

Power, Resistance and Knowledge in Efren R. Abueg's *Mga Kaluluwa sa Kumunoy*

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Abstract

This paper focuses into the dynamics of power, resistance and knowledge as portrayed in *Mga Kaluluwa sa Kumunoy* (Souls in the Quagmire), a novel by Efren R. Abueg, a well-known and prizewinning writer in the Philippines. Abueg, whose works have earned critical acclaim for portrayal of social issues, is particularly noted for his contributions to Philippine literature during the Martial Law era. Drawing on Michel Foucault's theoretical framework, the study explores how Abueg's novel critiques authoritarian rule and highlights the struggles of individuals caught in oppressive structures. Foucault's concepts of power relations, discourse, and subjectivity are used to examine how *Mga Kaluluwa sa Kumunoy* resists dominant narratives and generates alternative knowledge by amplifying marginalized voices. This paper demonstrates how the novel disrupts entrenched systems of power and engages readers in critical reflection. This paper argues that Philippine literature, exemplified by Abueg's work, not only serves as a record of historical trauma but also empowers individuals through the articulation of resistance and the envisioning of transformative futures.

Keywords: Michel Foucault, power, resistance, knowledge, Efren R. Abueg

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Introduction

Philippine literature has long reflected the country's troubled social and political history. One exemplary work is *Mga Kaluluwa sa Kumunoy* (Souls in the Quagmire), a powerful narrative that examines the dynamics of power, resistance and knowledge. This novel is written during the Martial Law era by Efren R. Abueg, a well-known and prizewinning writer in the Philippines. The novel reflects the harsh realities of authoritarian rule and explores the lived experiences of individuals under oppressive structures (Baquiran, 2010; San Juan, 2011).

This study employs Michel Foucault's theoretical framework to analyze Abueg's critique of authoritarianism. Foucault's concepts of power, resistance and discourse highlight how the novel not only documents historical trauma but also generates counter-discourses that challenge dominant narratives. By amplifying marginalized voices and envisioning transformative futures, *Mga Kaluluwa sa Kumunoy* exemplifies how literature becomes a tool for resistance and empowerment. This paper argues that Abueg's novel disrupts entrenched systems of power, engaging readers in critical reflection to oppression.

Review of Related Literature

The themes of power, resistance, and knowledge have been extensively studied in the context of Philippine literature, particularly works that emerged during and after the Martial Law era. Authors such as Lualhati Bautista and Jose F. Lacaba have critiqued authoritarianism through their narratives, exposing the systemic inequalities and human rights violations under dictatorial regimes.

Lualhati Bautista's *Dekada '70* is a seminal work that parallels *Mga Kaluluwa sa Kumunoy* in its exploration of resistance against the Marcos dictatorship (Bautista, 1983). Both novels focus on the transformative power of individual and collective defiance. Bautista's protagonist, Amanda Bartolome, mirrors the struggles of Abueg's characters, such as Mang Felimon and Celia, in confronting systems of oppression and reclaiming agency (Abueg, 2004; Bautista, 1983).

Similarly, Jose F. Lacaba's poem *Prometheus Unbound* critiques Martial Law through clear imagery and symbolism, echoing Abueg's use of the "quagmire" as a metaphor for systemic oppression (Lacaba, 2000). Lacaba, like Abueg, uses literary forms to highlight the relationship between power and resistance, emphasizing the importance of storytelling in preserving subjugated histories (Abueg, 2004; Lacaba, 2000).

Foucault's theoretical framework has also been applied in analyzing literature as a site of resistance. We can argue that literature disrupts entrenched systems of power by amplifying marginalized voices and fostering critical reflection. This aligns with Foucault's concept of "subjugated knowledges," which asserts that resistance often arises from reclaiming suppressed narratives. Abueg's novel exemplifies this dynamic, using storytelling to challenge authoritarian narratives and empower the oppressed.

In Philippine literary studies, the works of Resil Mojares have shed light on how regional literature resists the dominance of Manila-centric discourses. Mojares (2002) highlights the role of local narratives in reclaiming identities and histories erased by colonial and post-colonial systems. Abueg's *Mga Kaluluwa sa Kumunoy*, though set in a rural Philippine

setting, contributes to this tradition by foregrounding the struggles of the marginalized and amplifying their voices.

The relationship between power and resistance in literature is also evident in the works of Southeast Asian authors such as Pramoedya Ananta Toer of Indonesia. Toer's *Bumi Manusia* (This Earth of Mankind) critiques colonialism and authoritarianism through characters who resist the dominant forces shaping their realities (Toer, 1996). Like Toer (1996), Abueg (2004) employs his characters to demonstrate how individuals navigate and resist oppressive systems, reflecting the universal relevance of these themes.

This review of literature situates *Mga Kaluluwa sa Kumunoy* within a broader tradition of socially engaged writing in the Philippines and beyond. The themes of power, resistance and knowledge are not only central to Abueg's work but also connect with the broader struggles for justice and freedom in Southeast Asian literature.

Theoretical Framework: Foucault's Concepts of Power, Resistance and Knowledge

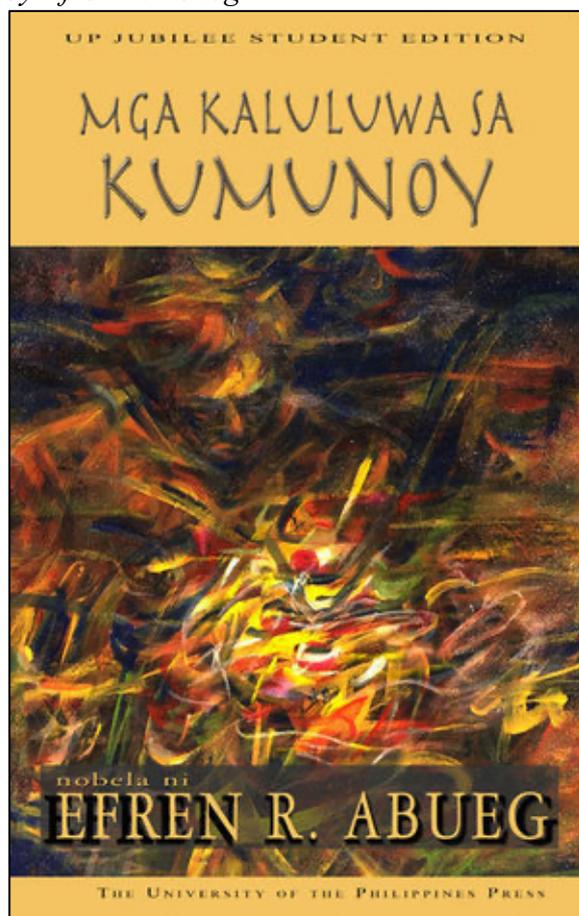
Michel Foucault's theories on power and resistance provide a clear framework for analyzing the dynamics of *Mga Kaluluwa sa Kumunoy*. Foucault (1980) argues that power is not centralized but diffused through networks, shaping individuals and institutions. Rather than being purely repressive, power is productive, creating systems of knowledge that define societal norms. Resistance, according to Foucault (1980), is intrinsic to power, arising wherever power is exercised. This connection between power and resistance is central to Abueg's novel, where the characters went through a setting of oppression, uncovering opportunities for defiance within the constraints of their reality.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, particularly a textual analysis approach, to examine Efren R. Abueg's *Mga Kaluluwa sa Kumunoy*. The research is grounded in Michel Foucault's theoretical framework, focusing on his concepts of power relations, resistance and knowledge. By applying Foucault's lens, the study critically analyzes how the novel represents the relationship of power, resistance and knowledge within the socio-political context of Martial Law-era in the Philippines. The primary data for this study consists of the text of *Mga Kaluluwa sa Kumunoy*. The novel is examined in its entirety, with particular attention to passages that highlight the themes of power, oppression, resistance and the generation of alternative knowledge. Secondary sources, such as scholarly articles, books, and critiques of Abueg's works, are also consulted to provide contextual and critical insights into the novel's socio-political background and literary significance. The study ensures proper acknowledgment of all sources and adheres to academic standards of integrity. As the research focuses on textual analysis, no human participants are involved, eliminating ethical concerns related to personal data or consent. By employing this methodology, the study aims to reveal how Abueg's novel critiques authoritarian rule and amplifies marginalized voices, thereby contributing to an understanding of Philippine literature as a tool for resistance and empowerment.

Figure 1

Book Cover of the Novel Mga Kaluluwa sa Kumunoy (Souls in the Quagmire)
by Efren R. Abueg



Results and Discussions

Power and Oppression in the Novel

Efren Abueg's *Mga Kaluluwa sa Kumunoy* clearly represents a society entrapped in systemic corruption, poverty and violence, symbolizing the struggles experienced during the Martial Law era in the Philippines. The novel's title encapsulates the dual tragedy of its characters: the "souls" symbolize the oppressed, while the "quagmire" represents the unyielding grip of social and political oppression. This imagery captures the despair and helplessness of individuals caught in an inescapable cycle of exploitation and abuse.

One of the most striking illustrations of systemic violence in the novel lies in Abueg's poignant depiction of the rural poor. In a powerful passage, Abueg (2004) writes, "There is no freedom in this place except the freedom to suffer. The farmer is a slave to his own land, a slave to his own sweat" (p. 32). This line starkly reveals the paradox of "freedom" under a repressive regime, where even the most basic rights and opportunities are distorted into instruments of subjugation. The phrase "slave to his own land" underscores the deep irony of a system where land, a symbol of prosperity, becomes a burden for those who toil on it.

Mang Felimon, a farmer, serves as a microcosm of the rural poor's plight. Initially depicted as a man resigned to his grim reality, he gradually awakens to the inequities surrounding him.

His transformation is encapsulated in his anguished question, “Until when must I bear the burden of something that is not my fault? If every move I make is controlled, when will I truly become human” (Abueg, 2004, p. 47). This internal struggle marks the beginning of his resistance, as he transitions from passive acceptance to active defiance.

Abueg also explores the use of silence as a tool of oppression. The state’s enforcement of silence creates an illusion of peace while perpetuating fear and compliance. This is articulated through the line, “the silence in the town is not a sign of peace, but a sign of fear created by those in power” (Abueg, 2004, p. 76). This enforced quietness suppresses dissent, fostering a culture where fear is mistaken for order, and oppression masquerades as stability.

Foucault’s analysis of power is crucial in understanding the mechanisms of oppression in *Mga Kaluluwa sa Kumunoy*. He posits that power is not merely repressive but also productive, shaping identities and knowledge within society (Foucault, 1977a). In the novel, power manifests through both visible and invisible structures, state institutions, economic hierarchies, and cultural norms that dictate acceptable behavior and discourse.

One of Foucault’s key concepts, disciplinary power, is evident in the way the state enforces compliance. Surveillance, policing, and the normalization of submission are central themes in the novel. The government’s control over education, media, and public discourse reflects Foucault’s notion of biopower, how power extends into the regulation of life itself. For example, the constant monitoring of dissenters mirrors the Foucauldian panopticon, where individuals internalize the gaze of authority and regulate their own behavior out of fear. Foucault argues that where there is power, there is resistance. This principle is central to Abueg’s novel, where acts of defiance, whether through education, protest, or storytelling, emerge despite overwhelming oppression.

Resistance and Counter-Discourses in the Novel

Despite the pervasiveness of power and oppression, *Mga Kaluluwa sa Kumunoy* emphasizes the resilience of human spirit and the capacity for resistance. These acts of defiance often originate from the margins of society, where individuals challenge authoritarian narratives in subtle yet profound ways.

One of the characters named Celia, a schoolteacher, represents intellectual resistance. Through education, she seeks to empower her students to recognize and question the systemic injustices that permeate their lives. Her declaration, “Education is not only for teaching reading and writing; it is a weapon against ignorance and injustice” (Abueg, 2004, p. 90), encapsulates her mission to arm the youth with knowledge as a tool for liberation. Her quiet defiance highlights the transformative potential of education in resisting and dismantling systems of oppression.

Another character named Ka Andres, a revolutionary leader, embodies a more overt form of resistance. His legacy, recounted through the perspectives of other characters, serves as a source of inspiration for the oppressed. One follower reflects on his influence stating, “Ka Andres did not only fight with weapons. His struggle was also against the lies spread by those in power” (Abueg, 2004, p. 115). This statement underscores the multi-dimensional nature of resistance, which involves not just physical confrontation but also the battle against propaganda and lies propagated by those in power.

Through these characters, Abueg demonstrates that resistance, whether intellectual or physical, is both a personal and collective endeavor. It is an act of reclaiming agency and affirming the inherent dignity of individuals against a backdrop of systemic exploitation. The novel illustrates resistance through alternative knowledge production. By exposing the lies and deceptions of those in power, *Mga Kaluluwa sa Kumunoy* creates a counter-narrative that challenges the state's ideological control. Foucault (1980) argues that knowledge is a site of power struggles, and Abueg's novel exemplifies this by using storytelling as a means of reclaiming suppressed histories. The narrative provides the marginalized with a voice, enabling them to resist the imposed narratives of their oppressors and redefine their own reality.

Furthermore, the novel serves as a powerful metaphor for collective awakening. The characters' realization that their oppression is not fate but a construct imposed upon them echoes Foucault's assertion that power is not absolute; it is contested and negotiated. This revelation encourages both characters and readers alike to critically engage with systems of power and resist passive submission.

Knowledge as a Tool for Liberation in the Novel

The novel further underscores the transformative power of knowledge and storytelling as tools for liberation. Abueg highlights how these mechanisms preserve subjugated histories and challenge dominant discourses. An elder in the community poignantly articulates this when recounting past struggles to young activists, "If we do not tell our history, who will care? If we do not pass on our lessons, how will the spirit of resistance live on" (Abueg, 2004, p. 123). This line affirms the importance of collective memory in fostering a culture of resistance and continuity.

Celia's efforts to encourage her students to document their lives and struggles further exemplify this theme. In a particularly moving moment, she tells them, "Our words can be weapons. The story of our lives can be the spark of change" (Abueg, 2004, p. 135). This act of writing and storytelling becomes a form of defiance against the erasure and manipulation of truth, empowering individuals to assert their realities and envision a more just future.

The act of storytelling is also deeply intertwined with the concept of counter-discourses. By giving voice to the marginalized, Abueg's narrative itself becomes an act of resistance. As Foucault's framework suggests, reclaiming suppressed narratives and fostering alternative knowledge are intrinsic to challenging entrenched systems of power. *Mga Kaluluwa sa Kumunoy* not only documents the trauma of oppression but also serves as a vehicle for empowerment, reminding its readers of the potential for transformation even in the direst circumstances.

Celia embodies the Foucauldian idea that knowledge production is a site of struggle. By teaching her students to question state narratives, she disrupts the dominant discourse and fosters counter-knowledge, aligning with Foucault's claim that knowledge is not for knowing; knowledge is for cutting (Foucault, 1980).

Ka Andres, the revolutionary leader, further exemplifies resistance as he challenges not only the state's monopoly on violence but also its control over history. His defiance represents Foucault's idea of the insurrection of subjugated knowledges (Foucault, 1980), wherein suppressed truths resurface to challenge hegemonic ideologies. His movement is not just

about armed struggle, it is about reclaiming narratives and exposing the mechanisms of domination.

Mga Kaluluwa sa Kumunoy aligns with Foucault's vision of power as a fluid, contested force rather than a static entity. The novel suggests that resistance is always possible, even within deeply entrenched systems of control. By integrating Foucauldian analysis, this study demonstrates that Abueg's work is not just a reflection of historical oppression but also a blueprint for critical engagement and transformative action.

Conclusion

Efren R. Abueg's *Mga Kaluluwa sa Kumunoy* is a testament to the enduring power of literature as a medium for social critique and resistance. Through its clear portrayal of power, oppression and resistance, the novel engages readers in a critical reflection on the dynamics of authoritarian rule. By amplifying marginalized voices and reclaiming suppressed histories, Abueg's work demonstrates how literature can challenge dominant narratives and inspire transformative change. This study, guided by Foucault's theoretical framework, has shown how *Mga Kaluluwa sa Kumunoy* disrupts entrenched systems of power and fosters alternative discourses. *Mga Kaluluwa sa Kumunoy* is a powerful testament to literature's role in resistance. By portraying the lived experiences of oppression and resilience, Abueg's work fosters critical reflection and inspires action against systems of domination. As Foucault posits, "where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault, 1977b), and through the novel's characters and themes, Abueg clearly illustrates this perpetual struggle. As Philippine literature continues to evolve, works like Abueg's remind us of its essential role in shaping collective memory and empowering individuals to envision a more just and equitable society.

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