

# Framing the Collective Image of Maestra as a Martyr-Hero in the Selected Filipino Films

<sup>1</sup>Darryl Imperial<sup>ORCID</sup>, <sup>2</sup>Rachel Lily Licmoan<sup>ORCID</sup>, <sup>3</sup>Alexis Ace Agravante<sup>ORCID</sup>, <sup>4</sup>Arvie Jane B. Conde<sup>ORCID</sup>

St. John Paul II College of Davao

<sup>1</sup>[darrylimperial@sjp2cd.edu.ph](mailto:darrylimperial@sjp2cd.edu.ph), <sup>2</sup>[rachellily\\_licmoan@sjp2cd.edu.ph](mailto:rachellily_licmoan@sjp2cd.edu.ph), <sup>3</sup>[alexis\\_agravante@sjp2cd.edu.ph](mailto:alexis_agravante@sjp2cd.edu.ph),

<sup>4</sup>[arviejane\\_conde@sjp2cd.edu.ph](mailto:arviejane_conde@sjp2cd.edu.ph)

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Corresponding Email:

[darrylimperial@sjp2cd.edu.ph](mailto:darrylimperial@sjp2cd.edu.ph)

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**Abstract.** This study aims to explore the collective image of the maestra as a martyr-hero in three Filipino films: *Balota* (2024), *Mila* (2022), and *My Teacher* (2022). The study uses qualitative film analysis to understand scenes and dialogues in the film in the light of the issue of women teachers as victims of systemic violence and as ethical agents of care, resistance and social responsibility by applying theories of martyrdom and heroization in relation to Galtung's Violence Triangle. They show that the films create a multi-layered experience of violence towards maestras, from direct threats, verbal abuse to emotional manipulation, institutional neglect, cultural belittlement, and gendered objectification. Such violence is not seen in isolation but as interwoven parts of a larger system that undervalues teachers' work, denies their agency, and makes their suffering seem normal in a political, educational, familial and patriarchal space. However, in these circumstances the maestras are not simply depicted as victims. They become moral agents who uphold the truth, student protection, corruption resistance, emotional and academic assistance and engage in collective struggles for justice. Their acts of heroism are rooted in practices of integrity, care, sacrifice and advocacy. But, the study says, the martyr-hero image needs to be understood critically. The films celebrate maestras as strong and brave women, but they also reveal the risks of romanticizing the suffering of teachers. Finally, the study calls for respecting the dignity of teachers, enhancing institutional protection, enhancing working conditions, and breaking the culture of sacrifice which is natural or obligatory in teachers' profession.

## Introduction

The role of a teacher is very important in the moral and social life of society, as teachers are expected not only to transfer knowledge to their students but also to act as role models of fairness, caring, discipline, and responsibility. According to Tripathy and Panda (2022), Bunga et al. (2025), and others, teachers are considered moral role models whose job shapes the values and character of learners. As to the moral expectation, this is more pronounced in the Philippine context, especially for female teachers or maestras, whose work is expected to embody the values of patience, sacrifice, care, and service. But this could also lead to a normalization of teacher suffering, especially if dedication translates into self-denial and endurance.

In films, women are often cast in socially defined roles that align with the culture's notions and ideologies. As cited by Teixeira et al. 2021, women in film are often depicted as struggling figures who balance between work, family, and social obligations, and Arif and Rahayu (2026) demonstrate that female authority can be portrayed in nurturing or authoritarian forms. Similarly, Jimenez (2022) notes that women characters tend to be subject to traditional and stereotypical representations, as they are dependent, passive, or locked up within gender-based representations. These performances show that film is not only a product of entertainment but also an active agent in the making and dissemination of the social significance of women's roles, identities, and constraints.

In educational and institutional settings, gendered expectations and power dynamics also impact female teachers. Harford and Hyland (2023) and Wescott et al. (2024) highlight that the practice of teaching the female role is frequently embedded

within institutional structures that are male-dominated, patriarchal, or gendered, and that have a negative effect on women's professional identities and agency. Thus, the image of the maestra in the movie is a place of analysis, as it includes the notions of gender, work, morality, and institutional power. In the film, female teachers can be portrayed as loving mentors and moral guides, but they can also be portrayed as being overwhelmed and suffering, which is acceptable because of the cultural norms of feminine sacrifice.

Other research confirms that women working in film are frequently mythologized, stereotyped, or symbolized as sacrificing and exceptionally resilient. Saenko et al. (2021) believe that the image of women teachers in films could be distorted and idealized by mythological images of women that emphasize their characteristics and assign them to mythological roles. Similarly, Wang et al. (2022) and Yang (2025) emphasize the shifting representation of female characters as heroes through representations of power, agency, and cultural values. Yet, while there are elements of resistance in the female characters, there are also subtle ways in which they can be considered martyr-like subjects whose offerings are influenced by social and cultural discourses (Gasviani, 2022). In these studies, it is suggested that the female role in films is often defined in the context of victimhood and agency, sacrifice and empowerment.

This tension can be explored through the use of the concepts of martyrdom and heroism. Lachenal (2021) indicates that martyrdom is socially created by sacrifice and recognition, and heroism arises out of socially valued acts of courage, honor, and morality. Therefore, martyr-heroes are not just people who suffer or act heroically; they are people whose suffering and heroism are acknowledged and meaningful to society. In the context of filmmakers, this is a way to understand women teachers as normal people beaten, discriminated, and neglected by institutions who are also regarded as heroes for their care, resistance, and moral involvement.

Although there is existing research on women's representation in film, teacher identity, martyrdom, and heroism, the subject of how Filipino films create the maestra as a combined martyr-hero figure is hardly addressed. Although previous research has focused on women as victims of gendered systems, empowerment heroes, or sacrificial figures, few studies have dealt with the intersections of these roles in the film image of female teachers. This space is important because the maestra is not just a professional educator, but also a moral agent whose suffering, care, and resistance are influenced by larger cultural, structural, and gender violence systems.

To fill this gap, the current study explores the representation of the maestras in selected Filipino films such as *Balota* (2024), *Mila* (2022), and *My Teacher* (2022). In particular, it examines the representations of female teachers as objects experiencing other types of violence and as martyr-heroes through ethical approaches, caring, sacrifice, and resistance. The study aims to shed light on how Philippine cinema depicts the collective image of the maestra as a victim of systemic oppression and a moral figure of resilience, advocacy, and social responsibility, through analyzing these portrayals.

## Methodology

### *Design*

This study employs a qualitative research design, specifically qualitative film analysis, which examines films as cultural texts that construct social meanings, narratives, and gendered representations (Borish et al., 2021). This approach focuses on interpreting how maestras are portrayed in relation to violence, heroism, and martyrdom in cinematic works.

This research design is used because it allows an in-depth and interpretive understanding of complex social representations that cannot be fully captured through quantitative methods. It is particularly suitable for analyzing how meanings about female teachers are constructed and communicated through film narratives.

### *Corpora*

The film corpus consists of three selected Filipino films: *Balota* (2024), *Mila* (2022), and *My Teacher* (2022). These films are chosen because they prominently feature female educators and depict their roles within educational, social, and political contexts. The films are used as primary materials to examine how maestras are represented in relation to violence, systemic oppression, and martyr-hero narratives.

### *Data Collection*

Data were gathered through repeated viewing of the selected films to ensure thorough familiarization with their narratives, characters, and key scenes (Iwasaki, 2021). This process was used to closely examine the films and identify segments that depict violence, resistance, and heroic or sacrificial portrayals of maestras.

Relevant dialogues, scenes, and events were carefully noted and transcribed to ensure accurate representation of the film content. These recorded materials served as the primary data for a detailed analysis of how maestras are constructed in the selected films.

### *Data Analysis*

The collected data were analyzed using a deductive qualitative content analysis, guided by existing theoretical frameworks (Kumar & Ujire, 2024). Instead of generating new themes, the analysis began with established theories and examined how these were reflected in the selected film data. Scenes and dialogues were directly examined and organized based on predefined categories to identify relevant representations of maestras.

These categories were drawn from Galtung's (1969) model, supported by Sinha et al. (2017), to examine forms of violence and structural inequality, while Political Martyrdom (Murphy, 2022) and Identity Formation (Mars, 2022) were used to interpret martyrdom. Together, these lenses provided a comprehensive understanding of how maestras are constructed as victims, martyrs, and heroes in Philippine cinema.

## Results and Discussion

### *Types of Violence Faced by Maestras in the Line of Duty*

In the present study, violence is defined in terms of the Violence Triangle proposed by Galtung (1969), which is conceptualized as a condition where direct, structural, and cultural aspects of violence intersect and reinforce each other in the life of the maestras. Sinha et al. (2017) also note that structural violence takes place in the form of unequal systems that entail suffering and restrict human agency. In all these (as in Balota 2024; Mila 2022, and My Teacher 2022), maestras are depicted not just as people who are victims of discrete incidents of harm, but as workers operating in systems that devalue their work, silence their voices, and normalize their pain. The chosen movies demonstrate that violence towards maestras is a physical threat, emotional manipulation, institutional neglect, cultural denigration, and gendered objectification.

The most apparent form of direct violence is physical violence, verbal aggression, intimidation, and threats faced by the maestras. Stark and Hester (2018) suggest these behaviors can be interpreted as coercive control, as this diminishes women's freedom and creates situations of fear for women. In the movies, this violence is not just about wounding a body, or even about safety, but also about diminishing the authority of the maestra from a valued teacher to a person to be conquered. The films uncover how violent forces seek to undermine the professional identity of the maestras by threatening them, slapping them, and verbally abusing them.

*Migs: "Hindot ka! Tarantado ka! Papatayin kita!"*

*(Balota\_1:02:26-1:02:32)*

*Migs: "You're a fucker! You're foolish! I will kill you!"*

*Nato: "Yung pera! Sa susunod, huwag mo akong hihiyain, ha?!"*

*Teacher Mila: "Anong hiya-Ah!" (sinampal)*

*Nato: "Ibigay mo na sa akin yung pera! Nasaan ba 'yon? Nasa'an?!"*

*(Mila\_8:50-9:11)*

*Nato: "The money! Next time, don't you embarrass me, okay?!"*

*Teacher Mila: "What embarrass-Ah!" (slaps her)*

*Nato: "Give me the money! Where is it? Where is it?!"*

The scenes illustrate that maestras are depicted in circumstances where violence becomes a way of control. Teacher Emmy's encounter with political threats in Balota shows that teaching is a risky profession where the interests of corrupt powers prevail. In the movie Mila, domestic violence reveals the fragility of a maestra who lives her life under the pressure of economy and the control of women. All of these scenes imply that direct attacks on maestras are not coincidental, but rather the result of an unequal power dynamic in which male, institutional, or political actors and/or their agents rely on fear to exert control over women's agency. This is exacerbated by psychological and emotional violence. Stark (2007) describes coercive control as having to do with manipulation, fear, surveillance and emotional pressure. In the movies, the maestras are physically threatened and also emotionally overwhelmed with guilt, moral pressure and fear of repercussions. They make their choices based on fear for family members, blackmail by institutions, and the accusations of their families

that professional commitment is an individual's failure. These kinds of violence will undermine their freedom of expression and make them carry emotional loads that may not be visible, but can cause a lot of harm.

*Migs: "Siguraduhin mong nandyan ka, kundi anak mo naman ang isusunod ko!"  
(Balota\_57:49-57:55)*

*Migs: "Make sure you're there, or your child will be next!"*

*Ms. Love: "Gusto ko lang sabihin na once there will be an investigation... Mauungkat lahat ng nangyari that day. Kung sino ang kausap mo, kung para kanino pinakiusap ng kausap mo, at ano ang sikreto ng kausap mo. Ah... Lahat yun mabubunyag Ma'am Emma... Sa madaling sabi you be outing Jude and Ace against the will. Kaya bayun ng konsensya mo?"*

*(My Teacher\_1:20:38-1:21:12)*

*Ms. Love: "I just want to say that once there will be an investigation... Everything that happened that day will be uncovered. Who you were talking to, for whom the person you were talking to made a request, and what the secret of the person you were talking to is. Ah... All of that will be revealed, Ma'am Emma... In short, you will be outing Jude and Ace against your will. Can your conscience handle that?"*

*Primo: "Lagi ka namang wala dito sa bahay, ah? Lahat ng oras mo, nasa eskwelahan! Nasa strike! Chalk! Eraser! Yan ang mahalaga sa'yo! Ako lagi akong mag-isa sa bahay, ah! At sinong kakausapin ko? Mga dingding?! Buong hapon nagmo-mokmok ako dito, tapos ikaw nasa strike! Puro ibang tao mahalaga sa'yo! Alam mo 'yon?"  
(Mila\_40:49-41:30)*

*Primo: "You're always not here at home, huh? All your time is at school! On strike! Chalk! Eraser! That's what's important to you! I'm always alone at home, huh! And who am I supposed to talk to? The walls?! I spend the whole afternoon sulking here, and then you're on strike! Other people are all that matter to you! Do you know that?"*

The following are excerpts showing the way in which psychological violence operates against the sense of responsibility of the maestra. Teacher Emmy is threatened via her child, Teacher Emma is pressured by the possibility of her students being exposed and Teacher Mila is guilted for having more of an interest in her profession and advocacy. In such cases, emotional manipulation becomes a weapon that compels maestras to make a decision between safety, integrity, responsibilities of the family and morality. So the films are a psychological violence that is an internal burden, not even when the physical form of violence is present.

The three movies also strongly feature structural violence. According to Winter et al. (2001): "Structural violence is harm caused by social structures that hinder people from achieving their basic needs or full agency. The participants observe structural violence in the chosen films as expressed in the presence of corrupt politicians and police, the presence of school authorities who are avaricious and do not pay attention to children who are in danger, and the presence of institutions that act as 'maestras' when it suits them and do not protect them when they are in danger. What these systems do not do is ignore teachers, they actively put teachers in vulnerable positions and they don't give them the necessary support, recognition and protection.

*Enzo: "Ma, paano kita matutulungan? Gusto mo, pupunta ako sa mga police?"*

*Teacher Emmy: "Hi-hindi... hindi... hindi... E-enzo, h-hindi ka pwede pumunta sa mga police. Hindi tayo pwedeng magtiwala sa kanila. Naiintindihan mo 'ko?"*

*(Balota\_45:21-45:32)*

*Enzo: "Mom, how can I help you? Do you want me to go to the police?"*

*Teacher Emmy: "N-no... no... no... E-enzo, y-you can't go to the police. We can't trust them. Do you understand me?"*

*SPO1 Pastor: "Alam mo bang suspect s'ya sa isang double murder case? Namatay ang isang Comelec representative at ang co-teacher n'ya."*

*(Balota\_51:24-51:36)*

*SPO1 Pastor: "Do you know that she is a suspect in a double murder case? A Comelec representative and her co-teacher died."*

Mrs. Mission: "Dahil–mukhang kini-kwistiyon mo ang integridad ko bilang prinsipal ng eskwelahang ito... I am telling you this: I will make sure that you will be punished for the further extent possible kapag napatunayan na mayroon kang nilabag! So, goodluck to you Ms. Bonifacio."

(My Teacher\_1:19:28-1:19:56)

Mrs. Mission: "Since it seems you are questioning my integrity as the principal of this school... I am telling you this: I will make sure that you will be punished to the furthest extent possible once it is proven that you have violated something! So, good luck to you, Ms. Bonifacio."

Principal: "Ms. Cabangon... Kailan ka naging abogado ni Mr. Malvar, ha?"

(Mila\_5:59-6:20)

Principal: "Ms. Cabangon... When did you become the lawyer of Mr. Malvar, huh?"

These scenes reveal the fragility and, even, danger of the institutions for maestras. In *Balota*, the police aren't seen to protect people, and Teacher Emmy is not a victim of political violence, but a suspect. In *My Teacher*, the administration doesn't go so far as to find out the truth, but it aims to scare Teacher Emma. In *Mila*, the principal tells Teacher Mila she doesn't need to worry about a fellow teacher, and she labels Teacher Mila's advocacy for her as "insubordination. These examples illustrate how systems operate to disempower maestra to speak, question authority, and to demand justice.

This institutional neglect is made worse due to the inconsistent value placed on teachers by the state. Akiba et al. (2023) point out that teacher labor is frequently utilized but little acknowledged or supported in institutions. This is clearly seen in *Mila*, where the teacher speaks of how they felt they were needed for the national events and left behind after. The film portrays how the teacher becomes a tool of the state in the context of elections, ceremonies and services to the public, but is not paid sufficiently, protected adequately and socially accepted.

Teacher Mila: "Pakiramdam naming mga teachers, para lang kaming mga second-class citizens. Eh, ganoon naman kami kung ituring ng gobyerno, hindi ba? Parang pakiramdam namin, tingin nila, wala kaming silbi. Pero pag may mga foreign dignitaries, kami naman ang tinatawag. Pag may election, kailangan din kami. Pero pagkatapos noon? Wala na, kinalimutan na lang kami sa isang tabi."

(Mila\_23:40-23:54)

Teacher Mila: "We, teachers, feel like we are just second-class citizens. Well, that's how the government treats us, isn't it? It feels like they think we are useless. But when there are foreign dignitaries, we are the ones they call. When there is an election, they also need us. But after that? Nothing, we are just forgotten and set aside."

This seems to be a clear articulation of a structural contradiction involving teachers' labour. Maestras are invaluable when needed in the public sphere, useless in institutional use. Their labor is mobilised in front of the public but ignored in private. This is an indication of a broader system in which teachers' sacrifice is expected as a part of public service, even if the sacrifice occurs when the working conditions are unfair and the teachers are not given the proper care and support.

Cultural violence contributes to this by sustaining the naturalness, acceptability or desirability of the low status of maestras. Childs (2025) describes cultural violence as the justifications of inequality through beliefs, symbols and social meanings. In the movies, the role of teacher is portrayed as a low-paid job and the maestra is made a "just a teacher." Such expressions are not just a matter of insult but an expression of cultural values that devalue what teachers do, and normalize the economic and emotional challenges of teaching.

*Edraline: "Teacher ka lang!"*

*(Balota\_1:31:34 -1:31:35)*

*Edraline: "You're just a teacher!"*

*Mila's Mother: "Teacher ka diba?"*

*Mila: "Opo"*

*Mila's Mother: "walang pera ang mga teacher. Turo lang sila ng turo, kung sino-sinong tao pag ka tapos iiwan lang sila."*

*(Mila\_1:39:07-1:39:21)*

*Mila's Mother: "You're a teacher, right?"*

*Mila: "Yes."*

*Mila's Mother: "Teachers don't have money. They just keep teaching and teaching different kinds of people, and in the end, those people just leave them behind."*

These are claims about cultural violence that are expressed in everyday language. The term "teacher ka lang" diminishes the maestra's identity, and the mother's description in Mila of teaching as a profession of low status, poverty, and fatigue. The films thus reveal that cultural violence is not necessarily a direct assault; it can be inscribed in commonplace judgements, in which teachers' suffering becomes predictable.

Gendered expectations are also involved in cultural violence. Maestras are evaluated as teachers and women with value assessed by roles in the family, subservience and conformity to institutional norms. Their dedication to students and advocacy for them is sometimes expressed as neglect of household duties or the absence of gendered roles. The films thus demonstrate how devaluation of the position of a maestra is compounded by the overlap of patriarchy and judgement.

*Primo: "Kaya wala kang pamilya... Naintindihan mo ba ako? Wala kang pamilya! Kasi mahalaga sa'yo puro ibang tao!"*

*(Mila\_40:30-41:37)*

*Primo: "That's why you don't have a family! Because what's important to you is only other people!"*

*Principal: "Tingnan mo'ng sarili mo, hindi ba may asawa ka? Eh, bakit hanggang ngayon, Ms. Cabangon ka pa rin? Hindi ka sumusunod sa mga patakaran ng eskwelahan!"*

*(Mila\_6:20-6:26)*

*Principal: "Look at yourself, don't you have a husband? Then why are you still Ms. Cabangon? You are not following the rules of the school!"*

From these excerpts, it becomes clear that the perceived threats to women are used to discipline female teachers. The character of teacher Mila is criticized for not having a family, for being too otherworldly, for her attention to others rather than to her family, and for questioning her identity and conformity with institutional rules based on her marital status. These types of judgments imply that the role of the maestra is not divorced from gender expectations. Her worth is judged not just on her ability to do her job competently, but on her ability to meet the social expectations of societal femininity, marriage, and obedience.

This devaluation is exacerbated by gendered and sexual violence. Harassment and objectification may lead to empathic failure of the harasser, particularly when the comments are sexualised and normalized (Anzani et al., 2025). Balota, the professional identity of the maestra is diminished by the sexual fantasy and misogynistic language. There is no longer an educator, but rather a sexualized object, a sign that the professional dignity can be destroyed by gendered violence.

*Migs: "Alam mo, ma'am, paborito kung porn yung mga teacher... Lalo na yung may edad."*

*(Balota\_1:01:05-1:01:28)*

*Migs: "What a waste... You know, ma'am, my favorite porn is teachers... Especially those who are older."*

This is a clear illustration of the intersectionality of direct, cultural and gender-based violence. This is an insulting comment, and it's part of a larger culture of objectifying women and normalizing harassment. In sexualizing the teacher, the scene reveals how the deprofessionalization of maestras can lead to their dismissal of professional authority and personal dignity. The tone of the comment also indicates the normalcy of harassment as a form of common discourse, which makes it difficult for victims to stand against or challenge the harassment.

Overall, the results suggest that there is no incidental, but there is a systemic violence against maestras in the selected films. Direct violence poses a threat to their safety; structural violence takes away any institutional protection and recognition; cultural violence legitimises their low standing and gendered violence objectifies and disciplines them as women. One of the threats to the maestra's well being is not simply a problem of political corruption, institutional neglect, cultural belittlement, or patriarchal control, but a problem of overlapping systems of violence. As a result, the films highlight the necessity for increased institutional safeguards, policies that prioritize the teacher, anti-violence measures, and cultural change that emphasizes the dignity and professional worth of maestras.

### *Maestras as Heroes Enduring Systemic Oppression*

The chosen movies depict maestras as victims of violence but they also build them up as strong ethical figures of care, resisting and social responsibility. Their heroism is more about their everyday responses to an oppressive situation rather than about their being exceptional or their perfection. As found in Murphy (2022), martyrdom has meaning when it is part of a broader political and social narrative; and as seen in Mars (2022), identities of heroism and martyrdom are created whenever acts of heroism or martyrdom are repeated and assigned a social meaning. In this context, the Balota, Mila and My Teacher are figures of martyrs-heroes since their suffering is connected with moral action, public service and opposition to injustice.

The element of heroism is first introduced in terms of moral agency. Franco and Zimbardo (2007) maintain that moral courage is a central element of heroism, particularly when people do the right thing in the face of pressure or risk. In the movies, maestras reject completely corrupt, unjust, and unethical systems. They face electoral malfeasance, they seek to have teachers treated fairly, and they protect students from institutional suspicion. They are depicted as heroic, but not because of grand gestures or dramatic exploits; their heroism is in their everyday moral choices.

*Teacher Emmy: "Putang ina mo! Anong good morning? Alam mo, alam ko na kung anong sasabihin mo kaya 'wag mo nang subukan."*

*(Balota\_10:31)*

*Teacher Emmy: "You son of a bitch! Don't even say 'good morning' to me. I already know what you're going to say, so don't even try it."*

*De Castro: "Ikaw Mila? Mahal mo din ang pagtuturo, di ba?"*

*Mila: "Opo, pero mas may malaking layunin, dapat bayaran nila ng tama ang mga teacher."*

*(Mila\_31:39-31:54)*

*De Castro: "You, Mila? You also love teaching, right?"*

*Mila: "Yes, but there is a bigger purpose—teachers should be paid properly."*

*Teacher Emma: "With all due respect Mrs. Mission, I will say this again for the last time: I did not tamper any of the grades of my students para maka pasa. Hindi ko na po kailangan gawin 'yon dahil pinag trabahuan nila yung mga scores nila. Naniniwala, ho, ako sa mga estudyante ko at sapat na 'yong paniniwalang binigay ko sa kanila para mag aral silang mabuti, para mag focus at maniwala sa mga sarili nila. Sana maniwala kayo sa mga estudyante ko ma'am, paniwalaan nyo rin sila."*

*(My Teacher\_1:18:32-1:19:02)*

*Teacher Emma: "With all due respect, Mrs. Mission, I will say this again for the last time: I did not tamper with any of my students' grades so they could pass. I did not need to do that because they worked hard for their scores. I believe in my students, and that belief I gave them is enough for them to study well, to focus, and to believe in themselves. I hope you believe in my students, ma'am, and trust them as well."*

*Mario: "Eh, ma'am... Nagdi-distribute lang po ng sample ballot."*

*Teacher Emmy: "Alam mong bawal yan, diba? Alam mo ikaw, parang di ka dumaan sa akin, eh."*

*(Balota\_28:18-28:40)*

*Mario: "But ma'am... I was just distributing sample ballots."*

*Teacher Emmy: "You know that's not allowed, right? It's like you didn't even pass by me about this."*

In these excerpts, maestras are seen as moral beings who stand up for integrity, even in the face of pressure. Teacher Emmy is rejecting corruption in the context of elections; Teacher Mila is linking love of teaching with the greater fight for just compensation; Teacher Emma is standing up for the dignity and sense of achievement of her students and their academic integrity. They are not heroes of the big time or the great deeds, but of a steadfast refusal to abdicate moral accountability. By embedding the practice of heroism in everyday acts of courage, fairness and professional conviction, the films expand the definition of heroism.

The heroism of the maestras is not limited to their individual actions, but also extends into the collective resistance and solidarity of others. The films imply that teachers' difficulties are not about to be solved simply through the effort of individuals as they have systemic issues. It is only when institutions do not recognise teachers' rights and dignity, that

collective action becomes necessary. The maestra is not only a caregiver but a political subject who can be related to other political events for reform through scenes of protest, mass leave and calls for justice.

*Representative: "Mga kapatid, saan ba nang-gagaling ang kapangyarihan sa mundo? Hindi ba't sa katawan at isip ng bawat isa sa atin? Ngunit ninanakaw ito ng mga politiko't mayayaman! Pero nasa atin ang tunay na kapangyarihan! Gamitin natin ito para sumigaw! 'Hustisya!'"*  
(Balota\_29:59-22:22)

*Representative: "Brothers and sisters, where does power in the world come from? Isn't it from the body and mind of each one of us? Yet it is being stolen by politicians and the wealthy! But the real power is ours! Let us use it to shout: 'Justice!'"*

*Co-teacher: "Teka sandali, ang suggestion ko pwersahin na natin ang gobyerno! Edi, 'wag tayong pumasok! Lahat ng mga public school teachers mag mamass leave. Imposible hindi nila tayo papansinin!"*  
(Mila\_18:43-18:57)

*Co-teacher: "Wait a second, here's my suggestion! Let's force the government to act on it! Well, let's not go in anymore! If all public school teachers take mass leave, there's no way they can ignore us."*

These scenes reimagine maestras' struggles as part of a collective fight for justice. The call to "take back" "true power" from politicians and the wealthy is the political aspect of teacher heroism. Similarly, the demand for mass leave of teachers in Mila exemplifies how teachers' agency is enhanced through the collective voice. The maestra, then, is a person who suffers but also a member of a larger community who practices and fights against their own subjugation, neglect, and institutional indifference.

Meanwhile, the movies make the heroism of the maestra intimate with everyday gestures of care. Teachers also do emotional labour, as described by Kariou et al. (2021), which goes beyond teaching. In the films chosen, the maestras are seen to give encouragement, supervision, tutoring, emotional reassuring, and personal guidance. These acts may seem mundane, but they show how teachers never give up on students when the resources are scarce, they are emotionally drained, and they face personal difficulty.

*Teacher Emmy: "Andrea, yung Nanay mo nasa Dubai... Hirap-na-hirap para sa'yo... Mag-effort ka nama, ha? Effort tayo..."*  
(Balota\_12:09-12:23)

*Teacher Emmy: "Andrea, your mother is in Dubai... working very hard for you... You should also put in some effort, okay? Let's make an effort..."*

*Student: "Bulakbol?...Eh Ma'am oras po ng practice ng intrams namin dito at ngayon lang ho namin na solo tung court na ito ng wala kaming kahati."*

*Teacher Emma: "Ganun ba Mr. Delos Reyes? Pwes, para sabihin ko sayo wala akong pake alam dahil 'tong oras na 'to, you're all under my supervision at lahat kayo responsibilidad ko!"*

*(MyTeacher\_14:10-14:30)*

*Student: "Slacker? But ma'am, it's the time for our intramurals practice, and this is the only time we've had the court to ourselves without sharing it with anyone."*

*Teacher Emma: "Is that so, Mr. Delos Reyes? Then let me tell you—I don't care, because at this time, you are all under my supervision, and all of you are my responsibility!"*

*Jenny: "Matagal na po akong nasa Grade 3. Sabi ng nanay, mahihiya na daw s'ya sa mga kaibigan nya kapag bumagsak pa ako."*

*Teacher Mila: "Bakit ba iniintindi ng nanay mo ang kahihyan? Nasa'n ba yang nanay mo? Kakausapin ko."*

*Jenny: "Ma'am, 'wag po..."*

*Teacher Mila: "Hindi na... Sige na, tahan na. Itu-tutor na lang kita, walang bayad. Huwag mong sabihin sa nanay mo, ha?"*

*(Mila\_12:45 - 13:26)*

*Jenny: "I've been in grade 3 for a long time. My mother said she'll be ashamed in front of her friends if I fail again."*

*Teacher Mila: "Why does your mother care so much about shame? Where is she? I'll talk to her."*

*Jenny: "Ma'am, don't."*

*Teacher Mila: "Okay, I won't... there, stop crying. I'll just tutor you for free. Don't tell your mother, okay?"*

The maestra's heroic actions in these examples hold profound relationality. Emmy recognizes Andrea's mother's sacrifice and encourages her to excel. Teacher Emma assumes responsibility for her students, and Teacher Mila offers free tutoring for a struggling child. These scenes create maestras as beings who care more than do duty. But the films also show the costs of this care; the burden of maestras is to try to make up for family issues, poverty, shaming and institutional gaps. Their courage is thus commendable, but it also highlights the dichotomy of the emotional work expected of teachers. This commitment is more marked when maestras safeguard the dignity and destiny of students at the expense of their own lives. The chosen movies depict educators who are willing to risk punishment, job loss, financial hardship, or their own safety to protect the most vulnerable learners. The scenes set up this image of the maestra as a martyr-hero, since her death is not one of suffering but of moral choice to save others.

*Teacher Emma: "Yes! I'm admitting everything. Fire me, revoke my licence, i-transfer n'yo ako sa pinaka malayong eskwelahan bahala na po kayo."*

*Mrs. Mission: "Sige!"*

*Teacher Emma: "Pero may pakiusap lang po sana ako. Pwede po ba akong mag stay hanggang sa end ng semester at saka sana huwag niyo hong parusahan ang mga bata. Hayaan n'yo ho silang maka-bawi sa finals."*

*(My Teacher\_1:21:28-1:21:54)*

*Teacher Emma: "Yes! I'm admitting everything. Fire me, revoke my license, transfer me to the farthest school—do whatever you want with me."*

*Mrs. Mission: "Alright!"*

*Teacher Emma: "But I just have one request. Can I stay until the end of the semester? And please, don't punish the students. Let them have a chance to make it to the finals."*

*Leni: "Hindi mo nai-intindihan? Bukas, makalawa, mare-rape din yan nang kung sino! Mabuti ng pagkakitaan ko!"*

*Teacher Mila: "Yan lang ba ang importante sa'yo? Pera? Puro pera? Eto... Lahat ng kinita ko! Yan... Iyan! Sa'yo na! Huwag mo lang ibenta ang anak mo!"*

*(Mila\_1:21:29-1:21:57)*

*Leni: "You don't understand? Tomorrow or the next day, she'll just end up getting raped by someone! I might as well profit from her!"*

*Teacher Mila: "Is that all that matters to you? Money? Always money? Here... everything I earned! Take it! Just don't sell your child!"*

These scenes powerfully construct maestras as figures of sacrifice and protection. Teacher Emma accepts possible professional punishment but pleads for her students' chance to recover academically. Teacher Mila gives up her earnings to prevent a child from being exploited. In both cases, the maestra absorbs the cost of institutional and social failure. Their heroism lies in their willingness to act when systems fail, but the films also expose the troubling reality that teachers are often forced to become protectors because institutions and families have failed to provide adequate care. Finally, the maestras' heroism is reinforced through advocacy and social responsibility that extend beyond the classroom. They respond not only to academic concerns but also to poverty, stigma, absenteeism, family neglect, and identity-based marginalization. These forms of advocacy demonstrate that maestras function as social actors whose work reaches into the emotional, moral, and social lives of their students and communities.

*Teacher: "Boyet, ano ba talaga ang problema? Bakit ba lagi kang absent..? Pinagtinda ka na naman ng sampaguita ng tatay mo, samantalang s'ya naglalasing? Eh, dapat nga s'ya ang nagtatrabaho para sa inyo, hindi ba? Alam mo, susugurin ko na 'yang tatay mo, eh... Oh, kunin mo ito. Sabihin mo, 'yan ang kinita mo sa sampaguitang ibenenta mo, ha? Pero papasok ka sa eskwela, ha?"*

*(Mila\_17:22-17:59)*

*Teacher: "Boyet, what is really the problem? Why are you always absent? Your father made you sell sampaguita again while he's out drinking? He should be the one working for you, shouldn't he? You know, I might go and confront your father... Here, take this. Tell him, this is what you earned from selling sampaguita, okay? But you will go to school, alright?"*

*Teacher Emma: "Sayang kasi yung opportunity, kunti na lang gagraduate kana."*

*Axel: "Makaka graduate nga ako, pero ang tingin naman nila sakin madumi kasi dito ako nagtatrabaho. Wala rin, dito rin ang bagsak ko eventually."*

*Teacher Emma: "Hindi kana papasok sa eskwela? At hindi mo na itutuloy mga pangarap mo dahil lang tinutukso ka nga mga kaklase mo? Sana pag isipan mo yung mga sinabi ko sayo."*  
(MyTeacher\_38:15-38:52)

*Teacher Emma: "It would be a waste of the opportunity—you're almost graduating."  
Axel: "I might graduate, but people will still see me as unclean because I work here. It's useless anyway—I'll end up here too eventually."*

*Teacher Emma: "You're not going to school anymore? And you're going to give up your dreams just because your classmates are teasing you? I hope you think carefully about what I told you."*

*SPO1 Morales: "Malaki ang utang na loob ko sa kanya. Sa labas para s'yang strikto... Pero grabe... Grabe yung supporta n'ya sa akin... Lalo na nung... nung... nung nalaman n'ya na... hindi ako mahilig sa babae. S'ya lang nakaka-alam... Pero kasi sa trabaho namin, 'di nila ako maintindihan, eh. Bata pa lang ako pangarap ko na to, eh... Nung sinabi ko 'to sa Mama mo... niyakap n'ya ako... Kaya Enzo, mahal na mahal ko yang Mama mo."*  
(Balota\_1:11:01-1;13:04)

*SPO1 Morales: "I owe her a lot. On the outside, she seems strict... but really... really... her support for me was overwhelming... especially when... when... when she found out that... I am not into women. She's the only one who knows... But in our work, they don't understand me. I've dreamed of this since I was young... When I told your mother this... she hugged me... That's why, Enzo, I love your mother so much."*

Maestras are depicted as "promoters of dignity and possibility" in these excerpts. Absenteeism is a problem that Teacher Mila intervenes in by responding to the poverty and neglect that is at the root of the issue. Teacher Emma supports Axel's education despite the stigma. Teacher Emmy's care of SPO1 Morales is an expression of care that validates identity and offers emotional safety. Through these acts, the maestra is built as a figure that sees the humanity of others where the institutions, families or communities might not.

The findings collectively indicate that the chosen films create the images of martyr heroes as a result of the confluence of suffering, care, moral courage, and resistance. Their heroism comes not from the power, prestige or public acknowledgment, but from their ethical behavior in an unjust system. Coinciding with this heroism, the films complicate it by demonstrating that the maestra's sacrifice is often the result of structural failures. So, the films celebrate the maestras as tough, morally upright characters while also cautioning against idealizing their plight. The image of the maestra as martyr-hero must not be used to justify teacher exploitation but to reveal the desperately needed institutional change, greater teacher protection, improved working conditions for teachers, and the recognition of their dignity in culture.

In this regard, the collective portrait of the maestra of Balota, Mila and My Teacher is a powerful and complex one. It is empowering because it acknowledges the female teacher as an ethical agent, a caregiver, an advocate and a figure of resistance. However, it is disturbing, since their heroism is fueled by systems that keep on letting them down. In the films, then, a call is made to honor the maestras, not by making them sacrifice forever, but by changing the social, cultural and institutional environments that make those sacrifices imperative.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study reveal that the selected Filipino films (Balota 2024, Mila 2022, My Teacher 2022) create the image of the maestra as a multifaceted character defined by violence, sacrifice, care and resistance. The results, based on Galtung's Violence Triangle, demonstrate how direct, structural, and cultural violence devalues, silences, and normalizes the work of the maestras. They are manifested in physical threats and verbal abuse, institutional neglect, gendered expectations, professional belittlement and social attitudes that devalue teachers as undervalued workers. So, the suffering of the maestras is not seen as random or individual but as a result of larger political, institutional, cultural and patriarchal structures. Yet, the movies also do not depict the maestras as victims. Instead, they are cast as moral actors who act against oppression through moral action, caring, advocacy, and collective resistance. They are heroic in their simple yet significant actions: protecting the students, defending the truth, resisting corruption, offering emotional support, and standing up for justice, even at risk. In this respect, the maestra is a martyr-hero whose sacrifice is socially significant as it serves the cause of others. But the study also teaches that this heroism should not gloss over teacher suffering. The films are celebratory of maestras as steadfast and selfless, but also reveal the inequitable structures that allow teachers to suffer harm in the first place. It is important, therefore, that the collective image of the maestra as martyr-hero is not to be interpreted as an excuse

to make continuous sacrifices, but rather as an invitation to respect the dignity of teacher and defend their rights and improve the social and institutional contexts in which their sacrifice is required.

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## Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study; all data used were obtained from previously published sources as cited in the reference list.

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## Appendices

No appendices are attached to this study.