

# Film as corrective social spaces in Southern Asia: Trans persons as oppressed characters with superpowers from below

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**Abstract:** This paper analyzed four films produced and released between 2003-2016 in Southern Asia, specifically Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, and India that revolves around a transgender character with extraordinary abilities. The selected films are *The Adventures of Iron Pussy* (Thailand), *Zsazsa Zaturannah Ze Moveeh* (Philippines), *Madame X* (Indonesia), and *Arddhanaari* (India). sought to answer the question “How does gender oppression in selected religious countries south of Asia give rise to trans persons with superpowers or extraordinary abilities? Specifically, the study sought to surface experiences of oppression of the persons behind the characters with extraordinary abilities, their anti-oppression powers, the structures of power they undermine, and the resolutions to the oppression they addressed. Through repeated viewing and textual analysis (via thematic analysis), the study found that the protagonists’ experiences of rejection and abandonment, desire for love, and external and immediate threats to safety were the main sources of their motivation to be heroic. However, their actions, while nurtured and exercised from below, seek only to correct and not overturn an oppressive system.

**Keywords:** Trans, transgender, film, power from below, oppression

## I. Introduction

The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation or GLAAD is a US-based non-governmental organization established to work against inappropriate representation of LGBT people in the media. The GLAAD plays an important role in that “By and large, the media is unethical in its portrayal of transgender characters” (Jobe, 2013, p. 30). As they are usually stereotyped, “the struggles faced by the transgender community are downplayed and treated as little more than comedic props” (p. 30). In 2020, Human Rights Campaign reported that at least 44 transgender or gender non-conforming people died because of violence targeting Black and Latinx transgender women. Since 2013, more than 200 transgender and gender non-conforming people have been killed in the US alone (Human Rights Campaign, 2020). Because violence against trans persons has become more frequent, “every breath a trans person takes is an act of revolution” (Retro Report, 2015). This act of revolution, manifested in the media, has led Retro Report to assert that the visibility of transgender people is now becoming more mainstream after decades-long struggle for transgender rights.

## II. Review of Literature

**Anti-Trans Stigma and Violence.** Human Rights Campaign (2020) reported that violence against transgender people begins with stigma that manifests as lack of support in the family, hostile political climate, and cultural marginalization and invisibility. Stigma risk factors are increased by intimate sex partner and sexual

assault, engagement in survival sex work, poverty and homelessness, and physical and mental health disparities. Anti-trans stigma intensifies stigma risk factors and deny opportunities for education, employment, mobility, and health, justice, and legal services (which further contribute to the stigma risk factors). Ultimately, all of these intensify violence against transgender persons. The Human Rights Campaign posits that anti-transgender stigma and discrimination can be removed by “embracing people of all genders for who they are” (p. 3). The fight against anti-trans stigma and discrimination is celebrated during the commemoration of the Stonewall Riots of 1969 when police raided the Stonewall Inn in New York City’s Greenwich Village where gay, lesbian, and transgender people come together and transgender persons resisted police arrest (Pruitt, 2020). It is also highlighted during the commemoration of Matthew Shepard’s Killing in 1998 - “one of the worst anti-gay hate crimes in American history... (which) precipitated a national backlash against hyper-macho culture and tacit tolerance of homophobia” (Bindel, 2014, para. 1). To help remove anti-trans stigma, November has become known as the Trans Awareness Month; November 13-19 as the Trans Awareness Week; November 20 as the Transgender Day of Remembrance; and March 31 as Trans Day of Visibility.

**Anti-Trans Violence in the Philippines.** In the Philippines, violence against transgender women was highlighted in 2014 by the killing of Jennifer Laude by the American Marine Lance Cpl. Joseph Scott Pemberton who was released from his detention in the Philippines last September 19, 2020 (Gomez, 2020). In the Philippines, at least 50 transgender and gender non-binary persons have been murdered since 2010 and no national law against the discrimination of marginalized genders exist (Redfern, 2021). Redfern wrote:

A trans woman rarely has the legal right to complain if she is denied an interview on the basis of her sexuality or turned down for a position in a bank or a school (or a restaurant or a shop) because of her looks. If she does find a job, she has a 30 per cent chance of being bullied at work, according to a United Nations study in 2018. She can’t tick “female” when filling out a form or update her birth certificate, and she can’t marry a cisgender man. No data is collected on how likely she is to experience physical or sexual abuse, but she’s twice as likely to contemplate suicide, according to a 2014 report in the *The Philippine Journal of Psychology*, although even death is unlikely to bring the discrimination to an end. Instead, “dead naming” will commence across social media and in the press, as strangers call her by the name and gender that others assigned her at birth, her true identity framed in inverted commas and undermined. (para. 5)

**Anti-Trans Violence in Indonesia.** The survey conducted by the Wahid Foundation and Lembaga Survey Indonesia revealed that the LGBT group was the most disliked minority group in Indonesia (Sarhini & Zakiah, 2018). Sarhini and Zakiah added that in 2017 the LBH Masyarakat (Community Legal Aid) reported that 973 persons were victims of gender-based violence and that trans women experienced the most violence (715 out of 973). In the same year, at least three transgender women were murdered after having sexual relations with their perpetrators (who considered women less superior to men). In 2018, transgender women were reported to be the most frequent victims of police violence, often humiliated for being feminine. Furthermore:

Despite the fact that transwomen have become the most vulnerable group in Indonesia, the government tends to deny the violence against transwomen happens. It is also difficult to document the violence against transwomen because victims are often intimidated and oppressed, both by law enforcement agencies and society at large when they try to report their cases. Violence continues, justice is delayed. (para. 8)

**Anti-Trans Violence in India.** Violence against transgender women are perpetrated in India as a result of the British considering them as threat to British culture and polity (Shaikh, 2020). A survey by National AIDS Control Organization in 2014-2015 revealed that almost 1000 transgender persons experienced sexual violence during the said period (Henry, 2020). A study by Humsafar Trust in 2017-2018 revealed that 59

percent of the members of the transgender community experience violence, mostly in the cities (Tapasya, 2020). In 2020, Indian transgender activist Sangeetha was murdered in her home. The year before, a transgender temple priest was beheaded. Tapasya added:

The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill was passed in the Lower House in August 2019... it does not give transgender people the right to self-identify their gender without having had sex reassignment surgery....In addition to that, the provision for punishment for serious crimes committed against transgender people is substantially less severe than for the same crimes committed against cisgendered people. The new bill also denies reservation to transgender, intersex and gender non-conforming people, and requires them to be living with their birth families which are the site of physical and psychological violence in most cases. (para. 10, 12)

**Anti-Trans Violence in Thailand.** Thailand is commonly considered as the most queer-friendly countries in Southeast Asia. However, murders of lesbians and gender-variant women were reported between 2006 and 2012 (Tan, 2012). Tan explained the cases were dismissed as crimes of passion, or the fault of the victims. Thailand has no law against hate crimes and gender-based discrimination. Furthermore, Salva (2016) wrote:

... there is no law against homosexuality in Thailand and transgender people can express their identity publicly without fear of persecution. But the rights of the community are far from equal to those of the rest of society. For starters, transgender individuals are not legally recognized, while marriage between two people of the same sex has no legal validity. (para. 3)

**Religion and Anti-Trans Discrimination.** It is worth noting that the Philippines, Indonesia, India, and Indonesia are not just southern Asian countries; they are also cradles of religiosity in the region. The Philippines is largely Christian and the only dominantly Christian country in the region. Indonesia is the largest Muslim country not just in the region but also in the world. India is the cradle of Hinduism and is dominantly a Hindu country. Thailand, meanwhile, is dominantly a Buddhist country. Religion plays a key role in the traditions of these four Asian countries and informs the manner gender minorities are portrayed in the media. Zed (2016) wrote that while women are considered more religious than men, women do not get the same treatment as men in major religions. Religions, mostly having male leaders, put women (and other gender minorities) at a disadvantage when patriarchal institutional mechanisms bestow more power and privilege to men (Chauhan, 2014). Johnson (in Becker, 1999) explained:

What drives Patriarchy as a system - what fuels competition, aggression, and oppression - is a dynamic relationship between control and fear. Patriarchy encourages men to seek security, status, and other rewards through control; to fear other men's ability to control and harm them; and to identify being in control as both their best defense against loss and humiliation and the surest route to what they need and desire. In this sense, although we usually think of patriarchy in terms of women and men, it is more about what goes on among men. The oppression of women is certainly an important part of patriarchy, but, paradoxically, it may not be the point of patriarchy. (p. 24)

Klingorová and Havlíček (2015) found that gender inequalities, defined by Ridgeway (2004) as “culturally and socially created differences between men and women (and other gender minorities) when both sexes do not have the same share in the decision making and wealth of a society” (p. 1), were found lowest among the non-religiously affiliated, average among members of Christian and Buddhist communities, and highest among Hindus and Muslims. Deprived of legal protection and religious recognition, transgender persons have taken the road of media to seek social support.

**Transgender Media Visibility and Support.** Colby (n.d.) wrote that Traci Gillig, Professor of the Edward R. Murrow College of Communication, found in 2018 that “exposure to transgender characters on television (selected episodes in *Royal Pains* featuring an adolescent teen) influences viewers’ attitudes and behavior toward transgender individuals as outlined in their 2018 research” (para. 2). Zitser (2021), writing about *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, underscored the experiences of Gen Zers who were introduced to non-binary gender identities by the show. It gave them confidence and the permission to explore trans identities. Gottmik, the first trans man in the show performed by the 24-year old Kade Gottlieb, was perceived by Gen Zers as introducing and normalizing “transness” (para. 26). In 2018, RuPaul Andre Charles, the producer of the show, received backlash after saying that he would “probably not” include trans women in the show. Audiences perceived this as exclusionary and transphobic. Gottmik, “assigned female who then transitioned to identifying as a man performing as a woman”, helps normalize conversations about queer and transgressive gender identities. However, the show has mainly highlighted male queerness, even while eight trans women have already become part of the show since its second season (Neveling, 2020).

American Ryan Murphy’s *Glee* and *Pose* provided space for trans women visibility. Trans women characters, performed by real-life trans women, portrayed mothers of “houses” or surrogate families of queer identities participating in the ball culture of New York City in the late 1980s (Lopez, 2019) and their surrogate children. Lopez wrote that *Pose* made television history by “having one of largest casts of transgender actors in series regular roles... (and) the largest recurring cast of LGBTQ+ actors ever for a scripted series” (para. 16). *Glee*, meanwhile, introduced its first transgender character in 2012 through the black character named Unique (Kane, 2012). Later, it also introduced a white trans man character named Coach Beiste. The displacement of Unique upon the entry of Coach Bieste, drew attention to the often-ignored intersectionality of gender and race (Mey, 2015). Similarly, the casting of cisgender actor Denis O’Hare for the role of trans woman character named Liz Taylor in another Murphy show titled *American Horror Story: Hotel*, drew attention to the impropriety of having a cisgender man take the limited roles available to transgender actors (Damshenas, 2021). Considering his body of work, Islip (2020) wrote that Murphy used his power to improve queer storytelling and visibility.

**Transgender Superhero.** Beyond the small screen, comics provided another space for trans characters to emerge. According to Persaud (2018), as early as 1978 DC Comics already had a transgender character by the name of Shvaugn Erin. However, Cook (2015) asserted that “there are no transgender superheroes in a mainstream comic universe” (para. 1). Recently, transgender woman and activist Nicole Maines was cast as the character Nia Nal or Dreamer in the fourth season of the CW action series *Supergirl*. She is considered the first TV trans superhero under the DC Comics TV universe (Keveney, 2018). Maines shared that having a superhero on TV that looks like her “would have been an entire new level of validation in myself to think that I can be a superhero” (para. 2). Meanwhile, The Marvel cinematic universe is releasing its first transgender superhero via the trans female character Sera who is originally from a group of all-male angels (Ancharites) in Thor’s world (BBC, 2020). A trans woman was sought in 2020 for the role.

In the Philippines, *Zsazsa Zaturannah* is the first comic-based character with extraordinary abilities that was released in 2002. Created by gay Filipino illustrator Carlo Vergara, *Zsazsa Zaturannah* is the female superhero that emerges from the effeminate hairdresser named Ada when he ingests a rock from outer space. Its film adaptation was directed by gay director Joel Lamangan and released in 2006 with the title *Zsazsa Zaturannah Ze Moveeh* (Bugg, 2007) - starring a male actor who first came out as gay in 2006 and as a trans woman in 2009.

In 2003, the musical-action-comedy film *The Adventures of Iron Pussy*, directed by gay filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasethakul (Morris, 2010) and Michael Shaowanasai, was released in Thailand. Starring the

openly gay Thai-American actor Shaowanasai (Musiket, 2010), the story revolves around a gay character who crossdresses into a female secret agent named Iron Pussy.

In Indonesia, the film titled *Madame X*, directed by LGBT activist Lucky Kuswandi (Diani, 2014) and starring gender non-conforming actor Aming Sugandhi, was released in 2010. The film revolves around a hairdresser named Adam who becomes Madame X after joining a traditional dance troupe (Lee, 2012). The film is considered a benchmark of Indonesian gender liberalism in film.

In 2016, the action drama film *Arddhanaari* was released in India. Written and directed by Bhanushanker Chowdary, the film revolves around a man, played by a cisgender actor Arjun Ambati, who disguises himself as a hijra to avenge the death of his wife and child and fight against social injustice (Indiaglitz, 2016) that caused it. In Hindu mythology Arddhanari is one of Shiva's avatars who is half man and half woman (Dharmadhikari, 2015).

Given that the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, and India are Asian countries defined heavily by their religious culture, the films above may be considered both a reflection and subversion of their respective dominant religion-biased cultures. In particular, the films reflect spaces in their respective cultures that allow and encourage the production of transgender superheroes.

**Philosophical Underpinning.** This study is guided by James Scott's (1985, 1990 in Goringe and Rafanel, 2015) notion of human agency from below. Scott moved away from traditional ideations of power that associate it with dominion and possession. It resisted notions of power as achieved through domination, leading to a zero sum, existing in macro-structural systems governing all societies and independent of or external to individual interactions. Instead, he underscores that those rendered isolated by structures and systems of control "tend to create social spaces... where the oppressed can talk in comparative safety... from persecution and... fear of coercion... (in) backstage areas (that) allow for the emergence of ... 'the hidden script' - people's critiques, grumbles, rumours and visions of different worlds" (p. 6). These are social spaces that give rise to super trans characters in films in countries dominated by patriarchal religions.

**Statement of the Problem.** This study, as a result, sought to describe these spaces to surface assertions of power by gender minorities, especially trans persons, that connect with ordinary people's lives in the form of super trans characters. This paper sought to answer the question "How does gender oppression in selected religious countries south of Asia give rise to super trans characters in selected films from 2003 to 2016? Specifically, the study sought to surface experiences of oppression of the persons behind the characters with extraordinary abilities, their anti-oppression powers, the structures of power they undermine, and the resolutions to the oppression they addressed.

### III. Methodology

This study is an investigation that arises from the Critical Paradigm. Through a Narrative Inquiry approach, it examines four purposively sampled films - films that narrate the lives of transgender characters with extraordinary abilities (or super powers). This is a qualitative research that looks into four films as text. The selected films are *The Adventures of Iron Pussy* (Weerasethakul & Shaowanasai, 2003) from Thailand, *Zsazsa Zaturnnah Ze Moveeh* (Lamangan, 2006) from the Philippines, *Madame X* (Kuswandi, 2010) from Indonesia, and *Arddhanaari* (Chowdari, 2016) from India. The films were accessed online through DVD (*The Adventures of Iron Pussy* and *Madame X*) and YouTube (*Zsazsa Zaturnnah Ze Moveeh* and *Arddhanaari*). The films were viewed by the researcher at least three times and were analyzed separately and collectively, thereafter, through the lens of Scott's Power from Below and using thematic analysis as analytical technique.

#### IV. Results

This discussion uses the single pronoun “they”, “their”, and “them” to refer to either the trans characters with extraordinary abilities (not super “heroes” or super “heroines” to avoid binary pronouns not appropriate for non-binary gender identities) or the persons behind them (except the person that created *Arddhanaari*). For the case of *Arddhanaari*, whose alterego is heterosexual, the paper uses the same trans pronouns in so far as *Arddhanaari* is a trans character which was intended to be unidentifiable with its alterego. Also, because *Arddhanaari* is interpreted here as the alterego’s merging with his wife’s spirit, in honor of her courage and dedication to his cause, and a manifestation of the spirit of *Adhanari*, one of Shiva’s many avatars that is half male and half female, which he intended to symbolize, *Arddhanaari* is considered as having a larger meaning beyond just an extension of a heterosexual man seeking justice. The above pronouns, therefore, appear less limiting or more inclusive. The sequence of the presentation of the findings below follows the sequence of release of the films.

##### **Film 1: *The Adventures of Iron Pussy***

**Experiences of oppression.** The person behind the persona (PBP) of Iron Pussy (IP) works as a clerk of a convenience store. Before becoming a cross-dressing and multi-talented secret agent for the Thai government, the PBP formerly worked as a gogo boy. IP is presented as a woman in good standing with Buddha and the government, and most importantly, in search of romantic love. PBP, following a monk, takes on a mission in a Buddhist temple to investigate the suspected illegal transactions of a man (Mr. Henry) who later turns out to be the biological brother of the PBP. As IP uncovers the truth behind Mr. Henry and his mother, IP’s loyal motorcycle driver, who owes IP his life, follows the superhero and ends up saving IP. IP falls in love with Mr. Henry, unaware of their biological relationship, and experiences tragedy in its revelation towards the end of the story. It seems that IP’s search for romantic love is a search for family at its core.

**Anti-oppression powers.** Prior to the main mission IP undertakes, IP is shown as saving a woman being harassed by a group of men and, in another incident, rescuing the man who hostaged a woman (who later becomes the motorcycle driver sidekick of IP). IP comes to the rescue with martial arts and role playing skills. However, while doing undercover work for the government, IP does nothing for the oppressed maids of Mr. Henry’s household. Instead, IP saves Mr. Henry during a hunting activity in the woods, and his mother after he holds her captive in a hideaway cave. By learning about the criminal activities of Mr. Henry and preventing his later actions, IP was able to counter the distribution of the mind-control drug Mr. Henry was developing.

**Structures of power undermined from below.** Because IP works for the government, the task at hand was to accept the covert assignment from the State. This means that IP’s power is directed towards the enemies of the State, specifically criminal elements like Mr. Henry. IP takes on the identity of a maid or servant in a mansion and operates in the guise of a powerless person within a rich person’s domain. As a maid, IP had to deal with the oppressive orders of a female supervisor who looked down on them. Gaining the interest of Mr. Henry, the son of her matriarch employer, IP evades his critical eye and gains their approval. IP’s domain of operation, thus, was limited to the network of the elites who came together during parties that serve as cover for their meetings on illegal activities.

**Resolution of oppression.** The structures of oppression that were highlighted in the film were those that exist between men and women (revealed in the form of a male employer sexually harassing newly hired maids as they were being screened for employment in his household), and between supervisors and employees (government agents looking down on gogoboy like the PBP of IP; and the housekeeper’s condescending treatment of her new recruits). IP does not question these structures and uses them to accomplish the mission. In the end, what was resolved was the mystery of IP’s past and relationship with kins. IP, and the romantic

attraction of IP to a man who turn out to be a biological brother. The oppressor dies of a death resulting from IP's personal decision.

### **Film 2: *Zsazsa Zaturannah Ze Moveeh***

Adrian or Ada, the person behind *Zsazsa Zaturannah (ZZ)*, is a heart-broken hairdresser who moves from Manila to an unidentified rural setting after a typhoon flooded their community. In the new home, Ada's is hit by a rock from outer space with the word "Zaturannah" engraved on it. Ada ingests the rock, through the prodding of a sidekick influenced by a Filipino comic superhero Darna who ingests a small talisman, shouts the word "Zaturannah" and finds out power. The extra-terrestrial talisman transforms Ada into a bombshell superhero. Dodong is Ada's love interest. Masculine Dodong is shown to have an attraction to effeminate Ada before *ZZ* came into the picture. Soon, the community encounters a giant frog the attack of zombies. Later, she encounters a group of extraterrestrials with female human forms who are out to forcibly takeover planet Earth. They have the power to transform all male humans into their female counterparts. They are also supremacist feminists (Amazonistas) who get look down on all males. In the end, *ZZ* throws her talisman to the main antagonist's (Queen Femina Suarestellar Baroux) mouth and transforms her into a male humanoid form with a pig's head ("chauvinist pig" commonly used as a slur for excessively prejudiced people). Dodong finds out that Ada and *ZZ* are the same person but confesses his love to the former, nonetheless. They move back to Manila after the alien defeat and gets hit by a new outer space rock, foreshadowing a film sequel.

**Experiences of oppression.** Ada is oppressed by the memory of a homosexual-hating father. Ada is also oppressed by the belief that noone can truly love transgender people because they cannot bear children. Ada decides to repress feelings for because that belief and seemingly past experiences of rejection. Ada confronts her zombie-fied father about their strained relationship during the attack of the zombies but the latter refuses to change until the end because Ada remains unable to give him a grandchild. Biological motherhood is presented as something that people like Ada cannot achieve and for that they should be condemned even beyond the grave. *ZZ*, with the persistence of Ada, continues to fight against human enemies despite that.

**Anti-oppression powers.** The powers of *ZZ* are seemingly all just physical, at first glance. However, those powers enable Ada to find courage and strength she has never asserted before, transforming Ada from the outside in. Beyond Ada, *ZZ*'s powers save countless members of their community from physical harm. Since the day *ZZ* used her powers, Dodong begins to show greater attraction towards Ada; worrying about Ada everytime *ZZ* appeared. Ada's use of the alien talisman increased her interactions with Dodong but in the form of *ZZ*. That said, *ZZ*'s power drew Ada and Dodong together especially in scenarios where people in the community were in danger. This external power slowly releases Ada from personal reservations and frustrations, especially in relation to romantic love. As *ZZ* rescues others, Ada is given the opportunity to transcend self-oppression (that women in the community did not seem to suffer from). The talisman that releases *ZZ* from Ada, also releases the latter from self-oppressive tendencies that changed her fate in romantic love.

**Structures of power undermined from below.** Realizing Ada's power as *ZZ*, the former becomes aware of power that lies beyond the four walls of the beauty salon. *ZZ*'s power created for Ada a public realm the latter normally avoids but other people use to assert power over other members of the community. *ZZ* recovers for Ada the public domains of power that leads back to the latter's internal universe. By becoming more internally capacitated, Ada is drawn out of her emotional disability and reservations (showing *ZZ*'s lack of shame while wearing a bikini costume inside a church). Ada was empowered to face the spite of queer bashers from the community, and challenged them to fight zombies and queer stigma [to which people respond with the double entendre "*Sasama ako sa bakla* (I will go with/fight with/become a companion of queers)] like trans persons like Didi can.

ZZ realizes that she cannot fight zombies completely on her own so she engages the priest or the religious leader to equip the people with holy water (popularly believed to ward away demons and evil spirits), thereby subverting the religious antagonism against gender minorities using its own symbols and rituals. As such, ZZ was able to empower people using their commonly held beliefs and becomes socially, not just physically, powerful. She mobilized people towards their own liberation, despite the risk of death, even if the enemies have powers that were beyond their capacity to overcome individually and as a community. ZZ defeats the zombies with the community by forming a cross figure in front of the church, suggesting that ZZ is capable of mobilizing local resources, including religion, to fight ghosts of the past (including unchanging queer stigma symbolized by Ada's zombie father). ZZ's power to influence men and village simpletons threaten external or foreign powers who were flaunting Western English accents. Surprisingly, the national government is not part of the narrative of the film. They seemed unnecessary given ZZ's presence; hence, ZZ's power also liberated a local community from the practice of power by and influence of the State.

**Resolution of oppression.** Ada realized that Dodong's ultimate love was not for ZZ. Dodong loved Ada more. Ada also realizes that ZZ is no longer a separate persona at the end of the story. Unlike before, where disaster or/and heartbreak forced Ada to leave and move somewhere else, the movie ends with Ada gladly leaving the community with a heart that can love a man, regardless of his readiness to leave everything behind to love back. Ultimately, as ZZ, Ada releases the community from its incapacity to unify when fighting problem. ZZ also releases Ada from the fear of rejection or loving unconditionally.

### **Film 3: *Madame X***

The PBP of *Madame X* (MX), Adam, is a hairdresser who ends up adopted by a traditional Indonesian dance troupe after their violent arrest from a night club with other gender minorities. Adam's co-worker dies after being thrown off the truck after their arrest and during their transport to an unknown destination. Adam, after being thrown off the truck and rescued, is trained as a dancer by a former military man (with a trans woman spouse) who forms a paramilitary group disguised as a cultural dance troupe. His spouse gets killed in a violent attack by a religious group during a major cultural presentation. The group was led by a man who humiliated after being found out practicing bondage by Adam's co-dancer. After the attack, Adam trains further to avenge their group's demise while their paramilitary group's founder grieves his loss. Their female co-trainee falls prey to a human trafficking group operated by an anti-trans political candidate (who turns out to be Adam's childhood friend who gets marked with an "X" as a child after being found playing with Adam). Adam's nemesis has links with a group of mysterious women with superpowers and a sheik with a crime syndicate trafficking poor women who want to work abroad as domestics. As MX, Adam saves friends and puts an end to the political candidate who has superpowers. Adam ends up reopening their hairdressing business and working as a trans crime fighter by night saving trans women in distress.

**Experiences of oppression.** Adam experienced harassment and discrimination at the hands of an anti-trans militant group that ended up killing her trans friend and co-worker. Adam was sexually abused by a truck driver. Adam and her queer dance group was attacked by a male religious leader who has a double life and links to the anti-trans militant group, a triad of superwomen trafficking poor women, and a middle eastern crime syndicate buying trafficked females. Adam's oppression as a trans person is linked to the plight of other powerless women and the criminal operations of more powerful but evil women disguised as privileged members of society. Their oppression comes from the actions of a web of oppressive groups that want to take control of the country and its gender minority groups. Gender oppression is politically motivated and supported by deceptive radical fundamentalist groups. The anti-trans operations cost Adam three friends.

**Anti-oppression powers.** MX is empowered by a tech-savvy cultural group, founded by a queer couple, which trains Adam to be a traditional dancer with exceptional martial arts abilities and gadgets akin to

Batman's or James Bond's. The martial arts movement is hidden under the guise of traditional dance choreography. Adam's transformation from a broken trans victim to a courageous trans savior was made possible by the caring and support of queer community members who are passionate about traditional dance and fighting anti-trans groups. MX's way of fighting oppression is through physical counter-attacks on physically violent oppressors. However, instead of proactive action against oppressors, MX is reactive - acting only when vulnerable people fall prey to evildoers. She seems particularly sensitive to calls for help from gender minorities in distress doing the rounds of the city at night when they are most vulnerable. She is not a hero who acts towards structural change.

**Structures of power undermined from below.** MX is a crime fighter in leather. MX fights elements that lie outside of the legal system. Through Ada's personal circumstances from below, Ada is vulnerable to the operations of crime syndicates that penetrate current structures of power like migrant worker agencies that promise women livelihood, and salons where trans beauticians attend to social climbers and socialite wannabes. Gender minorities like Adam are often targets of exploitative groups taking advantage of cracks in the system, including the electoral system. It is these spaces where organized crime integrate with the flawed system that MX is able to access and act on. It is not clear whether legitimate structures of government are involved with criminal elements; however, the film suggests that criminal elements are able to lurk and operate behind the flaws of the system. MX does not attend to these evildoers working in legitimate political spaces; however, MX's focus is on saving the lives of endangered gender minorities from below.

**Resolution of oppression.** Madame X was given the power to disable physical attackers where they operate in secret. With enough advanced technology and committed staff, they can find these criminal elements in hiding and those visibly in action. After realizing that the man behind their arrest and the death and trafficking of their friends was their childhood friend who experienced physical harm due to queer stigma, Madame X goes beyond their longstanding pain and dedicates themselves to being a crime fighter who can help prevent gender-related crimes.

#### **Film 4: Arddhanaari**

The PBP of Arddhanaari is a heterosexual family man with a wife and a baby. Before becoming Arddhanaari he is shown to help oppressed wives by physically punishing lazy husbands and those who justify them. His righteous anger motivates him to correct unjust news reports in real time and transform passive audiences into active ones. His unusual approach puts him in conflict with authorities who prefer the status quo. His wife, meanwhile, rescues him when he is in distress. He tries to stop violent protesters from setting a bus on fire but fails. Thereafter, his wife cleans him up while he is traumatized by his failure. Seemingly out of his mind, he burns the houses of the men who burned the bus. He fights against government corruption with the help of the media and wins the case in court. Unfortunately, the goons of the affected politicians puts a stop to him and kills the people closest to him. He is convicted in court but on his way to prison, he escapes and disappears. He gets lost in the woods and encounters a deity figure carved in stone that seems to have inspired his transformation from man to hijra (trans women of India). He reappears later as a hijra named Arddhanaari and kills any oppressor he comes across and those responsible for his family's demise. He is caught after a series of murders and reveals his identity on live TV. The police and the mass viewers learn the truth and witness him kill his oppressor. Arddhanaari dies by hanging at sunset.

**Experiences of oppression.** The man behind Arddhanaari experiences the oppression of the poor and his own family by people of his community and corrupt government officials. This oppression pushes him to the edge where he decides to take on the identity of a hijra named Arddhanaari. As a hijra, he experiences further marginalization which intensifies his righteous anger against his oppressors. The oppression of his people, his family, and the hijra community made him the ultimate killing machine that is seemingly indestructible (as he is

neither affected by scorpions nor fire in a few scenes). Arddhanaari is a trans character whose extraordinary capacity lies in his killing skills devoid of remorse and guilt.

**Anti-oppression powers.** As Arddhanaari, he can play the role of a hijra effectively. Arddhanaari effectively plans every move and accomplishes them on a solo flight. Arddhanaari expresses pleasure after killing an oppressor. Unlike the PBP of Arddhanaari, the latter operates outside of the law and makes use of the marginalized spaces of the hijra to accomplish the goals of a just man. Like the PBP behind Arddhanaari, the latter remains capable of exploiting the weakness of the media to achieve the said goals.

**Structures of power undermined from below.** Arddhanaari knew that the system through the system's structures. Arddhanaari, however, is aware that system's flaws can be made to serve justice. For example, Arddhanaari used spaces accessible to hijra to gain information about police operations and networks of power. While hijras are considered marginal identities, they have access to homes, resources, and events of powerful people who hire them. Their sexuality is also a resource Arddhanaari can tap to find their targets at their most vulnerable. In the film, Arddhanaari decides to undermine a corrupt system by beheading, literally and figuratively, by killing the leaders. Arddhanaari also makes use of knowledge of the media to undermine its oppressive tendencies. By doing so, Arddhanaari awakens the passivity of the audience who have been desensitized to political abuse and maneuverings day in and day out.

**Resolution of oppression.** After the death of the family of the PBP of Arddhanaari, the former decided to avenge his family by making use of power from the ground - specifically, the power of the hijra community. By killing, under the disguise of a hijra, all the powerful people who caused him misery and made the system corrupt, he pays homage to his wife who was always rescuing him at his most vulnerable. Arddhanaari creates a symbol of the lowliest in society as an agent of change. He uses the social powerlessness and invisibility of the hijra as a tool to move around the community under the radar of the politicians and even the police. After the media coverage of Arddhanaari's real identity, revealed near the end of the story, hijras will no longer be seen in the same way again. His oppression converged with the oppression of the hijras. And the oppression of the hijras has become symbolic of the oppression of all marginalized Indians. That said, his death has not become an act in futility. The hijra is likely to become stronger as it becomes a symbol of justice-seeking in India.

## V. Discussion

The discussion below revolves around the notion of power from below manifested in countries where the selected films were produced. It tries to qualify how experiences of oppression of the protagonists bring to life the super trans persons they become and how their extraordinary powers were used within their respective social spaces.

**Rejection and abandonment.** All the alter egos of trans characters with extraordinary powers were isolated in one way or the other. The person behind IP was discriminated against by those who know the gogoboy past of IP's alter ego. As a secret agent, IP dresses as a very respectable lady. In contrast with gogo boys who strip down to their underwear, IP has passion for dressing up and requires a wardrobe budget while on a mission. No one knows for sure whether IP's passion for clothes is a way of correcting a socially shamed past; what is clear is that the person behind IP earns an honest living and is in harmony with the higher being before taking on a mission. IP sings of a longing for a person to love and later it is revealed that the PBP of IP grew up an orphan, never knowing any parent or a twin brother which is revealed later in the story. The experience of having been rejected and abandoned as a child seems to be a struggle IP carries constantly. Ada, the PBP of ZZ, also experienced the rejection of a father and abandonment of a romantic significant other. Unlike IP, Ada suffers from rejection and abandonment because of the latter's queer identity. Ada shares this heartache with Adam who becomes MX. Adam was separated from a close friend after they were found engaging in cross-

dressing while they were still children. The punishment for their gender exploration was traumatic for Adam. It was even more traumatic for Adam's friend who is marked with "X" on his chest and later becomes the trans-hater villain of the story. Meanwhile, the man behind Arddhanaari experienced rejection and abandonment by the government despite or due to his sense of righteousness and aggressive fight against injustices. This caused the death of his family and drove him mad and made him a punisher.

**Desire for love.** Rejection and abandonment made IP vulnerable to emotional manipulation while on a mission. The hope to find love accompanies IP and is the more dominant quest than achieving the goal of the assigned government mission. Ada is also a character who, despite being very aloof and cautious about falling in love, remains thirsty of love seemingly from any man who shows the slightest indication of interest. Adam would consider facing danger to follow the suggestion of a man showing affection to get money. It seems that Adam believes that the only way to keep a boyfriend is to please him, regardless of the consequences. Losing friends who cared about him set Adam afire as a MX. For the man behind Arddhanaari, losing his family broke him - not being able to protect them from danger meant that he should do everything in his power to correct his wrongs to people who have always done him right. His going mad over their deaths meant that they meant the world to him and, seemingly, the way to feel deserving of their love is to avenge their deaths.

**External and immediate threats to safety.** IP's immediate response to a man, suspected of evil-doing, who gets into an accident while hunting, was to save him. IP was shown in the film as rescuing a young woman from sexual offenders and even a man who threatened the life of a woman in a previous incident. Near or far, IP is able to appear on time to save someone. The film does not show how IP became a secret agent but previous rescue scenes seem to indicate that everyone's safety is IP's top priority, regardless of how the emergency came about. The need for the safety of strangers is IP's concern when not on an official government covert assignment. Ada is the same. As ZZ, she responds to both individual and community needs wherever they are encountered in the locale. Adam became a victim of organized crime before becoming MX. After escaping threats to her safety twice, Adam rescues a community from violent men, and a group of trafficked women. Although MX rescues people personally known to Adam at the beginning the former's story as a crime fighter, the latter continues the crusade later by saving strangers, as well. Both ZZ and Madame MX come to the rescue of people who are not addressed by the police or the national government; hence, they are likely not to be saved without either or both getting into action. Arddhanaari cares very little about the safety of the little people but the man behind former, however, cares for them and is the reason why he fights injustices. While the film does not show him rescuing people in imminent danger, he cares enough for them to put himself in physical danger.

The themes above are universal concerns. They are, in fact, the most basic concerns of any human being regardless of country or religious affiliation. However, because Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, and India are not developed countries, more people who have these needs are often ignored by authorities, acting more in favor of emergencies concerning people in power. In worse conditions are gender minorities who are discriminated against and treated as inferior to other groups. Discrimination against them deprive them of access to resources and protection, even spaces for discourse and free expression. Rejection, abandonment, and desire for love are common experiences to all human beings; however, discrimination intensifies these experiences and drive gender minorities to pursue dangerous paths and options that other people do not find themselves in. As such, there is very little need for most people to listen to the stories of gender minorities. IP has to dress up to be found pretty and respectable. Ada has to be the sexy redhead ZZ to be considered desirable and acceptable by a regular heterosexual male. Adam has to constantly be in a vulnerable situation to danger to be able to keep a man satisfied. Arddhanaari, being a hijra, has to be part of a hijra community to be protected and ensured with livelihood. Their desire to turn things around through extraordinary means, as current social structures and institutions discriminate against them, is fertile ground for trans characters with extraordinary abilities grow. These themes appear to be the hidden scripts that are pregnant with "people's critiques, grumbles, rumours and visions of different worlds" (Goringe and Rafanel, 2015, p. 6).

### **Trans characters with extraordinary abilities and social spaces**

IP, ZZ, MX, and Arddhanaari are the first of their kind in their respective countries. As characters given extraordinary abilities, transgender characters are able to transcend their usual marginalized social spaces (hair salons, night clubs, hijra communes, and the like). They were able to penetrate mindspaces in popular culture where alternate worlds are more acceptable and new futures can be imagined, particularly those given to comics (Persaud, 2018). Although DC and Marvel Comics have only recently penetrated the world of mainstream television with transgender superheroes like Dreamer in the *Supergirl* series (Keveney, 2018), trans and other queers superheroes were already populating comic books since the 1970s (Persaud, 2018). Hence, the social space called comic books have always been open to queer characters and are more accepting of alternate realities or social worlds. The fact that Marvel Comics will only release its first trans superhero Sera from the world of Thor in cinemas later this year (BBC, 2020) makes mainstream film in the US laggards compared to filmmakers in Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, and India.

Given that the social worlds of queer persons in the said countries are way more limited and their dominant religions contribute to varying degrees to this limitation, the existence of IP, ZZ, MX, and Arddhanaari is evidence that queer social spaces in film, even under independent cinema, is way ahead in these four countries than in Hollywood. In fact, IP already released a short film sequel titled *Iron Pussy: A Kimchi Affair* in 2010 as a segment in the film *Camellia*. Meanwhile, ZZ is no longer just in comic book or film format, it has also been produced as a theatrical production titled *Zsazsa Zaturmah Ze Muzikal* since 2006 and will return on stage (De la Cruz, 2020). Considering the limitations set by patriarchal societies (Chauhan, 2014; Becker, 1999), mainstream Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism on queer discourses (Klingorová and Havlíček, 2015), and the liberal-mindedness of producers in the US, particularly in television (Zitser, 2021; Islip, 2020; Lopez, 2019), it seems that the existence of the four films are driven more by the need for such social spaces (Zitser, 2021) than the availability and diversity of resources and allowances. Hence, the production of such films are acts of resistance from below (Goringe and Rafanel, 2015), filmmakers being more sensitive to the needs of gender minorities, than innovations from above where mainstream producers are taking the lead for profit.

The assertion of this paper was that there is a paradox that exists within spaces of oppressive power - that in oppression lies the seed of its unmaking. The notion of power from below allows for this understanding - that despite the lack of access of minorities in society to structures of power, there lies in their own marginalized spaces the potential to subvert oppression outside of its formal structures that allow change. The existence of IP, ZZ, MX, and Arddhanaari in independent filmmaking circles point to seeds of resistance that fall in the cracks of the system. That the protagonists in the selected films do not point to any specific politician as the cause of misery of gender minorities and were filling in lapses in the system (by becoming crime fighters that compensate for the inadequacies of the system) to make it work better make it more acceptable than a film that seeks to undermine the whole system. IP helps the government as a secret agent in blind obedience. ZZ compensates for the lack of national or local government response to the problems of the far-flung villagers (Ada refuses the toppling of patriarchy which drives the amazonistas). MX operates in places that the government radar fails to cover (Adam does not reject politics altogether). Arddhanaari puts to light and corrects (though extrajudicial means) the injustices that the government cannot seem to address in its collusion with criminal and oppressive elements. That said, it must be qualified that the “unmaking” of power in the case of these characters leads to extraordinary means towards its correction, not toppling the structure of power upside down, at least, from the lens of their filmmakers

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