

## Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* and the Case of Melodramatic Films

Mary Joyce Camille A. Paragas<sup>1</sup>  
Pangasinan State University<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract** – This paper aims to speculate and analyze the melodramatic dimensions of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's film, *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*. As a special topic in literary studies, this paper further aims to discuss melodrama as a genre in terms of extra-aesthetic intentions. Since the story in the cinematic melodrama usually transpires in the domestic sphere, this paper made family and romantic conflicts as the focus of analysis. The overtly heightened emotions portrayed through stylized and hyperbolic exchange of lines and acting were also given points of references. Feminist ideologies including Marilyn Lowery's Traditional Plot Pattern for romance stories were also given points of discussion to provide more qualifying basis for the framing of the film as a melodramatic genre. As a periphery of the film analysis, the stock characters as representations of flatness, i.e. no character development, were discussed as how this filmmaker's choice of characters ironically strengthened the storyline. Overall, the paper aims to depict national cinemas in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as being anchored on a strong melodramatic tradition.

**Keywords** – National Cinema, Melodramatic Film, Romantic Conflicts

### INTRODUCTION

The watching experience that Fassbinder's film provide have resemblances to watching *Betty La Fea*, *Ina*, *Kapatid*, *Anak* and *My Husband's Lover*, all were known as *Philippine soap operas*. Traditionally, we label them as "tearjerkers" or "weepies" for they give emphasis on personal relationships, emotional or moral conflicts and other issues that could be found when audience are so glued on telenovelas (still rampant nowadays). The first one (*Betty La Fea*) talks about a woman beyond the normal curve of being human and how she was privileged by having a love life and a fruitful career. The second one (*Ina*, *Kapatid*, *Anak*) is about family relationships, their struggles and how they have resolved issues within this smallest social institution. And the last one tells us something about love that it's not really confining to the definition of falling for gender, but falling for individual.

This is not really a comparison between the film and the soap operas aforementioned but just merely opening up the possibility of their comparativeness. *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, is hypothetically soap operatic. Although soap operas are known to be containing lengthy episodes, the film's melodramatic conventions can be seen in the same way as the said soap is seen.

Since melodrama is the more appropriate term for those anthologies, there are times when we cannot separate one from the other.

### OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This paper aims to speculate and discuss cinematic melodramatic traditions in the film, *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*. How the storyline and some story arcs were framed are also given points of discussion. The representations of some significant lines and segments were analyzed to come up with a clear-cut definition and intention of a melodramatic genre.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

This film study, as a special topic of literary studies, used Rainer Werner Fassbinder's film *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*. It is a 1974 German film that tells the story of a lonely widow Emmi Kurowsky (Brigitte Mira) who meets an Arab worker Ali (El Hedi ben Salem) in a bar during a rainstorm. They fall in love—to their own surprise—and to the shock of family, colleagues, and drinking buddies. (Toteberg, 1990)

This paper used film criticism, narrowing down to semiotic analysis grounding on the study of meaning-making, the philosophical theory of signs and symbols, including signs and sign processes (semiosis), indication, designation, likeness, analogy, metaphor,



symbolism, signification, communication and representations. (Michael and Lenos, 2012). Shot by shot analysis was also done as a periphery to pore over how Fassbinder, through dynamics and techniques in filmmaking, expertly used the emotional power of the melodrama to underscore the racial tensions threatening German culture. Marilyn Lowery's traditional plot pattern for romance stories were also used for the explication of some melodrama references in the film.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Holman and Harmon (1986) said that a melodrama is based on a romantic plot and developed sensationally, with little regard for convincing motivation and with an excessive appeal to the emotions of the audience.

Although there are different schools of thought regarding what a melodrama is, generally it focuses on storyline that talks about family, personal, or sexual relationships and issues like rape, addiction, teen drinking, etc. The film of Fassbinder reflects this kind of plot. This one is typically a May-December love affair on the struggle for social acceptance. How the characters were presented in it is classifying them as "doomed couple". The established long shot of the minor characters when they stare at the main characters gave justice on how they are condemned in their own society. When Emmi entered the bistro for the very first time with all those creepy eyes on her depicts already strong forces between her and the people outside of her. This has been the atmosphere that was established all throughout the film, whether this is something to be damned or applauded by the viewers. Going back to the first scene until Emmi and Ali could be seen walking upstairs in the place where Emmi's staying at, people in there stare at them from head to toe as if they are criminals who committed a heinous crime. There was even a time when the son of their landlord went straight to Emmi's cellar regarding Ali's lodging in there and that he has to move out. The dominant line that a viewer can remember from this scene is, "You're old enough to know what you're doing." It has been a slap on her face although Emmi's recognition of the humiliation is not seen for she was clouded by the worry that Ali could not stay in there anymore. This scene was not explicitly given prominence yet seemed to be substantial in building up that social pressure that the film maker wanted to establish in the film. The powerful line is like an eye-opener for Emmi which is like saying, "Hey Emmi, wake up! This is not right. Better get back on

track!" Another scene which could truly support the society vs. Emmi/Ali conflict is when they are at a restaurant, an exterior scene, under the trees. The environment established was made too obvious when they are in the middle of tables and chairs with no one around except for the people at a distant looking at them so horrendously and which Emmi even called, "a horrible grin."

With all those observable phenomena in the film, the film maker did not deviate from the intention of the concept of a melodrama. The scenes are made too palpable that there is no room anymore for people in front of the screen to think critically since answers were already given. The story is a "me against the world" or "you and me against the world" trope—that is too typical and is usually found on drama anthologies transpiring in television.

However, the choice of characters has strengthened the storyline. The film maker has featured these stock characters as what they should be in a melodramatic film. According to Kamesha Jackson (2010), stock characters are:

- stereotypical fictional characters
- readily recognized in literary tradition
- distinguished by their flatness
- easy targets for parody
- criticized as clichés

The line of characters strongly suggests the second description of stock characters—readily recognized in literary tradition. They were actually a representation of flatness—no development at all, static and they are what they really are in the film. Despite of the slight changes within and in the middle of the film, still these characters remained as what they are intended to be portrayed. Emmi still stayed in love with Ali against all those humiliations, struggles with the horrible grins, and family feuds. Ali remained in love with her as well, despite the fact that he was tempted to sleep with the girl in the bar for the times that he was not receiving the love the way that he wanted to. The other characters have undergone character development, but still it was all flatness, generally speaking. With this, it is relevant to associate what an American poet who has once said to the framing up of the story,

*She runs the gamut of emotions from A to B.*

Delving through the scenes, all we find are struggles for social acceptance, hurt, betrayal, anger and love. Characters portray the same emotions, nothing extraordinary and do not even have a bit of element of surprise. Given that this is about love against



nationality/race and age and how the characters have undergone it, what could be very interesting here? We have witnessed all sorts of struggles for love and overcoming it—very typical. It resembles the case of watching soap operas; those who have keen eyes will despise it and even guess what will happen next. This is because soap operas are very predictable. We see the very usual scenes, and even memorize the plot pattern.

With reference to the romance writer, Marilyn M. Lowery, romances are based on a traditional formula. This is the traditional plot pattern according to her:

1. A girl, our heroine, meets a man, our hero, who is above her socially and who is wealthy and worldly.
2. The hero excites the heroine but frightens her sexually.
3. She is usually alone in the world and vulnerable.
4. The hero dominates the heroine but she is fiery and sensual, needing this powerful male.
5. Though appearing to scorn her, the hero is intrigued by her and pursues her sexually.
6. The heroine wants love, not merely sex, and sees his pursuit as self-gratification.
7. The two clash in verbal sparring.
8. In holding to her own standards, the heroine appears to lose the hero. She does not know he respects her.
9. A moment of danger for either main character results in the realization on the part of the hero or heroine that the feeling between them is true love.
10. A last-minute plot twist threatens their relationship.
11. The two finally communicate and admit their true love, which will last forever.

Although each part or detail can't be easily pinned down in the film, the pattern in general was obviously transpiring in it. It's a love story of two people from worlds apart, falling in love in such a haste, struggling against social pressure, undergoing conflicts within and outside of themselves, and still end up together. Many people are fascinated with this kind of formula. Like telenovelas and romance pocketbooks and cheap pulp romances, a lot of people still patronize them despite of the very predictable storyline. Lowery has an explanation for this,

Romance fiction works because it establishes

a kind of contract with its readers who agree to consume the story so long as it delivers what they want, and what they want is lots of language like this: Then they were together, hands exploring, mouths tasting, until their bodies met in passion.

Readers and viewers a lot of times are not really interested with the story itself but on what is happening just like what Lowery has suggested. How the scenes were sensationalized, the heavy drama, the “kilig scenes” --- these things make the audience stick on the idiot box for self-satisfaction. Lowery has even added, verbatim, that a reader is fascinated by this formula since it tells her that she can have the romance she was brought out to believe in; that her life can be exciting and happy; that she is desirably sexually; that true love lasts forever. In the film, happy ending is very apparent, that Emmi and Ali will end up together. Even if not all melodramas use happy endings, this as a very significant factor to look at not only in pocketbooks and soap operas but in the films as well. With a despising ending, people who have deeper sense of watching films would seek for a more mind-twisting and unexpected ending.

The ending and the whole pattern tells us something about the extra-aesthetic intentions of the film maker. He wanted the film to sell, that is. But all films are intended for that. It might be also asked, is this the kind of film that sells? The first query about the film maker's desire to make it in the market is tough to answer and attempting to answer it might be pointless. However, the second one is very significant. If *Precious Hearts Romances Pocketbooks* that gained a lot of readers and soap operas made the viewers not miss even a single episode, Fassbinder's film truly sells. “The formula is unbeatable,” says Lowery. No matter how usual the story is, it will still have its appeal to the viewers because of the said formula. The issue of popular culture could be brought in relation to this. Studies have proven that women are the real patronesses of these pocketbooks and soap operas. Who are the real consumers of romance reading? The target audience are always the women—female students, mothers, house *yayas*. Melodramatic films according to Tim Dirks are usually called women's pictures, weepies, tearjerkers, soap operas and *chickflicks*. They usually feature terminally-ill loved one, impossible love, giant robot that dies for our sins. In addition to that, we usually see tough, sinful, bawdy, naughty and fallen women, pleasure-loving gold diggers, prostitutes



and ruthless divorces. *Fear Eats the Soul* has a story that is not interesting at all. It's already a common knowledge that the prejudice of age seems to be one of the hardest things the society can ever accept. So what do we expect from the film? There will be a lot of struggles between the couple and the people outside of them. Watching a film like this is truly a humdrum experience. The film maker knew this, but still he chose this story to make it in the market. With the women as the target audience, the roughness of the story and all the clichéd things in it will be overpowered by the strong pull of heightened emotions established in the film.

Dirks further said that female audiences are attracted to plot lines that included doomed love affairs, infidelity, unrequited love, various family crises or marital separation. Hypothetically speaking, women are more emotional and expressive than men. But aside from this premise, women are the ones who like to watch something that they could relate to, that part of it might be happening in their lives. Women have always this fascination of witnessing love against all odds.

Melodrama has always been primarily concerned with popular culture. But this has often been despised by critics. Some critics would say that popularity reflects debasement; emotionality depicts ineffectiveness; religiosity is bogus; and domesticity promotes immateriality. Above all, a feminist ideology is brought out--- that there is women inferiority. This is how the critics see it while the rest are blinded by what the film has to fill their satisfaction.

There are other things worth pointing out in relation to the film. First off is the 'sex' scene. In the film, it was seen that Ali had sex with the girl in the bar. On another case, there was a sexual intercourse between Ali and Emmi. It was not explicitly shown in the film that they had made love, yet the film was very suggestive that there was a sexual activity that has happened between them. Speculating on this, the film maker chose not to expose it even just a slight scene of "foreplay" or the two of them naked and covered with bed sheets. This could be a representation of sexual humiliation. The film itself is propagandistic leading us to the realization that we are not allowed to see them make love because it is gross. It could also be because the sex scene is not important and not worth showing. Remember that they fell in love and got married after what has happened to them during the rainy night when Ali has to stay in her pad. And if the reason of the film maker was to avoid obscenity, why was the private

organ of Ali shown? Emmi even complimented it and said, "You're so beautiful, Ali." The motive then was to tell the audience how unacceptable it is to see the characters make love. The film itself does not really support this kind of love affair.

The scene where Ali was asked to buy in a nearby store was also very prominent. The misunderstanding of that "libelle" concept made the two cultures clash. It was a slap on the face of a Moroccan when he was told to learn German first before he will be entertained in the store. Racial discrimination was the greatest struggle of Ali in the film. How some of the characters despise foreigners was every evident. We see the neighbors of Emmi calling the police to report Ali and his friends when they are not doing anything, just partying. We also see the husband of Emmi's daughter who has had low regards to foreigners, and the expression of sarcasm of Emmi's friend when she saw Ali in the pad.

We have also witnessed in the film how Emmi's friends, family and acquaintances tried to avoid her upon learning that she has this "unacceptable" relationship with Ali, and what is worse is she got married to him. Since the couple could not take the social pressure anymore, they tried to go away from the accusations, the humiliations and those degrading eyes. The question is when the couple came back, why was there a sudden change with the people around them? The rationale behind this story arc cannot be easily deciphered. The store owner became nice to them because Emmi is a client. And one client is important to make the business go round, economically speaking. The people in the building where Emmi lives also became nice to them. It's because they have needed something from them. It was only the son of Emmi who was able to accept everything wholeheartedly. So what was the film trying to say regarding this? They were not really accepted by the society. The ending of the story even reminded us of the first time they have danced together in the bar--- all eyes are on them. So despite the happy ending, social acceptance is misleading. There was no really social acceptance.

There was also a sense of escapism transpiring in the film especially when Ali chose to sleep with another woman and make love to her leaving the old woman behind. So there is the presence of infidelity here as a result of escaping from the troubles of staying in love with her who can't even give him what makes him happy. This even adds up to justifications of the film as melodrama and very conventional.



Fassbinder has really made a melodramatic film and has not deviated from its conventions. There is a very important element here worth looking at—the dance. We saw it at the beginning and in the end. If the film maker has to show this more than once, therefore it is significant. An international film historian named Thomas Elsaesser has recognized the importance of music as a form of expression in the melodrama. (Wei, 1997) What can be seen in the film perhaps suggests that what the two can't say directly, the dance/music compensates.

The scene where Ali was so drunk suggests a way of overpowering social pressures which has resulted to inability to act. The same person made a point that this kind of act on social issues is very central to the construction of melodrama. There is what we call an “inner violence” in which the film maker wants to establish in the characters suffering from this kind of dilemma. And this energy has to be brought out through dependency on alcohol—which is a technique in melodramas.

#### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The polar moralities and the representations of *good vs. evil* and the stereotyping made the melodrama even more justifiable. There was oppression here, which is really true for a melodrama. The oppression will either come from an antagonist or the social pressure. It was transpiring in the film. In addition, there are questions of privileging in the storyline. Usually, melodrama sides with the powerless. Emmi was considered as the powerless in *Fear Eats the Soul*. Those who possess power are those who portrayed these horrible grins to them.

Doomed couple against social constraints, fairytale-like happy ending. *Fear Eats the Soul* is a melodrama, story-wise and construction-wise. This has been the depiction of the 20th Century national cinemas, anchoring on a melodramatic tradition.

Melodramatic films, in general, should be seen as how they are grounded on these issues, as a product of popular culture and not for mere consumption of its denseness.

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