

## **Vice Ganda: A Voice Against Homophobia?**

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### **Abstract**

Jose Mari Vicerál, also known as Vice Ganda, is one of the most famous entertainers in the Philippines. His widespread influence makes him a prominent figure who represents the marginalized voices of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ+) community in the Philippines. He is vocal in speaking about the plight of the LGBTQ+ community through various platforms. Vicerál's movies also touch on various issues such as microaggressions and homophobia. In this essay, I aim to examine the influence of Vicerál, particularly in representing the oppressed and marginalized voices of the LGBTQ+ community. Does his voice represent the marginalized voices of the LGBTQ+ community or does it do the exact opposite? I do this by: 1) defining what homophobia is and how it affects the LGBTQ+ community, 2) looking at the themes of Vicerál's movies and determine whether they authentically represent the voices of the LGBTQ+ community, 3) and synthesizing the discussion by looking at the overall influence of Vice Ganda. I find that there is inconsistency in Vicerál's voice and that he falls short in representing the LGBTQ+ community.

**Keywords:** Vice Ganda, LGBTQ+, homophobia, movies, counter-discourse

## Introduction

The existence of homophobia in the Filipino consciousness is one of the problems that should be addressed in the Philippines. Aiming for collective progress and growth, it is high time to address the marginalization of voices of the LGBTQ+ community. This problematic type of mentality in the Philippines can be traced to patriarchy. Feorillo Demeterio points out that the patriarchal Filipino consciousness is a result of the many years of Spanish and American colonization.<sup>1</sup> This patriarchal type of consciousness creates an oppressive society for the LGBTQ+ community. Patriarchy automatically places the cisgendered<sup>2</sup> heterosexual man as the superior gender and consequently marginalizes non-heterosexuals.<sup>3</sup>

Although the LGBTQ+ community sometimes takes space in this patriarchal society, particularly in popular culture, the space usually given to them remains within the confines and control of hegemonic masculinity. In popular media, for instance, they are seen merely as comedic reliefs or personalities subordinate to cisgendered heterosexual men. (This idea is part of the existing discourse about the members of the LGBTQ+ community in the Philippines.) On the other hand, the counterdiscourse seeks to break all these existing narratives by shedding light on the nuances of the life of the members of the LGBTQ+ community. The counterdiscourse humanizes their identity and experiences, and provides information about the fluidity of sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression. Hence, these existing counterdiscourses against homophobia must be amplified in order for the LGBTQ+ community to be heard.

As a vantage point, I focus on the *bakla*<sup>4</sup> in order to see how they are represented in Filipino popular culture. What are the

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<sup>1</sup> Feorillo Petronilo Demeterio, "Ang Nobelang "Si Amapola sa 65 na Kabanata" ni Ricardo Lee Bilang Kontra-Diskurso ng Baklang Manilenyo Laban sa Homopobikong Kamalayang Filipino," *Malay Journal* 25, no. 2 (2013): 76

<sup>2</sup> According to Peter Cava (2016, 1), the term 'cisgender' became a part of gender studies as early as the 1990s. It simply means that one's gender identity matches one's sex at birth (Cava 2016, 1).

<sup>3</sup> Demeterio, "Amapola," 76.

<sup>4</sup> According to Louise Abigail Payuyo (2012, 304-305), the bakla is an overtly effeminate, cross-dressing male. In the same study, Payuyo also pointed out that the concept of the bakla is distinct from the usual Western concept of the homosexual because both concepts came from two different knowledge systems made entirely

implications of this placement as opposed to other oppressed gender identities? I specifically chose the *bakla* because in the framework of intersectionality, the *bakla* is a nuanced identity that experiences various and interlocking webs of oppression which include sexism (homophobia), and classism, among others. In understanding the condition of the *bakla*, several intersecting factors such as class must be considered as well.<sup>5</sup> I explore mainstream media, where the counterdiscourse against homophobia potentially takes place. For Louise Abigail Payuyo, the presence and portrayal of the *bakla* is very visible in mainstream cinema.<sup>6</sup> Because of mainstream cinema's reach, I wonder how such a platform contributes to the counterdiscourse against homophobia. Although Philippine society has progressed with its views about gay people through popular media and slice of life narratives, the LGBTQ+ community is still one of the marginalized groups in the country.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, even if there are popular and idolized gay personalities in popular media today, with Vice Ganda as an example, gays are still discriminated against.

This essay recognizes popular media's capability in creating an effective counterdiscourse because of its ability to shape society's consciousness. Popular media must be maximized to its full capacity because doing so may benefit the LGBTQ+ community and provide them with acknowledgement from other sectors of Philippine society. This acknowledgement then results in a better representation and

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different by certain cultural nuances. Diaz (2015, 721) also had the same view by pointing out that the *bakla* is a gay male identity that is characterized by its effeminate and flamboyant behavior. He also pointed out that defining the *bakla* would also require some considerations when it comes to their social class because the *bakla* is usually found in the lower class. Hence, using such term would need some considerations when it comes to matters such as the culture, time, and class where the concept originated. Suffice to say that understanding the concept of *bakla* would entail understanding its cultural basis because it is something unique and nuanced.

<sup>5</sup> This undertaking is inspired by the revolutionary feminist thought of bell hooks who offers a new and a more inclusive definition of feminism that recognizes various and oftentimes interlocking webs of oppression (Biana 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Louise Abigail Payuyo, "The Portrayal of Gays in Popular Filipino Films, 2000 to 2010," *Philippine Sociological Review* 60, (2012): 291-322, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43486348>

<sup>7</sup> Angelo Ma. Antonio Morales, "Changing the Face of Homosexuality through Film," *Plaridel* 1, no. 2 (August 2004): 164-173, <http://www.plarideljournal.org/article/changing-the-face-of-homosexuality-through-film-review-of-eating-out/>

understanding of their struggles. In order to fully understand homophobia, there must be a recognition of the interlocking and oppressive structures of domination. After all, class and gender privileges are also factors in the persistence of homophobia. In this essay, I use Vice Ganda's movies as the main material as Vice Ganda is one of the most popular images of the *bakla* in the Philippines. I examine whether Vice Ganda's voice, through his movies, contributes to the existing counterdiscourse against homophobia. Or do these portayals do the exact opposite? Do they perpetuate homophobic stereotypes and microaggressions, particularly on the placement of the *bakla* either as a laughingstock or someone overly obsessed with men? Is the usage of the term *bakla* a derogatory term? It must be noted, however, that this essay does not aim to discredit the overall influence of Vice Ganda in Filipino popular culture. I, however, seek to point out the weaknesses in his voice as an advocate of LGBTQ+ rights in the Philippines. I also offer new ways in strengthening Vice Ganda's voice in order to break stereotypical narratives that continue to silence and oppress LGBTQ+ voices.

## Defining Homophobia

Homophobia is the fear, hostility, and prejudice towards gay people. Throughout the years, scholars have explored the definition of homophobia in various ways.<sup>8</sup> In this section's discussion, I enumerate theories that seek to explain homophobia. To understand homophobia, let me define the term, *homosexuality*<sup>9</sup> first. In their exploration of homosexuality, William O'Donohue and Christine Caselles pointed out

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<sup>8</sup> See O'Donohue, Caselles (1993) and Adam (1998) for a more detailed discussion of the various definitions of homosexuality and homophobia through the years. Here, through a survey of various perspectives, they aimed to articulate the sources of meaning for these concepts with the aim of arriving at a better understanding of such concepts.

<sup>9</sup> For the ears of gays and lesbians, this term is a pejorative word. The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) even added the word to its list of offensive terms (Peters 2014). For the sake of discussion of homophobia, however, I shall use the term to trace the history of homophobia starting from its pathologized and clinical definitions. I intend no offense on the usage of the term.

a pathologized definition.<sup>10</sup> The field of psychiatry initially categorizes homosexuality as a mental disorder. Homosexuals were formerly considered as people with a type of mental illness that need to be cured through therapy. The pathologized definition of homosexuality is considered one of the formidable obstacles for gay<sup>11</sup> people as they struggled for social and political status. To address this, a movement was formed to depathologize such cases. As these concepts are challenged by further research, the pathologized notions encountered various criticisms. A call was made to move the discussion about the narrative of gays to the individuals who have a prejudiced view of them.<sup>12</sup> O'Donohue and Caselles maintained that eventually, theorists and researchers in the field of psychology began shifting the focus from the victims to the victimizers. Attitudes that affect the social standing of gay people were then explored and eventually, through the collective efforts of activists and psychologists, homosexuality was then considered a normal and healthy lifestyle choice.<sup>13</sup>

As these discussions moved from one focus to another, explanations about homosexuality became more politicized in various fields. Even the term 'homosexual' was deemed offensive and politically-incorrect.<sup>14</sup> Homophobia was then explored by theorists, and was initially ruled out as a psychological concept closely related to other forms of phobias.<sup>15</sup> Questions about the existence of negative attitudes toward homosexuals were examined. It is glaring though, that the negative attitude tied to fear somehow rationalizes the prejudice against members of the LGBTQ+ community. Suffice to say that understanding such a negative attitude became an ordeal for some, particularly for early thinkers and gay activists. Barry Adam pointed out that homophobia is the response to the oppositions or

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<sup>10</sup> William O'Donohue, Christine E. Caselles, "Homophobia: Conceptual, definitional, and value issues," *Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioral Assessment* 15, no. 3 (1993): 177-195, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01371377>

<sup>11</sup> The term "gay" is an alternative term offered to lessen the load carried by the term "homosexual" since the latter is considered offensive and limiting.

<sup>12</sup> O'Donohue, Caselles, "Homophobia: Conceptual," 180.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>14</sup> Peters, Jeremy, "The Decline and Fall of the 'H' Word." *The New York Times*, March 21, 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/23/fashion/gays-lesbians-the-term-homosexual.html>.

<sup>15</sup> George Weinberg, *Society and the Healthy Homosexual* (Garden City, New York: Anchor, 1973) quoted in Adam, "Theorizing Homophobia," 388.

deviations to the standards set by a patriarchal society.<sup>16</sup> To illustrate, we can look at the system or the ‘game plan’ produced by patriarchal societies that focuses on the mistreatment of women.<sup>17</sup> Such a system exercises control of women – from their social standing to their bodies.<sup>18</sup> Homosexuality was seen as a form of deviance from the ideal man’s behavior or action towards women’s bodies.<sup>19</sup> Homosexual men refuse to take part in the act of controlling women as prescribed by the fraternal interest of patriarchal societies.<sup>20</sup> In this regard, homophobia serves as a form of social control. It is a means to negatively sanction the behavior of homosexuals as they deviate from what is acceptable to society. Negative sanctions for homosexual behaviors come in different ways, and all are oppressive and sometimes, even violent.

From the perspective of gender panic theories, particularly, queer theory, homophobia is generated out of the man’s desire to protect his male status and privilege.<sup>21</sup> Masculinity is achieved but it is an insecure type of status, and defending it is necessary.<sup>22</sup> Homophobia is considered as the defense mechanism that could secure one’s male status and privileges that come with it. Being prejudiced toward gay people is a way to secure one’s masculinity and prevent being feminized.<sup>23</sup> Homophobia is a form of social control and defense mechanism. In worst cases, it is the complete disregard and disrespect to gays by subjecting them to unfair treatment, stereotyping, and microaggression. To combat such prejudiced views, the counterdiscourse against homophobia takes place in various platforms and disciplines, with popular media being one of them. In social media, there are people who would call out such negative behavior with the hopes of creating critical awareness. These counterdiscourses aim to

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<sup>16</sup> Adam, “Theorizing Homophobia,” 390.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 390.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Queer theory is specifically chosen as it is one of the theories that aim to unpack and effectively explain in a formal and systematic way the nuances and experiences of queer people. Its scope of study ranges from the academe, art, media, etc. which makes it a holistic and an effective theory that can further shed light on this study.

<sup>22</sup> Adam, “Theorizing Homophobia,” 390.

<sup>23</sup> From this perspective, being feminized is something that must be avoided because it somehow strips one of his masculinities. This perspective also shows that the prejudice is not exclusive to gay people alone, but it also extends to women.

raise awareness about the plight of the LGBTQ+ community, eradicate the persistence of stereotypes and microaggressions, and continue providing safe spaces for the members of the LGBTQ+ community.

## **Vice Ganda's Influence**

Vice Ganda is a popular image in the Philippines. What is in question here, however, is Vice Ganda's capability to and effectiveness in representing and giving a voice to the LGBTQ+ community. Being a popular icon who is seen in mainstream television daily, Vice Ganda has a platform to echo the counterdiscourse against homophobia. The counterdiscourse against homophobia is the movement which aims to challenge the dominant narrative that oppresses gay people. In a way, the movement aims to break systems of domination that marginalizes the members of the LGBTQ+ community. In the following sections, I explore Vice Ganda's works and influence as an entertainer. Does his voice contribute to the marginalization and silencing of hegemonic masculinity? Does he echo the marginalized and silenced voices of the LGBTQ+ community? Looking at the works of Vice Ganda, contradictions arise between his advocacies in live television and his portrayals and representation in movies. In talk shows and variety shows, although characterized by its comedic nature, Vice Ganda is quick to call out his co-hosts' throw of insensitive and homophobic remarks. He is also very much aware of microaggressions, and he spots and corrects them immediately. In 2010, Vice Ganda had a heated exchange with a co-host because of an overly insensitive remark about gays and their flamboyance.<sup>24</sup> When it comes to calling out microaggressions and homophobic remarks, Vice Ganda does so by maintaining his humor while getting the message across. There are times, however, when Vice Ganda's humor becomes problematic.<sup>25</sup> For instance, his joke about rape and body-shaming drew flak for its

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<sup>24</sup> ABS-CBN News, "Vice Ganda, Tado exchange heated words in 'Showtime'," ABS-CBN News, May 25, 2010, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/entertainment/05/25/10/vice-ganda-tado-exchange-heated-words-showtime>

<sup>25</sup> For the sake of entertainment, some remarks of Vice Ganda in his movies are about lookism and body shaming.

There are also some instances when Vice Ganda gets to say such remarks in his noontime and primetime shows.

insensitivity.<sup>26</sup> This is where the inconsistency in his voice can first be first seen.

### **Reading the movies of Vice Ganda<sup>27</sup>**

The movies of Vice Ganda, usually released during the Metro Manila Film Festival, are the go-to movies of Filipino families.<sup>28</sup> Such instances speak about the pervasiveness of Vice Ganda's influence on the Filipino popular culture.

In my analysis, I use the semiology of French philosopher and semiotician Roland Barthes.<sup>29</sup> To analyze these movies in Philippine popular culture, Barthes' semiology is used to provide a deeper understanding of their contents. Since movies can be used as communication tools in delivering a message, semiology paves the way towards a more critical analysis. Vice Ganda has a total of eleven movies, mostly comedies, wherein he played the lead role. In all these

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<sup>26</sup> "Vice Ganda gets flak for 'rape' joke" Rappler, last modified May 28, 2013, <https://www.rappler.com/entertainment/30116-vice-ganda-jessica-soho-rape-joke/>

<sup>27</sup> This paper is inspired by the work of Demeterio on the semiological study of Gloc-9's discography and the contradictions in social criticism. Through that study, Demeterio was able to point out the different contradictions that Gloc-9 provided in his songs, and he was also able to reveal the kind of awareness that Gloc-9 has when it comes to certain social realities.

<sup>28</sup> "Vice Ganda and the MMFF: How his Absence Took A Great Toll On the Overall Box Office Performance of MMFF 2020" LionheartTV, last modified January 2021, <https://www.lionheartv.net/2021/01/vice-ganda-and-the-mmff-how-his-absence-took-a-great-toll-on-the-overall-boxoffice-performance-of-mmff-2020/36>

<sup>29</sup> Feorillo Petronilo Demeterio, "Isang Semyolohikal na Pagsusuri sa mga Kontradiksiyong Nakapaloon sa Panlipunang Kritisismo ni Gloc-9," *Malay Journal* 26, no. 1 (2013): 17-35. Barthes pointed out seven rhetorical forms that circulate myths (see Barthes, 150-155). They are as follows: 1) The Inoculation or the admitting of small mistakes to conceal larger mistakes; 2) The privation of History so that the attention of the viewers would only focus on the present and disregard any anomalous event in the past; 3) Identification or shaping the representation of non-bourgeoisie practices to the terms of the bourgeoisie; 4) Tautology or reasoning through repeating the things that need explanation themselves; 5) Neither-norism or representing any situation with bifurcated alternatives where one alternative is good and the other is bad and there is a direct or indirect invitation to follow what is presented to be good; 6) The quantification of quality or thinking about something in the perspective of money and mathematics even though one is not applicable to it; and 7) The statement of fact, similar to tautology, only made more elegant because of its usage of traditional sayings.

movies, Vice Ganda played a gay character. Several out gay characters are also present in the movies where they all serve as supporting characters. In general, these films are characterized by the diversity of their characters and the presence of dynamic LGBTQ+ roles. For the most part, however, the support roles are only present for added comedic relief especially when the story would reach the serious points. The table below shows the movies and their corresponding secondary theme or plot.

Year	Movie Title	Theme
2010	"Petrang Kabayo"	Magical Realism
2011	"The Unkabogable Praybeyt Benjamin"	Action spoof, family drama
2012	"This Guy's in Love with you, Mare"	Romantic comedy
2012	"Sisterakas"	Family drama, slice of life
2013	"Girl, Boy, Bakla, Tomboy"	Family drama
2014	"The Amazing Praybeyt Benjamin"	Action spoof, family drama
2015	"Beauty and the Bestie"	Friendship, romance, slice of life
2016	"The Super Parental Guardians"	Friendship, romance, family drama
2017	"Gandarrapiddo: The Revenger Squad"	Superhero comedy
2018	"Fantastica"	Fantasy
2019	"The Mall, the Merrier"	Family comedy

**Table 1: Movies with Vice Ganda as Lead**

Through the table above, we see the diversity of Vice Ganda's movie themes. It ranges from magical realism, to fantasy, and to action spoofs. Nonetheless, the usual comedic relief that his movies provide is

present even when more serious topics such as family, friends, and romance are tackled. Out of the eleven movies, I chose to analyze five films in consideration of its availability on legal streaming platforms such as Netflix. These selected films touch on relevant social issues that intersect with the issue of homophobia in the Philippines: 1) “Sisterakas,” (2012)<sup>30</sup> 2) “The Amazing Praybeyt Benjamin,” (2014)<sup>31</sup> 3. “Beauty and the Bestie,” (2015)<sup>32</sup> 4) “The Super Parental Guardians,” (2016)<sup>33</sup> and 5) “Fantastica.” (2018).<sup>34</sup>

## Movie Themes

Male gay personalities have always been a part of the Filipino mainstream media.<sup>35</sup> Their presence typically comes in the form of comedic relief, and they usually serve as support characters to the protagonists in the movie. However, the movies of Vice Ganda take a different route. While it is true that comedy and satire is present, Vice Ganda’s movies places the gay character at the center of the narrative. In a way, their roles empower not only the gay character in the story but also gay people in real life. Such presence is indicative of how gay personalities have started to claim spaces in Filipino popular culture. We must, however, question if their representation prevents the persistence of homophobic stereotypes and microaggressions. In a study made by Goran Madzarevic and Maria Soto-Sanfiel about the positive representation of gay characters in a movie, they argued that such positive representations can contribute to reducing homophobia.<sup>36</sup> They recognized the capabilities of media narratives in changing the attitude and perspective of certain viewers towards

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<sup>30</sup> *Sisterakas*, directed by Wenn V. Deramas (Quezon City: ABS-CBN Film Productions, Inc. Viva Films, 2012), Netflix.

<sup>31</sup> *The Amazing Praybeyt Benjamin*, directed by Wenn V. Deramas (Quezon City: ABS-CBN Film Productions, Inc. Viva Films, 2014), Netflix.

<sup>32</sup> *Beauty and the Bestie*, directed by Wenn V. Deramas (Quezon City: ABS-CBN Film Productions, Inc. Viva Films, 2015), Netflix.

<sup>33</sup> *Super Parental Guardians*, directed by Joyce Bernal (Quezon City: ABS-CBN Film Productions, Inc. Viva Films, 2016), Netflix.

<sup>34</sup> *Fantastica*, directed by Barry Gonzalez (Quezon City: ABS-CBN Film Productions, Inc. Viva Films, 2018), Netflix.

<sup>35</sup> Payuyo, “The Portrayal,” 293.

<sup>36</sup> Goran Madzarevic, Maria T. Soto-Sanfiel, “Positive Representation of Gay Characters in Movies for Reducing Homophobia,” *Sexuality and Culture* 22, (2018): 909-930, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-018-9502-x>

social issues, and in particular, the issue of homophobia.<sup>37</sup> Through these narratives, the lives and experiences of the LGBTQ+ are presented, humanized, and explained. Featuring their lives raise awareness about the uniqueness of their experiences. And through identification, the audience gets to show empathy.<sup>38</sup>

In this section, I explain how the movies of Vice Ganda may have a positive representation of gay characters but also fall short in preventing the perpetuation of certain stereotypes that marginalize gays in the long run. Based on the reading of the five movies of Vice Ganda, three common themes stand out in the narratives: 1) Family dynamics and issues, 2) Friendships between a cisgendered man and a *bakla*, and 3) Romance. The following subsection discusses how effectively these themes are integrated into a movie where the lead character is a *bakla*. In this section, I also discuss where the movies fall short in the counterdiscourse against homophobia. These themes show the aspects of the *bakla's* life wherein they commonly experience marginalization and oppression, and where they seek acceptance, validation, and respect. Aside from the fact that these are the most common tropes in the movies of Vice Ganda, these aspects are nuanced as well.

### *Family Dynamics and Issues*

The themes of family and family issues are present in all the movies analyzed in this essay. It can be noticed that several family setups were shown from the usual and traditional nuclear family to a family which was created out of a mutual agreement. Vice Ganda's character in most of these movies begins with the introduction of their character's relationship to his family. The main character is usually an offspring who encounters certain external conflicts, and the family serves as a support system for the main character.

In *Sisterakas* (2012)<sup>39</sup>, Bernice (Vice Ganda's character) is a son born out of marital infidelity. Bernice's mother is a house helper, and she had an illicit relationship with her married boss. When the

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 910.

<sup>38</sup> Juan Jose Iguarta, Francisco Frutos, "Enhancing attitudes toward stigmatized groups with movies: Mediating and moderating processes of narrative persuasion," *International Journal of Communication* 11, (2017): 158-177

<sup>39</sup> *Sisterakas*, directed by Wenn V. Deramas (Quezon City: ABS-CBN Film Productions, Inc. Viva Films, 2012), Netflix.

relationship was exposed, it was revealed that Bernice's real father is the mother's boss. After the confrontation, Bernice and his mother were thrown out of the house. Motivated by anger, Bernice persisted to be successful in life and sought revenge for the maltreatment they encountered in the hands of the father's wife. Bernice's half-sister Detty (played by Ai-Ai De Las Alas) became the subject of revenge. Now an owner of a famous fashion company, Bernice hired Detty to be his personal secretary. Several conflicts arose between Bernice and Detty which they eventually resolved in the story.

In *The Amazing Praybeyt Benjamin* (2014)<sup>40</sup>, Benjie is now at the peak of his career as a soldier. He received national recognition after defeating a group of terrorists. The accolade that Benjie received led him to have a conflict with his family because of the former's constant neglect of responsibilities to the latter. The plot revolves around the moral permissibility of Benjie to disregard his family for the sake of the country. In the prequel *The Unkabogable: Praybeyt Benjamin* (2011)<sup>41</sup>, Benjie's sexual orientation is revealed through familial support.

In *Beauty and the Bestie* (2015)<sup>42</sup>, Erika became the guardian of his sister's children because his sister left and wanted to search for her identity. Erika took all the jobs that he could take to raise his sister's children. Erika even took on a dangerous undercover job. Eventually, Erika's sister returned, and they reconciled and resolved all the issues that they had in the beginning.

Taking the almost-similar narrative from the previous movie, Vice Ganda as Ariel in *The Super Parental Guardians* (2016)<sup>43</sup> also took on the role of being a guardian to two children. This time, the children of his best friend. With almost the same narrative, Ariel took care of the children and did everything to protect them. The only conflict here is that the mother of the two children was murdered and Ariel has a

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<sup>40</sup> *The Amazing Praybeyt Benjamin*, directed by Wenn V. Deramas (Quezon City: ABS-CBN Film Productions, Inc. Viva Films, 2014), Netflix.

<sup>41</sup> In this movie, Benjie's sexuality has been an issue as he joined the military forces. He suffered from homophobia and microaggressions which was then resolved in the next movie.

<sup>42</sup> *Beauty and the Bestie*, directed by Wenn V. Deramas (Quezon City: ABS-CBN Film Productions, Inc. Viva Films, 2015), Netflix.

<sup>43</sup> *Super Parental Guardians*, directed by Joyce Bernal (Quezon City: ABS-CBN Film Productions, Inc. Viva Films, 2016), Netflix.

love-hate relationship with the former's younger sibling, Paco (played by Coco Martin).<sup>44</sup>

Employing magical realism and fantasy as a genre of this movie, *Fantastica* (2018)<sup>45</sup> also discussed a familial narrative where Belat struggled with his mother to keep the carnival that they are maintaining for a long time. The struggle enabled mother and Belat to grow closer to one another. As the story progressed, they were able to eventually resolve the conflict. Although there is a mention and concrete instances of homophobia and microaggression in these movies, there is no clear and concrete solution offered to address such concerns. The issue was left unresolved as the plot moved to another part of the story.

Vice Ganda's movies are nuanced when it comes to the discussion of family matters. From marital issues to sibling rivalries, the movies of Vice Ganda operate on such tropes. Although such movies show that the gay character is just like any other human person in the experience of certain familial concerns, we can see that such movies employed inoculation and privation of history. It concealed the other problems mentioned in passing in the movie such as marital infidelity, teenage pregnancy, homophobia, etc.

### *Romance and Friendships*

The theme about friendships between a cisgendered heterosexual man and a *bakla* was discussed in all movies except for "Sisterakas." In all these movies, the lead character is always paired with a cisgendered heterosexual man either as a sidekick or an unrequited love interest. In *The Amazing Praybeyt Benjamin*, Benjie is seen as someone who has an attraction to his superior who eventually becomes a good friend. In *Beauty and the Bestie*, Erika had secret romantic feelings for his best friend. When he confessed such feelings, they drifted apart. In *Super Parental Guardians*, Ariel has an explicit sexual attraction to his best friend's younger sibling who is a gangster. In *Fantastica*, Belat is shown to be attracted to the conventionally attractive prince in the movie.

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<sup>44</sup> Coco Martin is one of the constant sidekick and unofficial love interest of Vice Ganda in some of his movies.

<sup>45</sup> *Fantastica*, directed by Barry Gonzalez (Quezon City: ABS-CBN Film Productions, Inc. Viva Films, 2018), Netflix.

Both Vice Ganda and the cisgendered man's character are always given ample screen time. Such screen time either pushes the story to its climax or gives some sort of a backstory on the unrequited love that explains why such events took place in the narrative. Although the exchange between them is usually filled with witty sexual advances and/or homophobic punchlines, the comedic exchange further engages the viewers to be more invested with the flow of the story. Furthermore, their characters usually end up as friends which provides a very wholesome view of the relationship between a cisgendered man and a *bakla*.

Through these movies, we have seen a unique relationship dynamic. One of the strategies of these movies is to always cast a conventionally attractive man to serve as the friend and/or love interest of the main character. This strategy is surprisingly effective because it adds to the humor of the show through witty banters and swoon-worthy moments in the movie. Once again, inoculation and privation of history are used in such movies because they concealed the problems of hegemonic masculinity and homophobia. Furthermore, it refuses to discuss such topics because of attempts to turn a serious matter into something satirical. Apparently, satire, as a way of storytelling, is used in portraying the stories of the gay character. The movies of Vice Ganda are examples of how humor can be used to show another reality in the life of the LGBTQ+ people. It actually shows that gay people can lead happy lives.<sup>46</sup> This manner of presenting is arguably effective in terms of gaining the audience's sympathy to see the LGBTQ+ community in another light. It also humanizes the narrative of the life of the *bakla*.

The movies of Vice Ganda, however, in the attempts to make a more satirical approach to the life of the LGBTQ+ community, also employed problematic stereotypes of the *bakla*. Although there is an obvious manifestation that satire is used to narrate the story, it is, unfortunately, done in a way that is problematic. In the long run, the gay character is at the losing end because the portrayal of these stereotypes creates a distorted image not only in the eyes of the larger community but also their own.<sup>47</sup> Satire and comedy has its dangers of normalizing homophobia and microaggressions if done incorrectly. Suffice to say that "a negative representation of the homosexual

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<sup>46</sup> Morales, "Changing the Face," 168

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 168.

community will have negative consequences on the members of the community".<sup>48</sup> The portrayal of these stereotypes, although inevitable for some, can undermine all the efforts done by those who worked for the counterdiscourse against homophobia. After all, Vice Ganda's voice is a voice that is heard by the viewers, particularly the general Filipino viewer coming from different walks of life. The proliferation of these movies in the popular media may overshadow the existing efforts to consistently create safe spaces for the LGBTQ+ community. Hence, it is also important that critical viewing of these films must be promoted to the viewers in order to combat stereotypes and microaggressions.

### **The Distorted Voice**

Through the analysis of Vice Ganda's movies, several inconsistencies and problematic representations can be seen. Although the very goal of these movies is entertainment through a positive representation of the lives of the LGBTQ+ community, several remarks tend to perpetuate certain stereotypes and microaggressions against gay people in the Philippines. It engenders a limiting idea of gay people that may be a cause of generalizations from those who are not fully aware of the intricacies and fluidity of gender discourse. For instance, in all movies, the characters played by Vice Ganda may have the tendency to be described as someone overly attracted to men in a highly sexualized way, which then results in the perpetuation of stereotypes accorded to gays. In the counterdiscourse against homophobia, one cannot deny the contributions that Vice Ganda has made to the movement. However, one cannot also deny the aspects where Vice Ganda became inconsistent. Now to answer the question of whether Vice Ganda is a voice against homophobia in the Philippines, my answer is that the voice of Vice Ganda falls short in preventing the perpetuation of certain stereotypes of gays, particularly the stereotype that has something to do with gay's alleged and particular sexual behaviors. The formulaic character tropes of Vice Ganda hinder a well-rounded understanding of gay people in the Philippines. Furthermore, the voice of Vice Ganda falls short in preventing the creation of a misunderstood image for gays, and eventually the LGBTQ+ community. Moreover, such a voice does not prevent the hasty generalizations and stereotypes prevalent in the Philippines.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 169.

Nevertheless, the influence of Vice Ganda is so powerful that it creates new images of gays in the Philippines. As these new images get created, however, Vice Ganda's responsibility in stifling the oppressed and marginalized voices of the LGBTQ+ community may be raised. Utmost responsibility must be accorded to such portrayals in order to reach the goal of eradicating homophobia.

In relation to movements and studies concerning LGBTQ+ issues, recognizing the inconsistencies in the voice of Vice Ganda provides an opportunity for further elucidation of the plight of the oppressed community. Such critical analysis allows audiences to be aware of their views on the members as well as the representations of the LGBTQ+ community.

## **Conclusion**

The counterdiscourse against homophobia continues to persist mainly because the voices of the LGBTQ+ community in the Philippines are still being silenced by homophobic stereotypes and microaggressions. The counterdiscourse is a way for them to let their voices be heard. Although members of the LGBTQ+ community have started claiming space in society in general, they still face various forms of oppression. Hate crimes continue to happen, the laws protecting the LGBTQ+ community remain scarce, and efforts to make these laws possible still prove to be an ordeal. In general, there are still a lot of voices from the members of the LGBTQ+ community that remain silenced and unheard. In every way possible, platforms with the capacity to influence such as mainstream media must continue doing their part in raising awareness.

Personalities with a loud voice must rethink the ways by which they use their platform to raise awareness. Their popularity can be a tool for influencing others and shaping the overall consciousness of society. Vice Ganda is an example of such a personality. Being an influential artist, he has so much to say and contribute to preventing the persistence of homophobia in the Philippines. Such influence that Vice Ganda possesses shows the potential of his voice in breaking homophobic stereotypes and microaggressions. However, as he uses his voice, he may have failed to be sensitive to the plight of others who also experience oppression and silencing. Nonetheless, he can certainly be a voice that can echo the plight of the LGBTQ+ community through his platform. Vice Ganda can provide and echo a louder voice

for the LGBTQ+ community especially if it is done with utmost dedication, sincerity, and genuineness. Be that as it may, these silenced and marginalized voices are still heard albeit the fact that it is not that distinct. Hence, to make such voices even more audible, collective efforts must also be done because eradicating homophobia is a two-way process. The popular media's effort will not be sufficient if the public will not educate themselves enough. Hence, responsible consumption of these media contents must be done, for the voices of the LGBTQ+ community to be fully heard and recognized.

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