

Original Article

Exploring Speculative Feminism in Pre-Colonial Philippine Literature

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Article History:

Date received: March 3, 2026

Date revised: April 28, 2026

Date accepted: May 8, 2026

Recommended citation:

Tacogue, S.M., & Protacio, A. (2026).
Exploring speculative feminism in pre-
colonial Philippine literature. *Journal of
Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 4(6), 126-137.
<https://doi.org/10.69569/jip.2026.103>

Abstract. The study of Filipino women as a construct and subject of self-representation in Philippine literature remains limited, despite a shift in 21st-century feminist readings. While existing studies engage with feminist perspectives, there is a lack of research that applies speculative feminism to Philippine folktales. Hence, this study aims to explore how gender dynamics and feminist themes are depicted and reimagined in selected Philippine folktales through the lens of speculative feminism. This study analyzes three texts: *The Cycle of the Sun and the Moon* (Manobo), *The Good Prince Bantugan* (Maranao), and *The Prowess of Aliguyon* (Ifugao). Using qualitative content analysis informed by feminist speculative design, and guided by Butler's theory of gender performativity and Propp's Morphology of the Folktale, the narratives were examined for patterns of gender roles, relationships, and power. The findings reveal that the folktales incorporate and challenge feminist themes through intersectional analysis, drawing on patriarchal concepts and male-centered narratives. Characters consistently perform conventional gender roles and engage in gender-stereotypical relationships, reflecting repeated patterns shaped by social norms. These are seen in male characters taking on roles of strength, heroism, and decision-making, while female characters assume nurturing and supportive roles. At the same time, key themes emerge, including the reinforcement of masculine dominance, the expectation of feminine compliance, and the performative nature of identity through repeated behaviors. These patterns highlight how gender roles are both enacted and sustained across the narratives. Through a speculative feminist lens, the study suggests that these narratives can be reimagined in alternative futures in which characters reject fixed gender roles, redefine love and power, and break free from recurring cycles of oppression. Overall, the study shows that speculative feminism can broaden learners' perspectives, particularly through instructional materials such as the researcher's curated learning module.

Keywords: *Gender roles; Intersectionality; Performance and performativity; Speculative feminism; Teaching feminism.*

Trends in literature across media continue to evolve with each era, influenced by technological advancement and globalization. Among the prominent developments in literature is feminism, which functions not only as a literary perspective but also as a social movement that advocates for gender equality in rights, opportunities, and representation. To narrow down this concept, the researcher explores a more specific subgenre of feminism: speculative feminism. Speculative feminism, an umbrella term encompassing works across genres,

is characterized by its flexibility and its intersectional approach to imagining alternative realities and futures (Karademirler, 2021). In this regard, the study focuses on selected pre-colonial Philippine folktales included in the Grade 7 English curriculum under the MATATAG curriculum of the Department of Education (DepEd), namely The Cycle of the Sun and the Moon, The Good Prince Bantugan, and The Prowess of Aliguyon. These texts were selected for their cultural narratives and their depictions of gender roles, particularly the representation of women within traditional, male-centered narratives.

Despite various studies on pre-colonial Philippine texts, their analysis through emerging feminist lenses remains limited. After reviewing relevant literature, it is evident that not enough research has been done on speculative feminism in both national and local contexts. While feminist criticism has been widely applied in literary studies, studies specifically focusing on speculative feminism remain scarce. This gap is supported by Jocson (2020), who states that the study of Filipino women as a construct and subject of self-representation in Filipino works remains rare, despite a shift in 21st-century feminist readings. Ocampo (2022) further emphasizes that precolonial folktales provide a rich and creative source for speculative feminism, enabling future-oriented perspectives on gender equality rooted in non-Western histories and cultural viewpoints. Folktales reflect the complex imagination of early Filipinos and offer a meaningful foundation for such analysis.

Speculative feminist works frequently examine gender and social norms in stories and reclaim agency while challenging traditional patriarchal narratives. According to Sen (2022), this genre exposes and questions the repressive status quo and conventional power relations between the sexes. Themes such as agency, empowerment, complexity, and intersectional identities highlight and critique prevailing gender inequalities, while opening possibilities for reimagining roles and relationships beyond socially imposed norms.

Pedagogically, speculative fiction may serve as a valuable tool due to its analytical, critical, and constructive qualities. It enables learners to engage with marginalized voices, examine oppressive systems, and explore future possibilities, thereby fostering critical hope in the classroom (Thorne, 2021). Furthermore, it supports feminist themes and addresses contemporary social issues such as patriarchy and the lack of space for female agency (Baseer, 2024). Aside from that, to maximize students' potential in language use, L2 countries must continue improving how language education is delivered (Del Rosario, 2024). In this context, speculative feminism in pre-colonial literature may be used not only to enhance language learning but also to encourage students to reflect on identity and imagine alternative futures.

Hence, the researcher conducted this study to explore Philippine literature through the lens of speculative feminism as depicted in the selected folktales. The study aims to identify recurring gender themes and examine how these concepts can be integrated into the classroom. Grounded in the researcher's perspective as an English teacher who views literature as a mirror of society, this study seeks to provide insights that will help learners appreciate literary movements while developing critical and reflective thinking. In the appreciation of literature comes the appreciation of life; thus, the researcher pursued this study to contribute to both literary analysis and meaningful classroom practice.

Research Questions

This study explored speculative feminism in Philippine literature by identifying gender, power, and alternative futures in pre-colonial folktales. It addressed the following questions:

How do selected pre-colonial folktales incorporate speculative feminist themes in intersectionality and identity?

How do the characters in the pre-colonial folktales delineate their gender roles in reference to performance and performativity?

How do the characters in the pre-colonial folktales reveal gender dynamics in gender roles and power?

What are the alternative futures among the characters in the pre-colonial folktales?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed Textual Analysis Design, specifically Qualitative Content Analysis, alongside a Feminist Speculative approach to explore speculative feminism in selected texts and identify recurring themes. Qualitative Content Analysis focuses on human artifacts that have been recorded, such as journals, voice recordings, and manuscripts, allowing researchers to analyze written, spoken, and visual materials without direct interaction with participants. A researcher may analyze data from various sources, including books, audio files, movies, social

media posts, text messages, and more. According to Bardzell (2014), a research design can serve as a type of research. Bardzell expands on work in aesthetic cognitivism, claiming that design contributes to human knowledge by informing individuals about reality.

This approach was complemented by feminist speculative design, which aims to create images of potential pasts and futures and encourages the exploration of alternative possibilities. This approach enabled the researcher to analyze and identify themes across the selected folktales. Feminist speculative design initiatives should, in theory, develop a life of their own; to be culturally significant, they should be discussed, questioned, and critiqued. The critical, speculative design aims to create images of potential pasts and futures (Baker, 2018). These frameworks enabled the researcher to analyze pre-colonial Philippine folktales and identify patterns in gender roles, power, and representation. Appropriate techniques were then employed to collect, standardize, and analyze the data.

Literary Instrument

The instruments used in the study are different pre-colonial Philippine folktales tackled in Grade 7 English under the Matatag Curriculum, selected by the Department of Education (DepEd). The folktales include The Cycle of the Sun and the Moon, a Manobo tale, The Good Prince Bantugan, a Maranao folktale, and The Prowess of Aliguyon, an Ifugao folktale. The researcher obtained a printed copy of this work for annotation and easier analysis. This list of stories was taken from the book, *English Communication Arts and Skills: English communication arts and skills through Philippine literature*, published by Phoenix Publishing House, in compliance with the MATATAG Curriculum.

These folktales were selected due to their representation of pre-colonial narratives and their potential to reflect feminist themes such as gender roles, identity, power, and intersectionality. The pre-colonial section addressed only three folktales. ECAS promises a framework and discussions that address contemporary and relevant issues and concerns about language, culture, identity, and texts, with Philippine literature serving as the framing lens.

The researcher used Judith Butler's theory of performance and performativity to analyze the speculative feminist themes in the literature. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity was used to examine these texts, based on the argument that gender and sex are socially produced through performative activities and that gender is continuously constructed by repeated social performances within a regulatory framework, challenging the idea that gender identity is predetermined by biological sex (Kakoliris, 2025).

Data Gathering Procedure

The study commenced upon securing approval from the Dean of the Graduate School. The researcher reviewed the DepEd curriculum guide to identify texts addressing gender-related themes and selected three pre-colonial Philippine folktales: The Cycle of the Sun and the Moon, The Good Prince Bantugan, and The Prowess of Aliguyon. Permission was also obtained from a family member of F. Landa Jocano to use his version of The Prowess of Aliguyon. The researcher collected both printed and soft copies of the texts and conducted close reading and annotation. Through this process, patterns in gender roles, cultural influences, and regional variations (Manobo, Maranao, and Ifugao) were identified.

The collected data were then organized and analyzed through the lens of speculative feminism. The researcher examined the texts using Butler's theory of performativity, speculative feminist perspectives, and Vladimir Propp's Morphology of the Folktale (Propp, 1968). The folktales were contextualized within their respective cultures, and a comparative analysis was conducted to identify similarities and differences in gender representation and thematic patterns. After identifying recurring themes, the researcher developed a learning module based on the findings. This module includes instructional materials and activities designed to introduce speculative feminism in the secondary classroom and support students' understanding and appreciation of Philippine literature.

Data Analysis Procedure

The researcher assessed the texts and materials. The emergent themes were then documented. The researcher utilized Qualitative Content Analysis. Using the lens of Feminist Speculative Design, as well as Bressler's (1999) methodologies as bases for analysis, the literary subjects were analyzed using comprehensive analysis methods using speculative feminism:

Text Selection. It is the process of selecting specific literary works, such as poems, short stories, or passages from novels, for study or analysis. (Bibby, 2014). The researcher selected the three folktales based on their relevance to speculative feminist themes.

Contextualization. It entails analyzing the text by considering the social, cultural, historical, and political circumstances of the time period in which it was written. It involves placing the text within its pertinent historical and societal framework to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning and significance of a literary work and contextualization (Baddane & Abdelghanie, 2023). The researcher examined the pre-colonial context, cultural background, and gender norms present in each folktale.

Feminist Lens. It is a critical viewpoint that examines how gender roles, power dynamics, and societal expectations affect female characters and how they are depicted in the text. It focuses on how women are portrayed and treated in the story, often with the intention of questioning patriarchal norms and drawing attention to issues of gender inequality (Napikoski, 2025). The researcher analyzed the texts using Butler's theory of gender performance and performativity, focusing on agency, identity, patriarchy, and intersectionality.

Speculative Elements. These are elements that rely on well-known contexts, wherein audiences can interact critically and emotionally relate to the story. The speculation forms and links these to the audience's reality (Ringofrt-Felner, 2025). The researcher identified speculative aspects such as alternative realities, supernatural elements, and imagined scenarios within the texts.

Intersectionality. It is the critical examination of how various social identities, such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and ability, intersect and interact within a text to influence the experiences and viewpoints of a character, emphasizing that an individual's identity is not determined by a single element but rather by the intricate interactions of multiple identities (Muirhead et al., 2020). The researcher examined how gender intersects with other aspects of identity in shaping the characters' experiences.

Character Analysis. This analysis reflects in the way a literary work's characters are frequently reduced to an evaluation of their moral attitude, whether they are positive or negative (Šušić, 2020). The characters were analyzed using Propp's Morphology of the Folktale, focusing on their roles, development, and gender representation (Propp, 1968).

Language and Representation. These pertain to how language functions as a tool of expression in forming literary identity. Language use is essential in shaping the identities of the author and the text. The writer represents the world and its intricacies to the reader through language (Ali Abdurahman, 2025). The researcher examined how gender and identity are constructed through language and the use of gendered expressions in the texts.

Power and Resistance. These look at how characters defy authority, societal norms, or oppressive systems through their words, deeds, or even just by existing within the story (Sharmin, 2023). The researcher analyzed how characters negotiate power and resist or reinforce gender norms.

Alternative Futures or Realities. These are narratives that contribute to a common knowledge of the past, present, and future by helping to make sense of individual and collective existence. These present various possible futures, frequently exploring what-if scenarios by depicting societies, technologies, or social structures that differ from the current reality (Milojević & Izgarjan, 2014). The researcher identified and constructed possible alternative futures and gender roles based on the analysis of the texts.

Comparative Analysis examines how various literary genres, literary schools, intellectual currents, the nature of the topics, attitudes, and people in literature, and their connections. It is the study of two or more literary works from various cultures, eras, languages, or genres (Shamsuddin, 2022). The researcher compared the three folktales to identify similarities, differences, and recurring feminist themes.

These methods were used to analyze the selected texts to answer the research questions, specifically to explore speculative feminism in precolonial Philippine literature by examining gender, power, and alternative futures in contemporary speculative fiction.

Ethical Considerations

This section elaborates on the trustworthiness of the study and assures the accuracy and transparency of the results through the following indicators:

Credibility. The researcher ensured that the source material remains unchanged and untampered with. No words or ideas from the texts and materials were changed. To establish credibility in the text, the folktales were analyzed in their cultural and historical contexts, ensuring that interpretations of gender roles reflect both the worldviews of the past and modern feminist critique.

Dependability. The data were stored on a flash drive and in Google Drive, which may serve as backups to secure the raw data gathered. Hence, this was used in case a problem arose in the study. The collected data were retained in many ways during the process. By also using the same theoretical frameworks, theories, and lens for all three folktales, the dependability was preserved, with a transparent and traceable research methodology.

Confirmability. After the data collection and analysis, the researcher reviewed the study results. This measure is performed to confirm the study's validity. The researcher presented the study in multiple formats to foster a healthy discussion of the research topic. By recognizing the researcher's position in interpretation and firmly grounding the analysis in textual evidence, confirmability was strengthened, and conclusions were drawn from the folktales' narratives rather than from the researcher's personal bias.

Transferability. Rich explanations of how Butler's gender performativity and speculative feminism reinterpret conventional narratives are provided to support transferability and enable readers to judge how applicable these insights are to different cultural literatures. The results of this study could be used by other researchers interested in speculative feminism to view and appreciate literary works, such as fiction.

Furthermore, this study can be essential, especially for those interested in conducting further research on the subject. They may apply the results of this study. The teacher may implement the researcher-curated module in the classroom.

Results and Discussion

The text analysis method followed the following steps: text selection, contextualization, application of the feminist lens, identification of speculative elements, dissection of intersections, character analysis, investigation of language and representation, examination of instances of power and resistance, formulation of alternative futures, and conduct of comparative analysis between the three folktales that served as the instruments of the study.

Speculative Feminist Themes in Pre-colonial Philippine Folktales: Intersectionality

The intersections evident in the folktale *The Cycle of the Sun and the Moon* include Gender and Patriarchy; Motherhood and Gendered Expectations; Power and Authority with Masculinity; Violence and Subjugation with Emotions; and Escape as Defiance and Identity Reclamation. In *The Good Prince Bantugan*, these include Masculinity and Social Status, Gender and Heroic Status, Femininity and Powerlessness, and Class and Power Dynamics. Lastly, in *The Prowess of Aliguyon*, the intersections include Masculinity and Power, Feminine Role and Patriarchy, Power Dynamics and Marriage, and Conflict and Resolution. The five strongest recurring themes across all three pre-colonial folktales are *Masculinity and Power and Authority*, *Gender Roles under Patriarchy*, *Femininity and Powerlessness or Limited Agency*, *Power Dynamics in Relationships and Marriage*, and *Conflict as a Path to Identity or Social Order*.

In all the folktales examined, masculinity is consistently linked to authority, leadership, heroism, and dominance. According to Collinson (2023), leadership has historically been associated with men and traits such as toughness, aggression, competitiveness, and decisiveness. In the narratives, masculine characters are associated with action, warfare, and public authority, while female characters are often constrained and positioned in secondary roles. Male figures such as the Sun, Prince Bantugan, and Aliguyon gain and sustain power through culturally accepted masculine traits, thereby dominating conflict and its resolution. Their bravery and leadership not only shape their identities but also reinforce their dominance within the social structures depicted in the stories.

The folktales, on the other hand, uphold strict gender norms that confine women to specific, frequently subordinate roles like wife, mother, or passive figure. Rajput & Ekka (2023) argue that the prevalent concepts of

gender roles and chivalry idealize the masculine characteristics and usually place women in subordinated roles, frequently represented in early literature. In the folktales, female characters’ agency remains limited, even when they play important roles in the narrative. These constraints are further reinforced in romantic and familial relationships, which often function to sustain male authority.

Relationships within the folktales are shaped by power dynamics that favor men. A study by Ladzekpo et al. (2024) has also identified several common stereotypes and roles that exist in various literary works related to gender, such as men's aggressiveness and dominance and women's care and nurturing nature. These patterns appear in key narrative moments, such as the Moon’s flight from the Sun, royal marriage alliances in Bantugan, and the use of marriage to resolve conflict in Aliguyon. In each case, conflict reveals existing power structures and ultimately restores social order in ways that reinforce gendered expectations. The hierarchy is rarely challenged and is typically resolved through escape, heroic action, or social negotiation through marriage. Relating to Hook’s (2004) theory, patriarchy is a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence. These occur in the folktales examined in this study.

Speculative Feminist Themes in Pre-colonial Philippine Folktales: Identity

Character identities in the three pre-colonial Philippine folktales are similarly constructed by rigid gender expectations that restrict femininity to roles that are supporting, passive, and domestic, while elevating traditional masculinity. The Sun, Prince Bantugan, and Aliguyon are examples of male characters whose identities are derived from social recognition, strength, authority, and heroism. The narratives reinforce masculinity as dominant, active, and culturally valued by measuring their worth by apparent accomplishments, leadership, and social recognition. In contrast, female characters such as the Moon, Princess Datimbang, and Bagan are defined in relation to male figures and family structures rather than personal agency. Their identities center on caregiving, beauty, obedience, and emotional support, often as wives, daughters, or love interests. Even when contributing to harmony or resolution, their roles remain confined within domestic and relational expectations, limiting autonomy and reinforcing gender constraints. The shared character identities in pre-colonial folktales are illustrated in Figure 1 below:

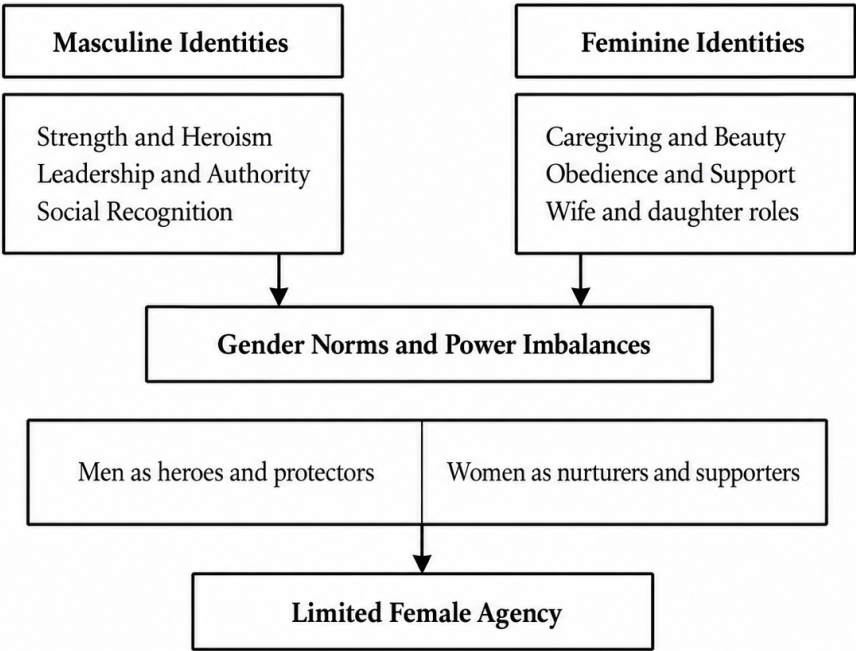


Figure 1. *Masculine and feminine identities and gender norms and power imbalances in pre-colonial Philippine literature*

Overall, the folktales exhibit a similar pattern of normalizing and idealizing gender roles: women serve as caregivers, romantic partners, or symbolic entities that bolster male narratives, while males are portrayed as heroes, leaders, or guardians. These patterns demonstrate how gender stereotypes are reproduced in pre-colonial

folktales, highlighting power imbalances and restricted female agency—conditions that speculative feminist analysis seeks to challenge.

These findings suggest that gender roles in literature mirror broader societal norms, where traditional stereotypes are reinforced rather than questioned. According to Budilova et al. (2024), the relationship between identity and literature offers a better understanding of the impact of literature on the development of gender consciousness by examining how gender is portrayed across works from various cultural traditions. While literary portrayals of gender have evolved toward more complex and diverse representations, folktales often retain more rigid and traditional constructions of identity.

Characters in Delineating Their Gender Roles: Performance & Performativity

This portion examines Judith Butler's feminist viewpoint, focusing on gender as a *performance* and *performativity* enacted through language, actions, and social norms rather than an innate identity. Performance refers to conscious acts performed by the characters. Throughout history, gender roles have been profoundly embedded in literature. Gender roles were frequently strictly established in many historic works reflecting the dominant social and cultural expectations of the time (Bridges, 2020). Men were usually portrayed as providers and decision-makers, while women were subservient and confined to domestic spaces (Ladzekpo et al., 2024). Table 1 shows the characters' performances in the selected folktales. As shown in Table 1, the characters' performances across the three folktales reflect these traditional gender expectations.

Table 1. *The performances of the characters of the folktales*

Folktales	Masculine Performance	Feminine Performance
The Cycle of the Sun and the Moon	Sun - Violent and destructive - Harms kids, hurts wife due to anger and impatience	Moon - Chooses to be passive and distant (runs away with her children instead) - Shows emotional constraint by not taking revenge against the Sun
The Good Prince Bantugan	Prince Bantugan - Chooses to be ideal, strong, and honorable Skilled in war, wants to protect the kingdom	Princess Datimbang - Chooses her gestures and speech - Tended to him, expresses grief, praises his bravery and beauty, even if she met Bantugan dead. - She wants to revive him for his beauty.
The Prowess of Aliguyon	Aliguyon - Chooses to be a warrior - Openly displays his bravery, strength, and skill - Mimicked the strut of a rooster and danced for Bugan	Bugan - Chooses to be kind, elegant, and graceful - Acts passive through male desire, not repetition - Shyly lowers eyelashes when offered to marry Aliguyon.

The Cycle of the Sun and the Moon shows the Moon's performance of passivity, distance, and emotional restraint, particularly in her decision not to retaliate against the Sun. In contrast, the Sun performs dominance through violent and destructive actions, harming his family due to anger and impatience. Table 1 highlights this contrast, where masculine performance is associated with aggression and control, while feminine performance is marked by restraint and withdrawal. *The Good Prince Bantugan* depicts the performance in the role of Prince Bantugan by embodying idealism, strength, and honor, being skilled in war, and desiring to protect the kingdom. He becomes performative when he unconsciously ties his worth to his conquests as a good prince by repeatedly engaging in battle and sacrificing himself. Princess Datimbang, on the other hand, performs femininity through emotional expression, devotion, and care, as seen in her grief and admiration for Bantugan. As reflected in Table 1, her actions emphasize relational and supportive roles rather than agency in conflict. *The Prowess of Aliguyon* showcases Aliguyon's performance when he chooses to be a warrior, openly displaying his bravery, strength, and skill. This is also evident when he mimics the strut of a rooster and dances for Bagan. His performativity is highlighted through repeated acts of leadership, war rites, and physical prowess, which are culturally accepted behaviors. His esteem comes from his peers' and his father's approval. The feminine character of Bagan performs by choosing to be kind, elegant, and graceful, acting passive in the face of male desire, not in repetition, as seen when she shyly lowered her eyelashes when offered to marry Aliguyon. Table 1 further shows how these performances reinforce gendered expectations through visible actions and behaviors.

One of the core concepts of Butler's (1998) work is gender performativity. Performativity refers to the manner in which gender identity is embodied and enacted rather than a more or less adequate representation of some underlying physiological reality. Butler likewise emphasized the physicality of social and individual existence and her desire to comprehend identity as a social process.

Drawing on this theory, characters consistently exhibit norms society considers masculine or feminine, and gender performance becomes understandable within cultural and narrative settings. These performances are supported in literary works by narrative structures that marginalize departures and reward conformity to prevailing gender norms. Therefore, gender performance in narratives serves to normalize power relations, making traditional roles such as female domesticity and male heroism appear natural and inevitable rather than constructed (McKinlay, 2010). On the other hand, performativity was exhibited in the texts as shown in Table 2. As presented in Table 2, performativity is evident in how characters internalize and reproduce these roles over time.

Table 2. *The performativity of the characters of the folktales*

Folktales	Masculine Performativity	Feminine Performativity
The Cycle of the Sun and the Moon	Sun - Emasculates his wife because authority is challenged - Uses resentful, aggressive gestures to reassert male control	Moon - Suffers due to verbal and physical abuse - Her identity is created by subordination as she tries to reclaim her independence
The Good Prince Bantugan	Prince Bantugan - Unconsciously ties his worth to his conquests as a <i>good prince</i> - Repeatedly engages in battle and sacrifices himself as part of the tradition	Princess Datimbang - Repeated acts of obedience and devotion reinforced by social expectations - Embodies a role that does not fight, only convinces the others to do the tasks for her
The Prowess of Aliguyon	Aliguyon - Repeated acts of leadership, war rites, and physical prowess, which are culturally accepted behaviors - Esteem comes from peers' and father's approval	Bugan - Lacks personal identity and self-agency - Was shaped by and conforms to the roles she must play - Replicates standards as a wife, daughter, and peace symbol

In *The Cycle of the Sun and the Moon*, the Moon became performative as she suffers due to verbal and physical abuse, where identity is created by subordination and reclaiming independence. The Sun's performativity is reflected in his repeated assertion of dominance through aggression when his authority is challenged. Table 2 illustrates how these repeated actions sustain patriarchal control. In *The Good Prince Bantugan*, Bantugan's performativity emerges when he unconsciously ties his worth to his conquests as a good prince by repeatedly engaging in battle and sacrificing himself. Datimbang is performative when she repeatedly exhibits acts of obedience and devotion, reinforced by social expectations, and embodies a role that only convinces others rather than fights. As shown in Table 2, her role reinforces conformity rather than resistance. In *The Prowess of Aliguyon*, Aliguyon's performativity is highlighted through repeated acts of leadership, war rites, and physical prowess, which are culturally accepted behaviors. His esteem comes from his peers' and his father's approval. Bugan's performativity is evident in her lack of personal identity and self-agency, as she is shaped by and conforms to the roles she must play, replicating the standards of a wife, a daughter, and a peace symbol. Table 2 highlights how these patterns are sustained through repetition and cultural validation.

The findings of this analysis are reinforced by Connell's (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity, which argues that men's power over women and other men is legitimized by a dominant, culturally idealized form of manhood that emphasizes strength, aggression, and authority. These patterns create and sustain gender hierarchies, where masculinity is privileged, and femininity is constrained, reinforcing inequality across the narratives.

Key Gender Dynamics: The Characters and Their Gender Roles & Power Dynamics

This portion of the study discusses the characters and their gender roles, as portrayed through Vladimir Propp's Morphology of the Folktale. In examining gender roles through Butler's feminist lens, the researcher considers the roles assigned to characters, whether these roles are depicted as natural or expected, whether they embody these roles based on the sex assigned at birth, and whether they perform roles that defy these expectations.

Propp's analysis helps examine the plots of comic strips, movies, television shows, and other literary works, such as plays and novels. In light of Propp's work, the emphasis on recurring, predictable cultural or local variants in comprehending the interaction between folklore and literature, as well as between the characters, must include both structure and content. We can learn about history, life experiences, culture, religion, politics, dreams, wishes, and any other local activity through folklore. The character roles Vladimir Propp presented as an abstraction of plot structure for understanding Russian folktales have gained popularity as a method of narrative analysis. These roles include the hero/heroine, the villain, the helper, the donor, the dispatcher, the prize, and the false hero/heroine (Gervas & Mendez, 2024; Propp, 1968).

According to Sotelo et al. (2026), Vladimir Propp's structuralist framework remains applicable to the analysis of Filipino literature. In particular, the research demonstrates how conventional folktale structures endure and evolve within modern, frequently non-linear storytelling, going beyond the identification of archetypes and narrative roles. Using Propp's framework improves critical thinking and emphasizes the importance of archetypes in cultural expression.

Since the study focuses on folktales and this portion delves into the characters' roles, the researcher employed Propp's Morphology of the folktale. Table 3 below presents the masculine and feminine gender roles in the selected pre-colonial Philippine folktales, using Vladimir Propp's *dramatis personae* (character types). As shown in Table 3, the selected folktales reflect clear gendered patterns in character roles.

Table 3. Character roles in the selected pre-colonial philippine folktales

Title	The Characters	Propp's Dramatis Personae
<i>The Cycle of the Sun and the Moon</i>	The Sun	Villain / False Hero
	The Moon	Hero / Victim
<i>The Good Prince Bantugan</i>	Prince Bantugan	Hero
	Princess Datimbang	Princess / Prize
<i>The Prowess of Aliguyon</i>	Aliguyon	Hero
	Bugan	Princess / Prize

In *The Cycle of the Sun and the Moon* shows the Moon is positioned as the Hero/Victim, embodying nurturing and passive traits, while the Sun functions as the Villain/False Hero, exhibiting dominance and control. Table 3 demonstrates how feminine roles are linked to suffering and endurance, while masculine roles are associated with power and authority. In *The Good Prince Bantugan*, Bantugan is the Hero, characterized by bravery and leadership, while Princess Datimbang is the Princess/Prize, defined by her relational and symbolic value. As reflected in Table 3, her role reinforces femininity as dependent and reward-based rather than agentic. In *The Prowess of Aliguyon*, Aliguyon is the Hero, embodying strength and leadership, while Bugan is the Princess/Prize, representing peace, submission, and relational identity. Table 3 highlights how these roles consistently position men as active agents and women as symbolic or supportive figures.

By using Propp's morphology, it is possible to see how traditional folktales reinforce gendered power relations, limiting femininity to relational and symbolic roles and making masculine domination seem natural. Male characters frequently serve as the *Hero* or *False Hero* in folktales, reinforcing masculinity as active, powerful, and essential to the plot's progression. Female characters are typically portrayed as *Princesses*, *Victims*, or symbolic *Prizes*, whose functions uphold or restore order but infrequently disrupt it through independent action. Across all three folktales, masculinity is consistently associated with authority, violence, and control, whether through the Sun's dominance, Bantugan's heroism, or Aliguyon's leadership. These portrayals reinforce the idea that men are naturally suited for leadership and action. Conflict and resolution further emphasize masculine authority, with men driving both narrative progression and outcomes.

In contrast, female characters such as the Moon, Princess Datimbang, and Bugan are positioned within patriarchal systems with limited autonomy. Their identities are shaped by relational roles such as wife, daughter, or symbolic figure. Gender hierarchies are not dismantled by acts of resistance like the Moon's escape, indicating that inequality persists rather than changing. Marriage frequently serves as a narrative resolution, restoring social order while maintaining male authority. When taken as a whole, these parallels show how pre-colonial folktales legitimate gender inequality by presenting women's suffering, submission, or symbolic worth as crucial to narrative harmony and frequently reiterating male domination.

These patterns illustrate how folktales normalize gender inequality by presenting male dominance as natural and female submission as necessary for harmony. Heroism, violence, and decision-making are examples of masculine domination that are commonly accepted by the characters themselves, even women whose identities are defined by marriage, parenthood, and commitment. Gramsci's theory of hegemony (1999), particularly his focus on consent as a tool of dominance ingrained in daily social and cultural life, helps explain the recurrent gender patterns in folktales (Martin, 2023). The folktales serve as cultural institutions that educate audiences to accept gender hierarchies as natural and inevitable, much like Gramsci's idea of civil society as a sturdy structure supporting power.

Hegemonic masculinity, according to Connell, is the understanding of gender practice that embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which ensures men's control while seeming acceptable and natural to society (Yang, 2020; Connell, 1995). This supports Gramsci's theory that, rather than relying solely on violence, ruling power endures by gaining the active consent of the dominated and integrating authority into cultural norms. Together, Connell and Gramsci provide light on how patriarchal authority functions as a cultural project, upheld by accepted notions of masculinity that denigrate women and alternative masculinities while portraying dominance as common sense.

Alternative Futures for the Characters in the Pre-Colonial Folktales

This section presents the different alternative futures that can be derived from the texts and the findings above. Alternative futures serve as another key element of speculative feminism. By analyzing the indicators above, various alternative futures can be derived from the selected pre-colonial Filipino literature. Meskus (2021) emphasizes that a speculative feminist perspective is useful for foreseeing the future. The goal is to demonstrate how speculative feminist thinking can create uncertain futures in settings such as ethnographic research and arts and culture analysis.

The seven alternative futures determined in *The Cycle of the Sun and Moon* are: Breaking Free from Patriarchal Cycles, Establishment of Fluid Gender Roles, Autonomy and Agency for the Moon, Transforming Power Dynamics, Redefining the Emotional Bounds, Creating New Forms of Family, and Escaping Domestic Violence. The seven alternative futures determined from *The Good Prince Bantugan* are: Gender Fluidity and Power Dynamics, Reimagining Heroism and Leadership, Shifting Power Dynamics and Relationships, Redefining Traditional Gender Expectations, Deeper Emotional and Psychological Complexity, Marriage as a Symbol of Liberation, and Rethinking the Concept of Death and Resurrection. Lastly, in *The Prowess of Aliguyon*, the following alternative futures were curated: Reimagined Gender Roles and Fluidity, Female Agency and Autonomy, Non-violent Conflict Resolution, Power Shared Between the Genders, Transformative Relationships and Mutual Respect, Alternative Family Structures, and Shared Resources and Collective Prosperity.

Across all three folktales, these alternative futures share a rejection of rigid gender hierarchies and patriarchal authority. They emphasize more fluid gender roles, equitable power distribution, and increased agency for female characters. Alternative narratives have evolved into a tool for fostering diversity of voice and teaching critical thinking. Through redesigned heroes, powerful female figures, or balanced gender dynamics, all three storylines shift away from male-centered domination by highlighting shared leadership, female autonomy, and mutual respect in partnerships. Additionally, they come together to redefine social structures such as the family, marriage, and community as places of empathy, liberation, and cooperation rather than of control (Heraclide, 2024; Milojević, I., & Izgarjan, 2013).

Taken together, these alternative futures present a speculative feminist vision that prioritizes community, relational power, and non-hierarchical structures over individual masculine dominance. Feminism features the representation of women in general, the image of women at work, the division of labor, and the role of women in society (Cacas, 2024). In line with real-life experiences of modern Filipinos, it can be observed in society that the performance and performativity of masculine and feminine roles continue to take place. Many men and women are trapped in oppressive cycles that they cannot escape from due to the pressure that social norms and expectations place upon them.

This is evident in the case of women who suffer physical or verbal abuse from their partners but cannot escape the relationship due to their fixed roles as wives and mothers. Escaping these roles means becoming a villain in society's eyes. Instead, they choose to stay in suffering and settle for the sake of their children. This can be

supported by the study of Munsayac et al. (2024), which stated that, because of gender, prevailing stereotypes and gender roles that are deeply embedded in Philippine society have raised expectations, particularly for single mothers. This has negative implications, especially since people trapped in these cycles tend to identify with these roles rather than reclaiming their own identities and fighting to free themselves.

As a result, individuals are often confronted with the question “What if?”, reflecting the speculative impulse to imagine alternative futures. The characters in pre-colonial Philippine literature navigate intersectional pressures shaped by gender, power, social expectations, and family roles, which influence their identities and actions. Systemic gender bias and discrimination are cast by stereotypes that portray women as emotional and caring but less capable than men (Mangarin et al., 2024).

All the masculine characters analyzed embody the traits and characteristics expected of them. Women, on the other hand, were depicted as possessing feminine traits, like being submissive and passive, worse, as rewards to men after they achieve a glorious feat. Women in the stories lacked agency and the power to make their own decisions. Their identities rely on the more dominant men in their lives, and they, unfortunately, embrace these roles because they are seen as their duties. This is reinforced by Cruz (2020), who stated that the fight for social justice and gender equality in the Philippines is intricately linked to the country's rich and dynamic past. Recognizing the varied experiences of women across socioeconomic and cultural contexts, contemporary Filipino feminism has recently placed greater emphasis on intersectional issues.

These folktales offered the researcher an opportunity to explore how different layers of identity intersect and influence the characters' actions and the narrative as a whole.

Overall, integrating speculative feminism through pre-colonial Philippine literature in the classroom can enhance students' awareness of identity and gender dynamics. This is supported by Quiño et al. (2025), who stated that students' cultural identities are strengthened through the teaching of Philippine literature. Teachers can teach Filipino values and historical awareness through literary works like novels, poems, short stories, and epics.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that pre-colonial Filipino folktales both exhibit and subtly challenge patriarchal structures through their portrayal of gender roles, relationships, and power dynamics. The selected folktales incorporate and challenge feminist themes through intersectional analysis, drawing on patriarchal concepts and male-centered narratives that place gendered expectations and stereotypical traits on the characters. These characters fulfill their expected roles, and their relationships are heavily influenced by gender. Viewed through the combined lenses of speculative feminism, intersectionality, performance and performativity, and Propp's Morphology of the Folktale, the narratives reveal how characters are shaped by socially constructed expectations, wherein they often perform gendered identities through repeated behaviors that reinforce stereotypical roles. This study emphasizes how these folktales might be reimagined beyond these fixed and hierarchical stereotypes by incorporating speculative feminist analysis. Through looking at the alternative futures, the possibility of more transformative relationships wherein characters are not confined to their gendered roles may contribute to literature. In this sense, pre-colonial and traditional texts may also be used not only for cultural aspects but also for more future-oriented analyses. In alternative futures, the characters may reject fixed gendered places and roles, redefining love and power, and ultimately breaking free from toxic, recurring patterns and cycles, especially in relationships and opportunities.

The results also have significant implications for literary pedagogy and education. Incorporating speculative feminist folktale readings into the curriculum can help students identify embedded systems of oppression, develop a deeper awareness and understanding of how gender roles function in both literature and society. These approaches could promote empathy, critical thinking, and the capacity to challenge prevailing beliefs found in literature. Overall, the researcher concludes that the study of speculative feminism can help open learners' perspectives. The analysis of the characters, their roles, relationships, and reactions may serve as lessons to help them identify oppressive patterns, to navigate through cycles they find themselves in, and to make decisions that stay true to their own identities and to what remains morally just and true, without being influenced by what is being dictated by the expectations of society.

For future research, scholars may expand this study by examining a broader range of regional and national texts,

including poems, short stories, and even novels, while incorporating concepts written during colonial and post-colonial settings, and frameworks like queer theory or similar studies. These may help explore how contemporary audiences may interpret and reimagine these texts.

Contributions of Authors

Author 1: The author conceptualized and proposed the study, collected and analyzed the data, and finalized the manuscript.

Author 2: The author analyzed the data and edited the study's content and language.

Funding

The research did not receive any funding from any source or agency.

Conflict of Interests

The researchers declared no conflict of interest in the conduct of the study.

Acknowledgment

Above all, the researcher thanks the Almighty God for His wisdom, blessings, and for providing her strength and resilience despite the distance and complexity of conducting this study; Doreen B. Tampus, PhD, and Mary Joy C. Carnazo, MAT, for actively sharing their knowledge and brilliant expertise to improve the quality of the study; Jeeb T. Abelito, PhD, as the program chairperson, who tirelessly answered queries and provided assistance throughout the process of completing this study; Dr. Walter G. Latorza for providing language edits and qualitative analysis to improve the quality of the study; To the parents, relatives, and friends of the researcher for sending their moral support. This study would not be possible without their encouragement, sacrifices, and understanding.

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