



The Modern *Ma-aram*: Elena as the Representation of the Residual and Ecofeminist in Alice Tan Gonzales's *Sa Tagu-angkan Sang Duta*

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of the *ma-aram*—a local term denoting a person who is wise and knowledgeable in indigenous thought—in Alice Tan Gonzales's "*Sa Tagu-angkan Sang Duta*" and articulates an ecofeminist framework grounded in indigeneity and spirituality. Drawing on Alicia Magos's (1992) definition of the *ma-aram* as one who can communicate with ancestral and environmental spirits, the study analyzes the character of Elena, the story's protagonist, who, although not an actual *ma-aram*, embodies its residual characteristics. Through thematic and textual analyses, the paper identifies key themes in the narrative and juxtaposes them with real-life contexts, while offering a close reading of Elena's actions and traits to uncover her relevance as a contemporary ecofeminist figure. Anchored in Agnes Miclat-Cacayan's (1998) ecofeminist theory—which integrates women's ecological concerns with indigenous spirituality—the study demonstrates how Elena's familiarity with local knowledge and her intimate connection with nature reflect the persistence of *ma-aram* traditions in Western Visayas. Ultimately, the paper contributes to discussions on ecofeminist representation and female identity in West Visayan society by illustrating how the text challenges patriarchal exploitation of nature and local resources, and by extending scholarly conversations on women's spiritual leadership and ecofeminism in indigenous contexts.



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1. Introduction

Numerous strong female characters who are connected to and relate to nature in various ways may be found in West Visayan literature, spanning from precolonial times to the present. One example of this is the story of a famed *ma-aram* from Antique in the person of Estrella Bangotbanwa (Magos, 1992). There are numerous tales about Bangotbanwa's abilities as a *ma-aram* but one that truly demonstrates her ability and as someone deeply connected with nature is the story of how she saved the town of San Joaquin from a famine-related drought. Bangotbanwa was also known to perform the rite, *samba*, which is done to ensure rain, a plentiful harvest, abundant fish catch, and the warding off of pestilence and diseases. It is this very same female connection with nature that West Visayan anthropologist and scholar Alicia Magos (1992) writes about when she embarks on a study of the *ma-aram*, a term that she defines as someone who is "wise" or knowledgeable and has the sole power

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to connect and communicate with ancestral and environmental spirits. According to Magos, the term *ma-aram* is the generic name for such other names such as *babaylan*, *sirhuano*, *manugbulong*, and the like. The *ma-aram* serves specific functions in their community but this study will only highlight their ability to communicate with their ancestral and nature spirits to emphasize their spirituality and connection with the environment.

In various regions of the Philippines, the *ma-aram* are referred to by different names. Philippine shamanism scholar and ethnomusicologist Grace Nono (2021) labels them as ritual specialists but they are known to be the *bailan* or *baylan* among the Manobo and Bukidnon, the *patutunong* in Maguindanao, the *mangungubat* by the Tausug, the *insup-ok* or *insupak* among the Bontoc, the *mumbaki* by the Ifugao, the *machanitu* among the Ivatan, and the *catalonan* among the Tagalog. These are only a few of the recognized ritual specialists in the Philippines but these devout individuals can also be found in other parts of the world. Nono also mentions the Ngadju Dyak of Indonesia and the Dusun of Malaysia who are believed to be their priestess-shamanesses. Further, the theologian and activist Sr. Mary John Mananzan (2004) discusses in her book, *Women, Religion and Spirituality in Asia*, the *Dayung Boris* of Sarawak, women who are known to communicate with the spirit realm and are in charge of interacting with the spirits and ancestors during various rites. Mananzan also discusses the significance of the *Bobolizan* of the *Kadasandusun* people of Sabah. Like the *ma-aram* and the *Dayung Boris*, the *Bobolizan* also serves as the intercessor between humans and spiritual beings and plays a significant role in ensuring harvests is abundant, reducing the afflictions of illness, misfortune and infertility. These duties and characteristics are also mirrored by other ritual specialists such as the *mudang* from Korea. The *mudang* is the only individual who can perform the *gut*, a ritual involving the meeting of humans and the spirits to solve a problem. Further, the Evenki shamans of Siberia are also considered the main link between people and spirits.

According to researchers, the Evenki's perspective of the world, revolves around the belief that the trees, grass, animals and birds are dwelling places of the spirits and these beliefs regulate their relationship with nature (Zamaraeva et al, 2019). Spiritual leaders also function as storytellers and doctors in Columbia and they prefer to be called *mayor*, *mamo*, *taita*, or *originaria* which translates to "wise one, sage or the first people" (Anderson, 2017). They consider themselves as the guardians of the world. Like the *ma-aram*, all the other ritual specialists mentioned above, also function as intermediaries between humans and the spirit world evidencing the significance of spirituality in the form of these individuals. These accounts about the mentioned spiritual leaders and healers reveal their existence not only in West Visayas but also around the world indicating their significant roles in their communities.

Beyond their roles as spiritual leaders, women worldwide have demonstrated their importance as environmental stewards. The United Nations Development Program publication *Women as Environmental Stewards: The Experience of the Small Grants Programme* (2018) documents women-led initiatives addressing ecological loss and conservation across different regions. In China, "left-behind women" from rural communities promoted the conservation of the Asian honey bee while generating sustainable livelihoods. In Peru, women utilized traditional knowledge to preserve a native cotton species central to their cultural identity, while in Paraguay, women's involvement in agroforestry helped prevent land degradation and large-scale deforestation. These cases highlight women's active participation in ecological sustainability (UNDP, 2018).

In the Philippine context, similar patterns emerge. Guiriba (2013) emphasizes the crucial role of women in environmental recovery in *Ecofeminism: Women's Work on Environmental Conservation in Sorsogon Province, Philippines*, while Jumawan-Dadang (2015) examines how women are portrayed as "natural" environmental carers in coastal communities, reinforcing gendered divisions of labor in *Saving Marine Life*. West Visayan literature further reflects women's deep connection with nature, exemplified by the famed *ma-aram* Estrella Bangotbanwa of Antique (Magos, 1992), whose rituals, including *samba*, were believed to ensure rain, abundant harvests, and communal well-being. Magos (1992) defines the *ma-aram* as a wise individual capable of communicating with ancestral and environmental spirits, underscoring the spiritual and ecological dimensions of women's leadership in the region.

2. Methodology

Alicia Magos (1992) defined the *ma-aram* as a religio-initiated person who has the ability to communicate with ancestral and environmental spirits. Similarly, in 1998, Agnes Miclat-Cacayan defined indigenous spirituality as something that refers to the original beliefs, concepts and rituals that the Filipino practiced before the arrival of the colonizers. Miclat-Cacayan also defined ecofeminism as the "merging of the mutually affecting concerns of women and ecology" (p. 33). Utilizing these definitions as a starting point, this paper seeks to identify the residual characteristics of the *ma-aram* in Elena to establish her identity as a *ma-aram*. Further, Reymond Williams' (2001)

definition of residual that states “how some experiences, meanings and values that cannot be verified nor expressed in terms of dominant culture but are nevertheless lived and practiced” (p. 137) will be utilized to establish the characteristics and behaviour of a *ma-aram* that is evident in Elena’s character. In doing so, the paper forwards not only a *ma-aram* that is rooted in her indigenous spirituality but also an ecofeminist figure in the West Visayan context that reveals the crucial role of women in terms of mitigating environmental abuse and ensuring the sustainability of our natural resources. The analysis of the character of Elena in “Sa Tagu-angkan Sang Duta” contributes to the current conversations on female identity and ecofeminist representations in West Visayan society and forwards a distinct *ma-aram* representation articulated using femininity.

To determine whether Elena embodies the residual characteristics of the *ma-aram* rooted in spirituality and indigeneity and also determine ecofeminism in the local context, the author will do the following: First, explore the different themes in the chosen story and examine how they contribute to the current discussions around the female identity in the midst of patriarchal hegemony and environmental devastation. By utilizing a thematic analysis to surface relevant themes that will help reflect certain realities of the West Visayan everyday life, the article endeavors to confirm that the short story “*Sa Tagu-angkan sang Duta*” truly mirrors the current state of women and the environment in Region. Also, a thorough character analysis of Elena’s attitude, behavior, actions, conversations with her husband and Tan Gonzales’s description of her will be employed to unpack the various residual actions and characteristics that qualifies Elena as the embodiment of the *ma-aram* that showcases a local brand of ecofeminist in the West Visayan context rooted in spirituality and indigeneity. The identified themes and the character analysis of Elena will be juxtaposed with real life occurrences to establish the relevance of the *ma-aram* to the contemporary period and also reveal their ecofeminist values and principles. In doing this, an ecofeminism identified in the West Visayan context can be forwarded and later contribute to ecofeminist conversations.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Decimated State of Nature

“Tagu-angkan Sang Duta” chronicles Elena’s observation of the changes in their farm when she returns from the city after being away for a while. Elena works at a pawnshop and upon her return, she immediately notices the drastic condition of their farm. She is also constantly reminded by her husband about their childless relationship which she compares to the barrenness of their land. The forests are bald, the animals no longer produce healthy offspring, the water supply is almost depleted, and the crops do not yield as copiously as before. In other words, the farm is dying. Amidst all of these predicaments, Elena ponders the dire state of their surroundings, and the need for immediate change that it so badly requires. In the wee hours of the morning, Elena suddenly remembers her Lolo Matias and his ritual of sowing seeds before the sun rises while he was naked and she now compels her husband to do the same, in the hopes of reviving the land. Afterwards, she initiates intercourse with her husband so that he too can sow his seeds in her womb.

Abuse, deforestation and the depressing state of nature is a predominant theme in “Sa Tagu-angkan Sang Duta.” This state of decimation is illustrated in the lines “There were traces of what had probably been massive trees judging from the diameter of numerous stumps standing over a wide clearing. She recognized the grainy surface of the stumps where the chainsaw had cut through” (Tan 1986 , pp. 7-8). Prior to Elena’s homecoming, both Andoy and his father cut all the trees for financial reasons. This confirms ecofeminist scholar Greta Gaard’s (2015) argument that masculinist ideologies are to blame for climate change and first world overconsumption. This short story illustrates how Elena’s husband and father-in-law adhere to the demands of an economic system and the main reason why they chose to cut the trees. A reflection of this scenario in real life is narrated by Agnes Miclat-Cacayan (2005) when she describes how the Lumad people treat the land as sacred and therefore, it is sacrilegious for them to treat land as property. They believe that the rivers, lakes, mountains, trees, forest, and mountains are the dwelling places of the Divine and as such should be treated with utmost care. This belief is reflected in Filipino psychologist and scholar Carl Lorenz Cervantes (2023) study that discusses how up to this day, many Filipinos believe that there are invisible entities that reside in nature around them and as such, makes them more respectful and cautious when dealing with their surroundings. Andoy and his father exhibits the opposite when they decide to cut trees because of economic reasons.

Elena also expressed concern and desolation when she heard that their farm animals are not as prolific as before. Men have long envisioned cattle, pigs, and turkeys as their personal property and therefore utilize their offspring for economic or personal gain. Men practice ‘animal husbandry’ with farmed animals, holding these animals in a position of forced dependence. In doing so, the physical bodies of these animals are used for men’s

needs, impregnating them and claiming their offspring (Lisa Kemmerer, 2013). This reflects Andoy's perception of their farm animals that equates to monetary gain. However, in the story, their farm animals are not as prolific anymore. This may be attributed to lack of nutrients, water, and an environment that encourages reproduction.

The story also reflects the dryness of the land because of lack of rain and this translates to the dryness of the womb of the farm animals. Their reproductive abilities are affected and it also affects their physical state. Ecofeminism views this as domination and oppression of nature and translates this to a judicious use of resources (Greta Gaard & Lori Gruen, 1993). Because Andoy considers his farm animals as money-making machines instead of considering their interconnectedness with each other, he now suffers scarcity because nature refuses to provide for him anymore. Andoy also laments how their rice produce did not even return their investment for the second time that year. Rappler points to climate change and innovation as some of the reasons why rice production in the Philippines is problematic (www.nowyouknowph.rappler.com). In the short story, Alice Tan Gonzales describes the dryness of the land and this can be attributed to lack of rain. Climate change has made farming challenging for farmers not only in the Philippines but also all over the world. Adding to the problem of not having enough water is the fact that Andoy's planting practices may also be backwards and lacks innovation. Compared to its neighbouring countries, the Philippines falls behind when it comes to technological advances in farming. The decimated state of Elena and Andoy's farm is shared by many other farmers in West Visayas and other parts of the country. Patriarchal forces like Andoy continue to see nature as a monetary source and in doing so, forget the sacredness and value of nature. Men who conform to economic standards rarely understand the repercussions of their actions and only realizes in the end the impact of their decisions and practices. Further, most of the challenges that the environment face is caused by men. Deforestation is not a problem that only plagues the Philippines as other countries like Canada who has lost 60% of its old-growth forests to logging and the United States losing 90% of their ancient forests also have the same challenge (Greta Gaard, 1993). This signals the need for women to step up and take on their roles as eco-warriors. Ecofeminism tells us that women may be more connected with nature and in the West Visayan context, this ecofeminist trait rooted on spirituality and indigeneity may be the answer to the ongoing environmental problems.

3.2. The Woman as Saviour

The Philippines' vibrant feminist movement is the result of years of conflict and involvement in several historical events. Even in the precolonial period, the Filipino woman was framed as a strong woman in the image of the *babaylan*. Filipino female activist and social researcher Mylene Hega et al (2017) describe how people of the community then turned to the woman for numerous reasons: medical, social, cultural and religious concerns. However, this changed upon the arrival of the colonizers from the West. Upon the arrival of the Spaniards they did not only demonize the image of the female *babaylan* but also monitored their religious and spiritual belief. On top of that, they also suppressed their sexuality and practices. By doing this, the woman was reduced to an inferior citizen. Years later, the women of the country started to become more significant. They participated in revolutionary movements and even actively participated in armed resistance against the Japanese oppressors. Alice Tan Gonzales's short story "Esperanza" narrates how a woman from Iloilo bravely fought against the Japanese militia by ensuring that the Filipino military groups get their messages and allow them to strategize. Prior to this participation in war, the early feminists were recognized by the first feminist group initiated by Felix Concepcion in 1905. These events may have awakened the feminist consciousness of women and may be one of the reasons why West Visayan writers continue to show that these women are not just passive remnants of history but active agents of change, embodying knowledge, resilience, and leadership. Elena demonstrates and imposes her presence as the saviour of their farm as she raises the environmental concerns she notices in the farm. In the line "You've felled all the trees," she could not help saying (p. 8), she makes Andoy realize the severity of their decision to cut the trees revealing her deep concern for nature. Ecofeminism, according to canonical ecofeminist thinkers like Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (2014) argues that the oppression of women and the destruction of nature are interconnected due to patriarchal, capitalist, and colonial structures. Women who are aware of this destruction are not afraid to voice out what they see to compel men to listen to them. If Elena does not bring the actual state of the farm to Andoy's consciousness, he and his father will continue to devastate their farm for financial gain which may result to the eventual ecological death of their land. Women, like Elena, have to be in the forefront to help avert environmental destruction. Her courage and conviction to call out her husband reveals the significance of her role as an ecological warrior in the pursuit for planetary health. This also shows that Elena is not passive but is rather instructive reflecting Magos' description of the *ma-aram* who functions as the leader

of the community when the need arises. Elena recognizes that Andoy and his father are harming the land by cutting down the trees and she resists this environmental degradation as she knows what this will lead to. Instead of simply accepting what her husband has done, she voices her concern and in the process imparts to Andoy the notion that the caring for the land is not only practical but is in fact spiritual and ethical.

Elena's belief in the indigenous practices and spiritual connection to the land also compels her to propose a possible solution to the dying state of their farm. She recalls a rite that her Lolo Matias performed when he was alive when she suddenly wakes up in the wee hours of the morning. She remembers how her Lolo Matias was inseparable from his land and she is reminded of seeing her grandfather "sowing seeds in the rice field stark naked in the early morning moonlight" (p. 14). In the middle of the night, this memory rouses her from her deep slumber and she decides to wake Andoy as well so that they can perform the same rite that her Lolo Matias did. Elena, is seen as the initiator and leader in this ritual performance and is illustrative of a strong Filipino woman who breaks free from the patriarchal stereotype of a submissive and timid woman. In initiating the performance of a rite, Elena brings a prospect of hopefulness and eventually, recovery of their farm. Elena instructs her husband to take off his clothes and sow their palay seeds in the early morning light. Andoy obliges his wife and does her bidding demonstrating Elena's power over her husband. After watching her husband sow the seeds, Elena's attention is drawn to her husband's rigid manhood and she starts to feel a tingling warmth all over her body demonstrating her basic carnal need but also a response to the sowing of her husband's seeds. The sowing of the seeds holds a promise of rebirth and new beginnings and it is Elena who makes this possible. Elena reconnects with her indigeneity and spirituality that prods her to reconnect with the land through the rite that she makes her husband perform but she also reconnects her mind, soul and body to the land where it belongs. This demonstrates her ecofeminist link to nature as she communes with the land through Andoy's seeds being sowed in her own womb.

A *ma-aram* is connected to her surroundings and Elena reveals this with the notion of her union with her husband as well. She also exposes a West Visayan ecofeminism that echoes stewardship towards nature and is rooted in indigeneity and spirituality as she goes back to the primal. Elena utilizes a practice that would not only benefit her but also the land that she occupies with her husband. In this sense, she personifies a woman who does not only liberate their farm from eventual death but also promotes stewardship of nature to ensure survival and sustainability. This assertion is similar to what West Visayan scholar and feminist writer, Genevieve Asenjo, describes in her paper "Ang Kasarian at Rehiyon sa mga Sugilanon ni Alice-Tan Gonzales" where she argues that the stories of Alice Tan Gonzales provide a metaphorical setting in which we can learn about gender issues. She describes how Elena's lovemaking with her husband functions as the medium of her epiphany. Asenjo asserts the Elena become sensitive and conscious of the value of nature as her sensibility and sensuality as a woman after she engages in the ritual of lovemaking with her spouse. Elena, in this sense, illustrates an embodiment of land-spiritual wisdom that shows she doesn't just act practically but also spiritually. The ritual she performs with her husband echoes a pre-colonial or indigenous wisdom. Further, by engaging in the ritual, she revives a more revered, animistic worldview where the planet is considered as a living, breathing being rather than a resource to be exploited. Elena is framed as a champion of the land, a saviour, and not just a farmer or landlord. Like the famed *ma-aram*, Estrella Bangotbanwa, who saved the town of San Joaquin from famine and drought, Elena, also becomes the saviour of their land.

3.3. In the Womb of the Earth Symbolism

The first thing that greets Elena's upon her return to their farm is the barrenness and dryness of their land. Land being the provider of her family's immediate needs has ceased to do so because the same people who are expected to nurture and protect their environment are the same people who brought destruction and devastation. The mountains that should be abundant with trees have been left bald because Andoy and his father decided to cut the trees without reflecting on the possible outcomes. A mountain does not only consist of trees but also of dynamic ecosystems. They are homes to insects and animals alike. They produce fresh air and water when left unharmed by pollution. Juxtaposing land with the womb of the woman provides insight on different notions about life, fertility, and creation. The connection between land and a woman's womb carries deep meanings regarding nature, nurture and social duties. Similar to how new life is created in the womb, land is also seen as a fertile space where crops can grow and with this life can be sustained. This comparison highlights the land and the female body's inherent fertility which reveals their capacity to give, nurture and regenerate life. Further, both the womb and land are linked to nurturing. Just as a mother supports life inside her womb, land also supports plants, animals and human societies. This connection also emphasizes the historically and culturally ascribed characteristics of women as caregivers and maternal figures. Lastly, the land and the womb are also avenues of exploitation especially in

various literary and political contexts. Both land and womb can be conquered and colonized as they are both viewed as resources that can be controlled by colonial or patriarchal structures. This highlights a juxtaposition of how women's bodies, like the land, are prone to dominance and violence. In sum, the metaphorical relationship between land and a woman's womb forwards elements of fertility, creation, caring, dominance and exploitation. By using this metaphor, issues of imposed power and control and environmental degradation can be further discussed. The metaphor depicts the close connection between women, nature and life and can be utilized to critique social structures that aim to control all three.

4. Character Analysis

4.1. Elena's Connection to Land and Nature

Elena works at a pawnshop in a town several hours away from their farm and this forces her to live far from the farm. Despite the days spent away from the farm, Elena's immediate connection with the land is evident when she recognizes the many trees that they pass on their way to the waterfalls. The lines "On both sides of the path grew mostly *kawayan*, *agho*, *kamonsil*, *sambag* and some other trees that Elena count not name" (p. 7) and "Birdcall could be heard. She recognized the twitter of unseen *ombok* and *maya*" (p. 7) reveal her familiarity with her surroundings. Even after being away from the farm for a long period of time, Elena does not forget the animals that live on their farm but more importantly, because of her deep connection with the land, a mere birdcall even evoked a memory in Elena. This memory conjured feelings of familiarity and awareness of the living things that share the space that she and Andoy also occupy. Barry Truax (2001) describes the concept of an acoustic community in his book *Acoustic Communication* and explains how acoustic cues and signals aid in the geographical, temporal, social, and cultural definition of a place by acting as auditory cues and temporal allusions to the rhythms of everyday existence. Truax's text reveal how various sounds can convey helpful information, patterns of association, and possibly, most importantly, which sounds have enough significance to stick to your memory. The sound of the *ombok* and the *maya* triggers a memory of the time when the farm was abundant and transports Elena to happier times. Additionally, the sound of the birds also evokes her connection with her surroundings, a connection that is also evident in the ecofeminist *ma-aram*. Elena evidences the ecofeminist woman's spirituality in terms of her recognition of the interconnectedness of all life be it human, animals, or plants. She exposes an innate knowledge of her surroundings by her awareness of most living things in their farm. An illustration of this nature-woman connection is also reflected in this real-life scenario discussed by Agnes Miclat-Cacayan. Miclat-Cacayan (2005) narrates the environmental connection of the *babaylan*, Crescencia, when she hears the *kwahaw* (kalaw) bird's call "*Kwahaw! Kwahaw!*" The call of the *kwahaw* signals the start of the dry spell and when Crescencia hears this, she would then place a frog on its back in the middle of the dry field and implore rain from God. In Elena's case, the birdcall rouses positive images that she had of their farm. The birdcall that Crescencia hears, however, serves as an omen of the imminent drought that is to come. Unlike Elena, the birdcall from the *kwahaw* does not incite positive images but instead compels Crescencia to prepare for the dry spell that promises a dreadful future for the community as lack of water means lack of crops and lack of food. Both Elena and Crescencia display their strong connection to nature even with the mere recognition of the sound of the birds that occupy the space they also inhabit. While Elena is a fictitious character, Crescencia is an actual person who also embodies the spiritual connection of a woman to their surroundings. Her experience and relationship with the environment have taught her that creatures around us play a role in helping us survive and her sensitivity to such also helps her and her community.

4.2. Empowerment through Ecofeminist Ideologies

Francoise d'Eaubonne (1974) forwards a feminist perspective that calls for an egalitarian, collaborative society where there is no one dominant group. It utilizes the basic tenets of feminism that include equality between genders, a revaluing of non-patriarchal or nonlinear structures, and a perspective of the world that upholds organic processes, holistic connections, and the merits of intuition and collaboration. Elena embodies these principles of ecofeminism when she reveals her empowered state as a woman in various ways. First, she is a career woman. She left the farm and her husband to work in the city and does not conform to the typical rural woman that is contained to domestic duties. She also defies social norms and demands an egalitarian notion as she earns her own money through her job. Further, she challenges social conventions that strive to control her behavior or silence her voice. Elena always expresses her opinions and thoughts to her husband, Andoy, without inhibitions as she sees herself as her husband's equal. This is an ecofeminist principle that promotes equality of gender according

to d'Eaubonne. This is illustrated in the lines when she reprimands her husband for cutting down the trees, "Ti, whose idea is it in the first place? The old man would not have gotten it into his head to cut the trees for firewood had you not told him," Elena said softly, trying not to sound too strident" (p. 6). Only a man who treats his wife as an equal would allow her to speak to him this way. Elena is the empowered ecofeminist in this sense because she dismantles the patriarchal superiority that society has imposed and instead pursues the egalitarian principle that ecofeminism forwards.

Ecofeminism as an offshoot of feminism also frames Elena as a daring woman when she initiates lovemaking with her husband. Filipino scholar and author Lilia Quindoza Santiago (1996) establishes the strong feminist Filipina in her study and describes the precolonial Filipina woman as someone who occupies a respected position in the community. Quindoza Santiago further states that women in the past even had a higher status compared to men. Historians and sociologists, according to Quindoza Santiago, described women then as empowered because like men they were also eligible to become chief of the community. They also had the right to the family property and lineage and even had the power to choose their spouses or divorce them, if necessary. Although the Spanish colonizers imposed their patriarchal practices and forced women to be submissive during their time, Alice Tan Gonzales defies this image of the weak woman and paints Elena's character as an emboldened woman. By embracing ecofeminism, Elena's character aspires to reimagine the roles of women within both the environment and society.

4.3. Elena as the Ma-aram Rooted in Spirituality and Indigeneity

It is important to note that Elena is not a *ma-aram* but she embodies the residual characteristics of a *ma-aram*. Raymond Williams' (2001) definition of residual that states how experiences, meanings and values that cannot be verified nor expressed in the dominant culture but lived and practiced on the basis of residue frames Elena's identity as a woman that embodies some qualities of the *ma-aram*. First, like the *ma-aram*, Elena shows connection with the land and this is exemplified in the lines "...but she could almost hear its sigh of death as its body fell to the ground. Elena was oppressed by a sense of loss" (p. 8). She expresses deep ecological grief when she sees what has become of the trees that use to flourish on their land. As stewards of nature, Magos describes how the *ma-aram* leads rites that ensure a bountiful harvest by offering food and such and desecration of their land is unthinkable. Elena's emotional distress is so intense, she could almost hear the tree's dying breath when it was cut down. The spirituality of the *ma-aram* in Elena views nature as sacred and seeing the stumps of trees evokes a strong wave of sadness in her that exhibits her close connection with her surroundings. Elena's strong spiritual bond represents a perspective in which the land and herself are not separate. Land and Elena are in fact intertwined and the well-being of one is closely related to the other. She may fight for the preservation of both her heritage and nature as she is aware that the loss or deterioration of the land may result to a loss of her spirituality and identity.

As previously mentioned, it is the *ma-aram* that performs and leads various rites in their communities. Some of these rites require the sacrifice of a live animal and its blood. Elena's respect for living creatures is evident when her husband butchers a chicken and does it unsuccessfully. Elena tells her husband "Let's not make it suffer. Give me the knife" (p. 11) and she proceeds to slash the neck of the chicken to ensure its quick death and prevent further suffering. The butchered chicken was going to be cooked for dinner and although the animal has no voice, Elena could feel its suffering as it struggled. Her connection with all living creatures makes her abhor seeing them suffer. This echoes animal rights advocate Tom Regan's (2004) concept that each 'subject of a life' is precious, sacred, valuable and not expendable. Like the *ma-aram* who considers every living thing as sacred, Elena also mirrors this trait proving that she embodies some of the residual traits of the *ma-aram*.

Elena also remembers to perform the rite that her Lolo Matias used to perform to ensure an abundant harvest. Her *ma-aram* counterparts also used to perform what they call the *samba* rite. The *ma-aram* celebrates the *samba* rite as a communal ceremony for the community's welfare and economic benefit. Further, although Elena is not a *ma-aram* herself, she orders her husband to imitate Lolo Matias' ritual of sowing seeds while naked hoping for a bountiful harvest also. Carrying out the same traditional practice that both her grandfather and the *ma-aram* performed is illustrative of the residual spirituality and *ma-aram* traits that she embodies. This rite is not something that she and her husband has done before but witnessing her Lolo Matias doing the rite gives her the encouragement to do the same thing to help revive their land. By embracing the spiritual beliefs that her grandfather also embraced, Elena also honors the *ma-aram* tradition that has long been practiced by her ancestors. She also embodies the *ma-aram* indigeneity because she understands the significance of ancient traditions and she advocates the return to native practices that may be the solution to the challenges that their farm was facing.

5. The Modern *Ma-aram*

The last detailed study about the *ma-aram* was conducted by Alicia Magos in 1992. The groundbreaking study has created a ripple effect in terms of scholarship and conversations about the *ma-aram*. Numerous West Visayan writers and scholars have shared their own perspectives and knowledge about these women but the need to explore the modern day *ma-aram* still need to be discovered and addressed. With Senator Loren Legarda's support, the Philippine Studies Association, Inc. and the National Commission for Culture and the Arts launched a project "*Ma-aram: Pagtanghal sa Katutubong Kaalaman* ." The project created five short documentaries that focused on promoting the wealth of indigenous knowledge and creative practices that the country has as it is believed that these traditions are slowly vanishing and none of the five videos featured the *ma-aram* from West Visayas. In the teacher's resource materials provided by the same project, Randy Madrid (2022) briefly discussed about the *ma-aram* and described them as individuals who are gifted healers, intermediaries between humans and ancestral and environmental spirits, and cultural masters. Madrid, however, does not discuss whether there are still practicing *ma-aram* in Antique and the Panay region now. Further, although the project utilized the word *Ma-aram*, there is no section or film that solely focuses on the *ma-aram* practitioners of Panay. Why then is this project called *ma-aram*? This paper, however, wants to assert that this tradition is not dead and is in fact still part of the collective unconscious of the West Visayan people as illustrated in its contemporary literature. The modern *ma-aram* is alive in the contemporary woman. This woman may be a teacher, pawnshop worker or farmer but they still embody the characteristics and beliefs of the *ma-aram*. The modern *ma-aram* may be someone you have met or live with and they will continue to survive because their roles are necessary for the survival of nature. Their presence continues to be seen in literature, particularly West Visayan literature, that illustrates the significance of women in the conservation and protection of the environment. Elena, a modern woman, embodies the residual traits of the *ma-aram* in numerous ways. She shows her intuitive and spiritual sense as she feels and know how to connect human fertility with the ear

6. Conclusion

Engaging with other West Visayan narratives reveals the prevalence of strong female characters and, in fact, a continuation of indigenous female power in contemporary literature. Elena exhibits residual characteristics of the *ma-aram* that align with ecofeminist principles. She reflects a strong connection to the land through her spirituality and indigeneity, while also advancing a form of environmental stewardship rooted in these same notions. The presence of the *ma-aram* is pervasive not only in lived reality but is also evident in the literature of West Visayas, demonstrating that these women are not merely historical figures but continue to exist in contemporary contexts. Although *ma-aram* are primarily known as faith healers, one significant facet of their power lies in their deep connection with nature, which reflects key ecofeminist concerns.

What distinguishes the ecofeminism of the *ma-aram* from dominant Western ecofeminist perspectives is their organic and embodied relationship with the environment—one that renders them highly attuned to and respectful of their surroundings. Their reverence for nature is not shaped by goddess-centered religious frameworks but is grounded instead in indigenous knowledge systems and traditional practices, echoing ecofeminist critiques that foreground local, lived, and non-Western epistemologies (Shiva, 1988). In this light, this paper seeks to advance discussions of a localized form of ecofeminism rooted in the spirituality and indigenous practices of the *ma-aram*, thereby contributing to gender studies. Future research may build upon these findings by examining *ma-aram* representations in oral histories or through ethnographic fieldwork with contemporary practitioners.

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The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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