the novelty.

Perhaps what we need to see are changes in attitudes towards different kinds of mothers out there, mothers that have made Philippine society somewhat more tolerable. It is safe to say that if not for their contributions, guidance and advice—be they single mothers, lesbian mothers, separated, or unwed mothers—Filipino children will be wandering aimlessly about. ♪

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