



AMERICAN JOURNAL OF YOUTH AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT (AJYWE)

ISSN: 2835-3250 (ONLINE)

VOLUME 5 ISSUE 1 (2026)



PUBLISHED BY
E-PALLI PUBLISHERS, DELAWARE, USA

Tides of Change: How Philippine Mermaid Teleseryes Portray Women's Empowerment Through Mythical Identity

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Article Information

Received: March 09, 2026

Accepted: May 13, 2026

Published: June 23, 2026

Keywords

Characterization, Gender Performativity, Mermaid Teleserye, Mythical Identity, Women's Empowerment

ABSTRACT

This study explores how Philippine mermaid teleseryes portray women's empowerment through mythical identity, addressing the limited research on empowerment in fantasy narratives and symbolic representations in media. Using qualitative content analysis, the study examines Marina (2004), Dyesebel (2008), Mutya (2011), and Aryana (2012) as cultural texts. Guided by Empowerment Theory, Characterization Theory, and Gender Performativity Theory, the analysis focuses on how agency, character development, and gender roles shape empowered mermaid identities. Findings reveal that empowerment is expressed through decision-making, resistance, autonomy, and emotional growth rather than passive femininity. The study also shows that empowerment evolves across the teleseryes, shifting from individual and reactive actions to more conscious and purposeful forms of self-determination. Additionally, the portrayal of mermaid characters reflects changing societal attitudes toward women's roles, highlighting a transition from traditional and passive representations to more active, assertive, and complex identities. Overall, the findings suggest that mermaid teleseryes serve as symbolic spaces where women negotiate identity, challenge gender norms, and redefine empowerment within Philippine media.

INTRODUCTION

The representation of mermaids has long been influenced by patriarchal culture, yet these figures are not merely reflections of fixed femininity, as they may also challenge traditional gender roles and portray women as independent and resourceful (Merveille, 2022). In contemporary media, mermaids function as symbolic representations of evolving identity and gender, illustrating how fantasy narratives intersect with real-world social interpretations (Pressman, 2024). As hybrid creatures situated between myth and humanity, their experiences may reflect broader social realities, making them valuable subjects for examining empowerment in myth and culture (Currans, 2024). While mermaids have often been associated with conventional ideals of femininity, alternative portrayals also present women as strong, capable, and dynamic through character development, symbolic identity, and narrative progression, as demonstrated in *The Little Mermaid* (Rikhana *et al.*, 2025).

In the Philippine context, mermaid teleseryes such as Marina (2004), Dyesebel (2008), Mutya (2011), and Aryana (2012) combine fantasy and social reality by featuring female protagonists who embody both vulnerability and strength while exercising agency. Despite their cultural relevance and popularity, these teleseryes remain underexplored in studies focusing on empowerment and its narrative development.

Although existing studies have examined women's representation and empowerment in media, limited research has explored empowerment within fantasy as a form of symbolic identity, particularly in Philippine

mermaid teleseryes (Lestari & Elfattah, 2025). Previous research on gender representation and fictional characters has shown that women are often underrepresented, stereotyped, objectified, and sexualized, even in heroic or non-antagonistic roles (Santonniccolo *et al.*, 2023; Beauregard *et al.*, 2026). This gap highlights the need to examine how women's empowerment is constructed through symbolic and cultural identities in fantasy narratives. Therefore, this study analyzes how women's empowerment is portrayed in Philippine mermaid teleseryes through characterization, plot development, and mythical identity, as well as how these portrayals reflect shifting societal attitudes toward women's roles.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundations

This study is anchored on Naila Kabeer's Empowerment Theory, which defines empowerment as the expansion of resources, agency, and achievements that enable individuals to make strategic life choices (Kabeer, 1999). This framework allows the identification of empowerment through decision-making, autonomy, and resistance.

E.M. Forster's Characterization Theory is also applied, distinguishing between flat and round characters and static and dynamic development (Forster, 1927), enabling analysis of how mermaid characters evolve across narratives.

Additionally, Judith Butler's Gender Performativity Theory argues that gender is constructed through repeated social behaviors rather than being innate (Butler, 1990, 1993),

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a view supported by Jenkins and Finneman (2017), who emphasize the role of media in shaping gender norms. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive lens for analyzing empowerment, character development, and gender construction in mermaid teleseryes.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis (QCA), a method that systematically examines textual, verbal, and visual data to interpret meanings, patterns, and underlying messages. This design is appropriate for exploring Philippine mermaid teleseryes in order to understand how central mermaid characters construct empowered identities in relation to changing societal attitudes toward women's roles in the Philippines. A qualitative approach is suitable for this study as it allows in-depth exploration of meaning-making within media narratives. According to Creswell and Creswell (2023), qualitative inquiry is used when researchers aim to understand how individuals or characters construct meaning within social and cultural contexts.

Research Corpora

The research corpus consists of four Philippine mermaid teleseryes: Marina (2004), Dyesebel (2008), Mutya (2011), and Aryana (2012). These texts were selected through purposive sampling due to their relevance to the study's objective of examining women's empowerment through mythical identity. As fantasy narratives centered on mermaid characters, these teleseryes provide rich textual and visual data suitable for analyzing empowerment traits, character development, and the evolving representation of women across different time periods.

Data Collection

Data were collected from selected episodes of Marina (186 episodes), Dyesebel (96 episodes), Mutya (62 episodes), and Aryana (189 episodes). Episodes were purposively selected based on their relevance to the research objectives, particularly those depicting empowerment traits, character development, and representations of gender roles among central mermaid characters. The series were accessed through online platforms such as YouTube and iWantTFC. Relevant scenes, dialogues, and character behaviors were identified and extracted as primary data for analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. First, repeated viewing of all selected episodes was conducted to ensure familiarity with the narratives and to identify scenes relevant to the research objectives. Selected passages were then systematically coded based on recurring patterns of empowerment, identity construction, and gender representation.

The coding process was guided by three analytical categories derived from the theoretical framework: empowerment

traits (agency, autonomy, and achievement), character and identity development of mermaid protagonists, and representations of societal attitudes toward women and mythical identities. These categories were anchored on Naila Kabeer's Empowerment Theory, E.M. Forster's Characterization Theory, and Judith Butler's Gender Performativity Theory.

To ensure reliability, intercoder checking was conducted, where two researchers independently coded selected excerpts using the developed coding framework. Their results were compared, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. This process ensured consistency in interpretation and refinement of coding categories. Additional measures such as repeated viewing and systematic cross-checking of coded data further strengthened the reliability of the analysis.

Finally, thematic analysis was conducted based on the coded data. Emergent themes were interpreted in relation to the theoretical framework and compared across the four teleseryes to identify similarities, differences, and patterns in the construction of empowered mermaid identities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Traits of Empowerment Exhibited by the Central Mermaid Characters

The four mermaid teleseryes apply Naila Kabeer's Empowerment Theory to illustrate how agency and resources contribute to empowerment. In Marina (2004), empowerment is personal and receptive as the character learns to protect herself. In Dyesebel (2008), empowerment is more relational as she fights on behalf of her mother and challenges injustice. Mutya (2011) presents empowerment shaped by agency but constrained by emotion and limited resources. Meanwhile, Aryana (2012) demonstrates a more deliberate and resolute form of empowerment as she consciously confronts her fears. Overall, empowerment across the series shifts from self-assertion to more intentional and strategic forms, consistent with Kabeer (1999) and Jayasinghe *et al.* (2024), where empowerment is understood as a combination of decision-making, awareness, and contextual factors that enable individuals to take control of their lives.

Marina (2004)

Marina: "Ang tagal tagal kong hinintay tung panahon na to, itong kwintas na to para maipamukha ko sa kanila na hindi ako si Cristina."

(Episode 07 | 2:34-2:47)

Marina: "I've waited so long for this moment—this necklace—to prove to them that I am not Cristina."

The scene shows Marina who seizes the power of her life by defying those who have left her alone and by claiming her agency. She showed empowerment when she wore the necklace which her mother had given her as a little girl and said that she is no longer the same person: Cristina.

This means that she is no longer passive because she now takes active action to face the social judgement and take control of the way she is perceived. This agrees with Costa *et al.* (2023) and Grover and Sharma (2025) who describe empowerment as the process of obtaining agency, shattering social constraints, and utilizing resources to attain control over their lives.

Marina: “Ayoko, ayoko talaga hindi ako papayag na panuorin lang ako ng mga tao tapos pagtatawanan lang nila ako.” (Episode 96 | 13:16-13:22)

Marina: “No, No I really don’t want to—I won’t allow people to just watch me and then laugh at me.”

The scene highlights the empowerment of Marina as she asserts agency when she is not objectifying herself and she insists on her dignity. Her language shows self-promotion and resistance against restrictive social treatment as she is gradually coming to a sense of agency. It follows with the studies who keep defining empowerment as the ability to act as an agent, increase choice and confront social constraints that reduce control over life by individuals (World Bank, 2021; Ghosh & Chaudhuri, 2023; UN Women, 2024).

Aryana (2012)

Ophelia: Anak, hindi ako mapakali eh. Sigurado ka bang gusto mong pumunta ng dagat matapos yung nangyari kagabi?

Aryana: Mommy, kailangan ko pong gawin ’to.

Ophelia: Pero nasundan ka nga nila sa school eh, at kahit saan ka magpunta masusundan ka nila anak. Yun pa kayang lumapit ka sa dagat.

Aryana: Mommy, walang mangyayari sa akin kung lagi po akong matatakot sa kanila, kaya kailangan ko pong harapin ang takot ko para sa susunod po handa na ako (Episode 102 | 8:30–8:56)

Ophelia: My child, I’m feeling uneasy. Are you sure you still want to go to the sea after what happened last night?

Aryana: Mom, I need to do this.

Ophelia: But they already followed you at school, and wherever you go, they can follow you, my child. What more if you go near the sea?

Aryana: Mom, nothing will happen if I keep being afraid of them. I need to face my fear so that next time, I’ll be prepared.

Aryana is empowered in the passage because she decides to overcome her fear and her agency is shown by the fact that she decides to do something despite being dangerous. Her response is independent and anti-passive because she is taking charge of her situation. The aspect of resistance is demonstrated as well, as she does not want to be passive and she does not control her life. Her inner strength and determination can be viewed as the symbolic resources that support this. Overall, it highlights the empowerment through a set of agencies and resources, which Jayasinghe *et al.* (2024) and Santoniccolo *et al.* (2023) confirmed.

Comparison of Resource Utilization Between Marina and Aryana

The results demonstrate that the image of resource

utilization changes in the empowerment of Marina (2004), Mutya (2011), Dyesebel (2014), and Aryana (2012). Even though all characters demonstrate agency, autonomy, and resistance, the means that empower them vary. The empowerment of Marina is supported by an external symbolic resource, especially the necklace, which confirms her identity and helps her to be confident in her assertiveness. Mutya and Dyesebel are both influenced by a set of internal and relational resources, with Mutya being more courageous and initiative-driven despite fear and lack of control, and Dyesebel being more of an agent due to compassion and moral voice in the face of injustice. Conversely, Aryana is stronger in empowerment based on internal psychological resources like courage, self-awareness and determination as evidenced by her readiness to face the fear despite personal risk. This development indicates that earlier teleseryes depict empowerment as more reliant on outside approval, whereas the later versions bring out more and more empowerment by focusing on internal power, relational agency, and well-thought-out choices, which is consistent with Kabeer (1999) concept of empowerment as a strategic utilization of resources.

Mutya

Mutya: kuya si nanay at tatay ba talaga ang nakita natin? Bat bigla silang nawala?

Kuya: diko rin alam mutya eh.

Mutya: kuya sana pinabayaan mo nalang ako tumalon mabilis naman ako lumangoy mahuli ko sana sila”

(Episode 37 | 5:09-5:24)

Mutya: “Brother, were those really Mom and Dad that we saw? Why did they suddenly disappear?”

Kuya: “I don’t know either, Mutya.”

Mutya: “Brother, I wish you had just let me jump, I can swim fast, I could have caught up with them.”

The passage describes how Mutya is empowered when she decides to overcome the fear and take an action despite the risk, which is an agency, choice, and self-determination. The fact that she is doing it shows that she is exercising personal agency of achieving a desired outcome rather than being passive. The latter is aligned with the conceptualization of empowerment provided by Raj *et al.* (2024) seeing empowerment as an agency and choice as a process that depends on internal factors, social norms, and external situations that might enable or restrict action at individual and collective levels. Nevertheless, she is not empowered much due to the intensity of emotions and inability to control her surroundings.

Dyesebel

Dyesebel: “Isa lang po ang hiling ko sa buong mundo pero hindi po ito para sa akin kundi para sa aking ina... hinihiling ko po na sana pakawalan ninyo siya bilang isang alipin... matagal na po na panahon pinag-bayaran niya ang parusa ninyo sa kanya kaya sana po pag bigyan ninyo...ito lang po ang hiling ko sa buong mundo...ang Kalayaan ng aking ina.” (Episode 13 I 18:17-18:52)

Dyesebel: “I have only one wish in the whole world, and it’s not

for me but for my mother... I wish that you would set her free from being a slave... she has already paid for your punishment for a long time, so I hope you will grant this... this is my only wish in the whole world... my mother's freedom."

In this passage, agency is grounded in compassion because Dyesebel is appealing to voice in the pursuit of the freedom of her mother and not her self-interest. She stands up against injustice, challenging the power, and transforms the silence into resistance. Dyesebel, despite her little power, is intentional in her actions to free her mother, and shows the strength of self-determination and ability to influence social relations. Vasquez and Summer (2023) confirm this perspective with the suggestion that activism as an instrument to represent others can reduce inequality and result in social change, without material resources.

In all the teleseryes, the theory of empowerment by Naila Kabeer was used. In Marina, Marina is no longer in a state of scarcity, where it means that she has not been able to recognize and exert control over her identity; but rather, she has become empowered by integrating the agency with the symbolic resources that allow her to demonstrate authority over her social identity. In the meantime, Aryana shifts the experience of fear and vulnerability to agency, when the self-awareness and inner strength allowed her to make deliberate decisions and slowly take the agency over the situation. Mutya, however, is in an intermediate condition, in which she is not deprived of her agency, but rather constrained by the lack of resources and situational restrictions, as well as the inability to realize the full potential of empowerment. Likewise, Dyesebel also shifts to structural scarcity to empowered agency, albeit in a limited way, she employed her voice to have a say in decisions and have moral control over the situation.

Evolution of Empowered Mermaid Identities Across the Four Teleseryes (2004–2012)

It can be seen throughout the teleseryes that there is the development of empowered mermaid identities based on the Characterization Theory (1927) by E. M. Forster, particularly the concept of round characters who are multi-dimensional and capable of growth. Marina and Aryana illustrate this by their changing motives and inner conflict, being persuasively developed out of the feeling of weakness to the feeling of strength and self-sacrifice. The character of Mutya evolves slower, with the focus on emotional richness, understanding, and growing independence, and Dyesebel is the most fully-developed, with more intentional and conscious actions. On the whole, the change of their feelings, choices, and partnerships influence their empowerment, which promotes the concept of Forster that strong characters are characterized by their complexity and developmental prospects. This is a manifestation of a change in passive and submissive feminine types to active, independent, and empowered ones. Since mermaids grow rounder in the sense used by Forster, they become too big to be called damsel or maiden, becoming seeker or warrior, which

now is an action of choice. Since archetypes present cultural scripts of womanhood, this change demonstrates how the media redefines the Filipina myth, who is no longer an object of protection, but an agent of her own destiny.

Marina (2004)

Marina: "Kukunin ko parin ang lahat ng sakanya, pero naisip ko lang na habang pinagpipilitan niya na anak niya ako, mas mahihirapan siguro siya at masasaktan kung hindi na kami magkikita. Kaya ngayon palang puputulin ko na ang pag-asang magkasama kami."

(Ep 07 | 7:40-7:54)

Marina: "I will still take everything from her, but I realized that the more she insists that I am her child, the more it will hurt her if we never see each other again. So as early as now, I will cut off any chance that we could be together."

The emotional pain and the wish to avenge are the starting point of Marina in this excerpt which explains a wounded and defensive identity that was shaped by being abandoned and having a conflict with the biological mother. Nevertheless, this emotional condition is complicated by an inner struggle between revenge and emotional consciousness, as she wants to take everything at the same time, and at the same time, she wants to end all chances of reconciliation to avoid more and more emotional damage. This inconsistency demonstrates that her character is not single but multi-layered with opposing motives and emotional reactions, suggesting psychological complexity as opposed to a consistent type of character. This makes Marina a round character, according to Characterization Theory by E. M. Forster, as her identity is shaped by internal contradiction and emotional depth, shifting away from a mere damsel-in-distress character with her ability to reason in both moral and emotional ways. Peng and Zhang (2024) support this interpretation by stating that round characters are built using conflicting motivations and emotional layers that are revealed in the dialogue and are therefore more realistic and psychologically intricate.

Esther: "Anak kamusta ka? Alam kong minimaltrato ka nila dito."

Marina: "Okay lang ako dito, tumakas kana." (Ep 110 | 9:19 -9:33)

Esther: "Child, how are you? I know they are mistreating you here."

Marina: "I'm okay here. Just escape now."

In this passage, Marina begins at a more emotionally mature stage through the influence of previous suffering where she is not focused on herself but on the well-being of others more so her mother. This is a sign of internal transformation and relation change because her former resentment is substituted by self-control and a sense of protection, which demonstrates the evolution of her emotional priorities and sense of responsibility.

Her choice to put the life of her mother first, even though it will harm her, is a sign of an emerging identity that weighs pain and care, which means improvement in managing emotions and moral sensitivities. In the context of the round character, Marina can be considered as a round character in E. M. Forster theory since her growth is an example of complexity, change and depth as she shifts toward a more altruistic and emotionally balanced character, and thus is not the typical passive or one-dimensional damsel. This observation is consistent with Surya *et al.* (2025), who note that round characters are created due to motivation, emotional development, and relationship changes based on experience and inner conflict.

Aryana (2012)

Aryana: Andami ko nang problemang naharap; maliit lang lahat iyon nakayanan ko, nalampasan ko. Hindi ako nagpatalo sa mga pagsubok na dumating. Ginamit ko iyon para magpursige at matupad ang mga pangarap ko. Pero ito? Ito ang isang pagsubok na hindi ko alam kung paano ko malalampasan. Hindi ko kakayanin 'to. Hindi ko kaya 'to. Hindi mawawala ang problemang 'to. Sana, sa pagpikit ng mga mata ko, hindi na ako dumilat. Ayoko nang magising kung magiging ganito lang ang buhay ko. Ayoko nang mabuhay pa. **(Episode 39 | 10:06–11:25)**

Aryana: *I've already faced so many problems; all of them were small—I managed, I got through them. I didn't let the trials defeat me. I used them to push myself and fulfill my dreams. But this? This is one trial I don't know how to overcome. I can't handle this. I can't do this. This problem won't go away. I wish that when I close my eyes, I won't open them again. I don't want to wake up if my life is going to be like this. I don't want to live anymore.*

The first impression of Aryana is that she is a strong-willed and strong character who has already overcome several problems in her past, which makes her begin at a high but already emotionally cramped identity. Yet, this stability breaks down as she confronts a more serious and personal crisis, which results in a highly emotional ambivalence in which she feels powerless, out of control, and loses agency temporarily. This transformation shows that her identity is not static but that it is defined by varying emotional and mental states, as she changes her previously stable character into a more complicated and internally divided character. In the Characterization Theory by E. M. Forster, this shows how Aryana becomes a round character because of her emotional contradictions and vulnerability, which reveals depth and instability that transcends her to a heroic or damsel-in-distress character. This explanation can be compared to Frazer *et al.* (2025) who describes that depth of character can be influenced by psychological complexity, emotional contradictions, and changing motivations that make characters seem more realistic and multidimensional.

Marlon: Aryana, seryoso ka ba sa gagawin mo?

Aryana: Lagi naman nilang inaapi si mommy eh, lagi na

lang akong pinagtatanggol ni mommy, ngayon ako naman magtatanggol sa kanya.

Marlon: Hindi ba mas lalaki yung away non, hindi matatapos yung gulo.

Aryana: Marlon, anong gusto mong gawin ko? wala? hahayaan ko na lang na lagi nilang apihin si mommy at pagsalitaan nang ganun?

Marlon: Edi gusto mo gantihan sila ganun?

Aryana: Marlon, hindi 'to paghihiganti. Oo wala kaming pera, mahirap lang kami at bukod sa pamilya ito lang maipagmamalaki namin... yung dignidad namin. At ayoko naman 'yun na pati 'yun kukunin nila sa amin. **(Episode 109 | 0:55–2:04)**

Marlon: *Aryana, are you serious about what you're planning to do?*

Aryana: *They always bully my mom. She's always the one defending me, this time, it's my turn to defend her.*

Marlon: *Won't that just make things worse? The conflict won't end.*

Aryana: *Marlon, what do you want me to do? Nothing? Just let them keep bullying my mom and talking to her like that?*

Marlon: *So you want to get back at them like that?*

Aryana: *Marlon, this isn't revenge. Yes, we don't have money, we're poor and aside from our family, the only thing we have to be proud of is our dignity. And I won't let them take that away from us.*

In this passage, the initial state of Aryana is her status as the daughter who has repeatedly observed her mother being abused, which sets her emotional drive based on family defense and social injustice. This gives rise to an internal struggle between passivity and action because she is torn between staying quiet or fighting the oppressors of her family and ends up asserting herself by defending her mother and saving her honor. This change signifies her transformation to a more assertive and morally biased character in which her agency is defined by responsibility and not revenge. The character Aryana is a round character within the framework of E. M. Forster since her character development is not the simple damsel-in-distress character due to its complexity in motivation, emotional depth, and moral reasoning and the active role she plays in protecting and defining herself. This fits the prior research that proposes that character development and moral posturing help create a dynamic, well-rounded characterization, as well as breaking up traditional female passivity with more empowered media characters (Santonico *et al.*, 2023; Jayasinghe and Jayasinghe, 2024; Albalawi, 2025).

Mutya

Mang Kajo: “ Eh ano ngayon? Dapat nga pinakulong mo rin mga magulang nila eh, dahil sa kapalakan nila nangyari sa kanila to.

Mutya: wala po ba kayong nanay at tatay? wala po ba kayong pamilya tatang? Kasi alam ko po kung pano mawalan, kahit gaano po ka hirap ang buhay namin gusto ko parin po makasama mga magulang ko. **(Episode 35 |**

3:50-4:20)

Mang Kajo: *So what now? You should have had their parents jailed too—this happened because of their negligence.*

Mutya: *Don't you have a mother and father? Don't you have a family? Because I know what it feels like to lose someone. No matter how hard our life is, I still want to be with my parents.*

In this case, the character of a mermaid is more mature and caring. Mutya shares her experience of pain and that is why she realizes that parents and family are valuable to her. Through her words, it is clear that despite the difficulties in life, she still loves her family. This is an empowered mermaid identity since she is not merely a strong girl of action, but is equally strong of feelings and knowledge. Simply speaking, the statement proves that she can grow by using empathy, love, and the possibility to relate her life with the life of other people.

Mutya: *kuya, sila kuya Chito oh kasama ko sila Kuya: natatandaan mo?*

Mutya: *kuya kailangan natin sila balikan di pa sila umuwi.*

Kuya: *di nanga pwde mutya, wag kana makulit*

Mutya: *Pasensya na kuya pero kailangan ko sila balikan, kung ayaw mo ako nalang. (Episode 34)*

Mutya: *Look, it's Chito, I'm with them.*

Kuya: *Do you remember?*

Mutya: *We need to go back for them, they haven't come home yet.*

Kuya: *That's not possible anymore, Mutya. Stop being stubborn.*

Mutya: *I'm sorry, but I have to go back for them. If you don't want to, I'll go by myself.*

This dialogue demonstrates that the mermaid character is becoming more independent, courageous, and loving. Mutya recalls those she was with and feels it is her responsibility to be safe, indicating her faithfulness and emotional resilience. Despite all these, despite being advised by her brother not to go back, she still chooses to help and demonstrates courage and determination. The fact that she has decided to go alone implies that she is no longer frail and in need of other people. By doing so, the dialogue portrays her as a powerful mermaid whose identity is informed by responsibility, compassion and individual strength.

Dyesebel

Dyesebel: *Pakawalan ninyo ang Nanay ko!...*

Dyangga: *Alam mo na pala na nanay mo siya*

Dyesebel: *Ilabas ninyo ang nanay ko!...*

Dyangga: *Nasaan ang kabibe*

Dyesebel: *Ilalabas ko lang ang mahiwagang kabibe kapag pinakawalan ninyo ang Nanay ko...*

Dyangga: *Natuto ka na lumaban, Dyesebel...yan ba pinag-aralan mo sa lupa?...tingin mo? Kakayanin mo na ako ha?!*

Dyesebel: *Hindi ako nag punta dito para makipag laban...nandito ako para ibigay ang gusto mo na kabibe at para pakawalan mo ang nanay ko sa lupa.*

(Episode 68 I 23:01- 23:36)

Dyesebel: *Let my mother go!*

Dyangga: *So you already know she's your mother.*

Dyesebel: *Release my mother!*

Dyangga: *Where is the shell?*

Dyesebel: *I will only bring out the magical shell if you release my mother.*

Dyangga: *You've learned how to fight, Dyesebel... is that what you learned on land? What do you think—can you defeat me now?*

Dyesebel: *I didn't come here to fight... I'm here to give you what you want.*

In this passage, we can see that Dyesebel is at an early character development stage whereby her actions are influenced by emotional urgency and personal attachment, especially her need to rescue her mother. Even when she demonstrates the emergent agency by negotiating and making conditional decisions, she is not empowered in any way, but on a situational basis. Under the concept proposed by E. M. In Forster, she is a transitional figure, neither entirely flat nor yet round with her motivations being unique and predictable. This is in line with the research indicating that context-bound and relational motivations tend to influence early character development, and subsequently transition into more autonomy and complexity (Surya *et al.*, 2025).

Dyangga: *Dyesebel!! Pinahanga mo ako naman ako... Naka labas ka pa sa kwebang iyun?! Pero nagkamali ka sa pagbalik mo dito Dahil, hindi na kita bubuhayin pa!*

Dyesebel: *Hindi ka magtatagumpay Dyangga!! Andito ako para bawiin ang trono na inagaw mo sa Lolo ko at sa Ama ko!*

Coralia: *Kinuha? Tingnan mo kung sino na ang sumuot ng kurona ngayon? Ako na ang bagong reyna ng kaharian, at ako lang!!!*

Dyesebel: *Bibigyan ko kayo ng pagkakataon para sumuko dyangga, Umalis kayo nang mapayapa sa kaharian at walang masasaktan!!!*

(Episode 87 I 11:29-12:05)

Dyangga: *Dyesebel!! You impressed me... you even managed to get out of that cave?! But you made a mistake coming back here, because I will not let you live anymore!*

Dyesebel: *You will not succeed, Dyangga!! I am here to reclaim the throne that you stole from my grandfather and my father!*

Coralia: *Stole? Look at who wears the crown now. I am the new queen of this kingdom—and only me!!!*

Dyesebel: *I will give you a chance to surrender, Dyangga. Leave the kingdom peacefully, and no one will get hurt!!*

This passage introduces Dyesebel as a complete and empowered personality, characterized by power, moral agency, and extended motivations based on justice and leadership. By being able to exercise restraint through a peaceful resolution she is showing her authority to power and control at the same time. This finding is consistent with the results of Cowan, Mittal, and McAdams (2021) who found that mature narrative identity is defined by more coherence, agency, and meaning-making in the way

individuals structure life experiences into a structured and goal-oriented self-story. In this regard, the fact that Dyesebel does not respond emotionally, but rather makes decisions that are more leadership-oriented shows a more unified and coherent sense of self, as she no longer is a passive actor who reacts, but actively participates in shaping events and outcomes.

It can be seen throughout the teleseryes that there is the development of empowered mermaid identities based on the Characterization Theory (1927) by E. M. Forster, particularly the concept of round characters who are multi-dimensional and capable of growth. Marina and Aryana demonstrate this through their evolving motivations and internal struggles, showing convincing development from vulnerability to assertiveness and selflessness. The character of Mutya develops more gradually, with an emphasis on emotional depth, compassion, and increasing independence, whereas Dyesebel is the most fully characterized, displaying more purposeful and conscious actions. Overall, the transformation of their emotions, decisions, and relationships shapes their empowerment, supporting Forster's idea that well-built characters are defined by complexity and growth potential. This reflects a shift from passive and dependent feminine archetypes to more active, independent, and empowered identities. As mermaids become rounder characters in Forster's terms, they outgrow the "damsel" or "maiden" archetype tied to male rescue and duty, taking on instead "seeker" or "warrior" roles driven by personal choice. Because archetypes carry cultural scripts about womanhood, this shift shows how the media reimagines the Filipina myth from an object of protection to an agent of her own fate.

Mythical Characterizations and their Reflection or Response to the Changing Societal Attitudes toward Women's Roles in the Philippines

Across all teleseryes, the female mythical figures are those of Judith Butler who believes that femininity is a performance and not an inherent nature, as it is built through its repetitive acts and social demands. Being turned into the work of mermaids serves as a performative identification that governs the regulation of femininity, its othering, or idealization in society. This follows the argument of the feminist media theory, which posits that gender is created in both cultural repetition and power relationships. The moral obligation (Marina), dignity claim (Aryana), silent protest (Mutya), and independence (Dyesebel) of the characters exemplify the limitation and redefinition of femininity, demonstrating the role of the media in reinforcing and confronting gender stereotypes at the same time (Gill & Orgad, 2018; Banet-Weiser, 2018).

Marina (2004)

Marina: "Ang gusto ko lang naman mapa sa'kin ang lahat ng sa kaniya... para maranasan niya kung ga'no ka sakit at kahirap mawalan ng lahat-lahat sa buhay." (Ep 06 |

8:25-8:36)

Marina: "Tinanggap ko na ng buong loob ang sumpa ni Victoria." (Ep 65 | 19:58-20:08)

Marina: "I'm sorry pero 'di ko rin kayang makitang may ibang taong mamamatay ng dahil sa'kin." (Ep 66 | 2:02-2:08)

Marina: "*All I want is to take everything that belongs to her... so she can experience how painful and difficult it is to lose everything in life.*"

Marina: "*I have fully accepted Victoria's curse.*"

Marina: "*I'm sorry, but I also can't bear to see someone else die because of me.*"

Marina lives with the curse of Victoria, which presents her as a person who is to suffer or revenge. Instead of living up to this expectation, she reinvents herself by taking moral responsibility instead of revenge for her choice. Marina shows self-awareness and ethical agency by accepting her condition and refusing to make others suffer due to her. Such transformation of victimhood to responsibility can be seen as an indication of the changing attitudes towards the roles of women in the Philippines where women are now being seen as having the powers to take principled decisions. By doing so, her character demonstrates that gender roles are not predetermined but constantly formed in the process of action, which is consistent with Mawi (2024).

Aryana (2012)

Adrian: "Ayaw ko na sumali sa dance concert, ayaw na kita kapartner at please wag ka muna lumapit saakin."

Aryana: "Alam ko iba ako sa inyo, hindi ko naman pinipilit na tanggapan mo ako e. Pero sana naman huwag mo akong tratuhin na parang may sakit. Adrian, hindi ako halimaw para katakutan at pandirihan mo. Adrian, isinumpa ako, naintindihan mo ba 'yon? At hindi ko ginusto 'yon pero wala akong magagawa, nangyari na."

(Episode 105 | 8:15-9:00)

Adrian: "*I don't want to join the dance concert anymore. I don't want you as my partner, and please don't come near me for now.*"

Aryana: "*I know I'm different from all of you—I'm not forcing you to accept me. But at least don't treat me like I'm sick. Adrian, I'm not a monster for you to fear or be disgusted by. Adrian, I was cursed—do you understand that? I didn't choose it, but there's nothing I can do. It already happened.*"

Aryana faces exclusion and stigma where she is regarded as different and feared due to her identity. Rather than internalizing this rejection, she claims her dignity and questions the way others see her. In this resistance, Aryana reinvents her identity based on self-worth not judgment by society. Her reaction is indicative of the increasing role of female characters in negotiating and protesting marginalization. In turn, this depiction represents a larger change in the Philippine society, where women are not limited to passive roles anymore but are depicted as able to fight discrimination (Santonniccolo *et al.*, 2023; Romero-Ruiz and Cuder-Dominguez, 2022).

Mutya

Cordella: ano ginagawa mo dito?

Mutya: Wla po.

Cordella: bakit ang lalim lalim ng iniisip mo?

Mutya: Sana po ay may paa ako.

Cordella: Anak bakit namn kailangan mo pa ng paa eh para ka ngang prinsesa dito saamin lagi kang binubuhat kung kahit saan mo gusto pumunta.

Mutya: nahihirapan napo ba kayu sakin?

Cordella: kahit kailan hindi kami nahihirapan na alagaan ka. Ikaw ba anak nahihirapan kana?

Mutya: Hindi naman po, kaya lang gusto ko mag ka paa.

(Ep 03 | 19:50-20:57)

Cordella: “*What are you doing here?*”

Mutya: “*Nothing, ma’am.*”

Cordella: “*Why are you thinking so deeply?*”

Mutya: “*I wish I had legs.*”

Cordella: “*Child, why do you still need legs? You’re like a princess here with us—you’re always being carried wherever you want to go.*”

Mutya: “*Are you having a hard time because of me?*”

Cordella: “*We have never had a hard time taking care of you. What about you, child—are you having a hard time?*”

Mutya: “*No, not really... I just want to have legs.*”

The case of Mutya has a less obvious limitation as she is placed as an inactive, helpless character in the guise of protection. In spite of the fact that she is treated as a kind of a princess, this role restricts her independence and supports the dependency expectations. Her silent wish to possess legs signifies a wish to be independent and move freely, which is a slight opposition to the identity placed on her. It is in this subtle resistance that Mutya starts to make a new definition of herself as more than passive. This implies that even internal desires may serve as identity construction actions. Consequently, her representation is a slow transformation of how females are perceived in the society as people who can be independent, instead of being the objects to care (Schilt and Westbrook, 2021).

Dyesebel

Dyesebel: “Pasensya ka na Liro, pero hindi ko pwede gawin ang mga sinasabi mo... Nag-uumpisa ako ng bagong buhay dito sa lupa, at hindi ko naman pwedeng basta-bastang iwan na lang ang mga bagay na meron na ako ngayon.”

(Episode 56 I 20:46-21:01)

Dyesebel: “*I’m sorry, Liro, but I can’t do what you’re asking... I’m starting a new life here on land, and I can’t just leave behind everything I have now.*”

Dyesebel is constrained by a dual expectation of loyalty, to the sea and to relational obligations embodied by Liro, reflecting broader gendered pressures that tie women to responsibility and emotional duty rather than self-definition. However, by resisting Liro’s demands and rejecting full assimilation into land-based norms, she asserts a self-defined identity grounded in independence and pride. This exercise of agency signals a shift in

Philippine media portrayals of women: while traditional roles persist, contemporary depictions increasingly emphasize autonomy and resistance to restrictive gender norms (Arceño *et al.*, 2025). Thus, Dyesebel’s characterization illustrates an evolving discourse where women are no longer merely bound by duty but actively shape their own destinies.

The mermaid body is used to designate the characters as different, which impacts the way they are treated, subjected to control, excluded, or idealized, and these reactions, in turn, affect the way femininity is practiced, evaluated, or opposed. As an example, the transformation of Marina makes her other, but she defies expectations by executing moral restraint, the mermaid identity makes Aryana a subject of rejection, which she refuses to accept by demonstrating dignity and redefining femininity as human instead of monstrous, and the impossibility of legs makes Mutya passive femininity, but her wish to be mobile indicates an attempt to reperform identity as independence, and the movement of Dyesebel between land and sea is an emphasis on the fluidity of femininity, which she eventually accomplishes due to self-determination and autonomy. The analysis makes the direct linkage of transformation, social treatment and performed identity more effective in illustrating Judith Butler’s argument stating that gender is created by means of the repetition of acts that are constructed under social circumstances.

CONCLUSIONS

Comparing the four teleseryes, one can clearly observe the emergence of empowered mermaid identities. Empowerment is constructed throughout the stories based on the choices made by the characters, resources, and individual development, which are involved in the transformation of social perceptions of the role of the women in the Philippines and is aligned with the empowerment theory (Kabeer, 1999; Jayasinghe *et al.*, 2024). In the meantime, the characterization of the main characters presented them as dynamic and developing characters, whose emotionality, inner conflict and changing relationships underline their transformation into passive and more aggressive identities. Also, the mermaid transformation is a performative condition in which femininity is produced and redefined to satisfy social requirements, which aligns to Judith Butler concept of gender performativity. Overall, the findings suggest that the femininity of such teleseryes is a matter of negotiable and dynamic processes that depend on the characterization, performance, and empowerment.

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