Spectacle, Stomach and Specter: Consumption and Body Politics in Sharlene Teo's *Ponti*

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Abstract Set in Singapore and weaving together the lives of three women, Sharlene Teo's debut novel *Ponti* (2021) critiques the patriarchal construction of female bodies within the frameworks of beauty and consumption. Drawing from concepts in *l'écriture du corps* (writing the body) and revisionist mythmaking, this article explores the novel's sustained criticism of gendered body policing through three metaphorical elements: the spectacle, referring to the embedded filmic text within the novel that serves as metafictional commentary on the myth of femalehood ; the specter, embodying the hyperliteral erasure of women in the public sphere; and the stomach, symbolizing the regulation of women's eating habits and the perpetuation of an ideal physicality which result in disordered consumption. This analysis reveals how the body as a locus of power is subjected to control and, albeit not without complications, functions simultaneously as a vehicle for resistance. In seeking to unpack modes of resistance writing achieved through representations of consumption and the female body, this study positions three metaphorical constructs as categories of analysis for reading contemporary writings of the body in feminist literature.

Keywords resistance writing; migrant literature; critical food studies; revisionist mythmaking; feminist literary studies

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Introduction

Eating is a corporeal activity, a duty that the body accomplishes for its own

preservation. To eat is to introduce sustenance into the body and to divest it with energy and power. This power, not simply referring to the energy source of the organic machine, also connotes self-gratification, the power to temper one's hunger. An eating body is one that exemplifies the power to desire and to satiate this desire. At the same time, it is one that transforms, not simply in terms of the digestive process but also in terms of one's relationship to the individual body and the other bodies surrounding it. What one eats, or if one eats at all, if one eats for pleasure or if one does not eat for *others'* pleasure, transforms the eaters' body, in their own eyes and in the perspective of other eating bodies. The question of power reasserts once again its significance: the power to shape one's body through consumption and the power to require bodies to be shaped through consumption. If eating is a required activity for survival, a means to become a body—to "embody" so to speak—to prevent or manipulate one's consumption practices can symbolically amount to the curbing of one's power, to dispossession or disembodiment. Alternatively, if to eat is to allow the external the external to affect the internal, inasmuch as foreign substances are absorbed by the body, then choosing not to eat can also mean resisting the oppressive influence of an environment over one's physicality and regaining control over it.

Sharlene Teo, a Singapore-born author based in the United Kingdom, navigates the questions and issues that lie at the convergence of power, consumption and female embodiment in her debut novel *Ponti* (2018). Published originally in English, the multi-temporal novel takes place in Singapore and alternates the stories of three women: Szu, a 16-year-old misfit; Amisa, her mother and once actress of a fictional horror trilogy *Ponti!*; and Circe, a school outcast who befriends Szu. The novel begins in 2003 as Szu relates her descent into existential crisis and her struggles with anorexia, prompted by social alienation and the death of her mother. Circe's narration is set in 2020, nearly two decades after her fallout with Szu. Recently divorced and struggling to connect with the world despite her job as a social media specialist, Circe is tasked with a marketing project involving a remake of *Ponti!*. Amisa's story takes readers back into 1990 as she embarks on her first acting endeavor, only to confront subsequent disappointments and unfulfilled aspirations. Threading through all three narratives is a nuanced criticism of how patriarchy discursively constructs female bodies, and how this normative construction impends women's path to subjectivity, agency and autonomy.

The inscription of meanings on the body has been recurrently theorized and problematized through the concept of the body-as-text, i.e., the body as a text upon which discourses and ideologies are written, disseminated and perpetuated. The

theorizations of Foucault on corporeality, though not heavily focused on the question of gender or women's experience, have been adopted as the conceptual basis for many feminist writings on female body discipline (McLaren 81-82). The modern form of power focused on life (as opposed to death), what Foucault denominates as *bio-power*, is wielded through an anatomo- and biopolitics that produce docile, disciplined bodies (*The History* 139-140). Building on this concept, feminists like Susan Bordo and Sandra Bartky have argued that the body can be read as a site of social control and as a text upon which ideals about femininity are written. A system of regulatory regimes anchored into temporal and spatial elements, "disciplines and punishes" bodies (to borrow Foucault's titular words) to eventually render them docile. For Bordo, the shaping of bodies, through the perpetuation of dominant models of corporeality create and sustain ideals of femalehood (166).

Bodies in many forms populate Teo's fiction, and always in an attempt to lodge a broader feminist criticism: Szu thinks of herself as "Miss Frankenstein," "the bottom of the bell curve" (13), and of her body as a source of disgust, her "bad face" blemished by "acne," "disgusting hair" and "blood" (1). The depiction of her anorexic body is set against her negative body image and non-belongingness at home and in school. Circe's body is invaded by a tapeworm, her parasitic infection exemplifying her existential decay as she struggles to belong in a world where beauty is valued above else. Amisa faces death and disease as her body, once of "terrifying" beauty (64), undergoes the inevitable transformations of aging and succumbs to illness. Amidst this diverse array of bodies portrayed in the novel, Teo highlights patterns of consumption, focusing on the characters' aversion to food and refusal to eat.

If gastronomic narratives are characterized by an abundance of food references that whet the appetite, Ponti is an anti-food narrative, juxtaposing prolific foodspeak against the pervasive portrayal of repulsion associated with consumption. Food, almost always depicted as unpalatable or inedible, is emblematic of the societal discontents and anxieties plaguing the three women. In this article, I examine how Teo problematizes femininity ideals, female body policing, beauty and consumption in the context of consumer capitalism culture. As my analysis will show, Teo leverages a number of tools in her writing arsenal, from revisionist mythmaking to *foodspeak* to metatextual architectures, to illustrate the gendered dynamics of body regulation within patriarchal systems. In the next sections, I will draw focus on the novel's sustained criticism of modern patriarchal power's production of (non) acceptable physicality, particularly through three elements: the spectacle, i.e., the eponymous film trilogy embedded in the novel; the specters or the transfiguration

of the characters as ghosts that evoke metaphorical disembodiment and erasure; and the stomachs or the representations of the consumed/consuming body.

Spectacle of Femininity

In Southeast Asian folkloristic tradition, a woman whose death occurs during childbirth or is caused by male-inflicted violence transforms into a pontianak, a flesh-eating ghost seeking vengeance for her unjust demise. The many Malay horror films featuring the pontianak, more than ten to date, have cemented a mythos: always female, the pontianak has a deceitful appearance, manifesting as a beautiful and seductive woman but having as her true form a mangled, decaying face. Driving a nail onto her nape subdues her and suppresses her grotesque form, turning her back into the beautiful, "good" woman and wife. Though largely known for targeting men, the pontianak is depicted in some stories as also attacking expectant mothers and children. Narratives about her; however, are sometimes ambiguous. In certain films for instance, the pontianak is portrayed in a heroic light, exacting revenge on those who caused her death or those who threaten the *kampung* community. The modern remake *Revenge of the Pontianak* (2019) tells the story from the perspective of the ghost, a woman who returns from the dead to take revenge against a lover who forced her into abortion and death.

For many critics, the retellings of the pontianak's story can be read as an allegory of the battle between women and patriarchy. She embodies the antithesis of the ideal Malay woman who is first defined by her ability to reproduce and become a mother. At the same time, her origin story as a victim of abuse or rape manifests as a criticism of female-targeted violence in contemporary society (Kreems). That the pontianak transforms to a "normal" and "ideal" woman when nailed—the nail evoking the phallus—is evocative of patriarchy's attempt to control, disempower and silence the women (Nicholas and Kline). But while many reimaginations of her legend in both film and literature do carry feminist meanings, they are nevertheless underpinned by patriarchy's misogynistic conception of female monstrosity. Indeed, the earliest historical reference to the pontianak, dating back to 1618, describes the ghost as "enemies of men" (Galt 2). Writings during the colonial era attest to the androcentric anxieties around female seduction and desire. An avatar of what is considered as extreme evil in patriarchal mythopoeisis, the pontianak must be eradicated in order to produce the other end of the extreme: the good woman, kind and submissive, emblem of ideal femininity. The potential female agency that empowers the modern pontianak in the films is nevertheless constricted by the patriarchal script, and by the fact that she can display agency only because she is

technically dead (Kreems).

Through repetition, mythic discourse perpetuates female archetypes that operate within a dualistic frame. Women are typecast as either a figure of Good, where goodness is equated to submissiveness, passivity, silence and obedience, or as a figure of Evil, the root of disorder and destruction—the legend of the sisters Bawang Merah and Bawang Putih, i.e. the story of a "good" woman, Bawang Merah, who suffers abuse at the hands of her "evil" sister, Bawang Putih and her evil mother-in-law, come to mind. Such "angel/monster" female imaginary do not reside simply in fiction, but extends well into reality (Gilbert and Gubar 17). Myths so potently repeated soak the very society and culture within which they were created; and in turn, become themselves "mythifying" in that they too construct discursive notions and ideals within these sites. Indeed, mythic images of women reinforce a universal imaginary of femininity, i.e., what it means to be an ideal or non-ideal woman, and renders it a given. This in turn not only promotes sexism and gender hegemony in society, it also instigates concrete violence upon female bodies. The witch killings in modern Indonesian and Nepalese societies are magnified cases in point of the potency of Myth and its role in gender-based violence (Shrestha; Sims).

By typologizing ideal femininity and promoting the demonization of female bodies, myths dictate what it means to be a "good" or a "bad" woman, and justifies body regulation and compliance as necessary tools for social order. "Myth deals in false universals," as Angela Carter writes, "to dull the pain of particular circumstances" (*Sadeian* 5). Unsurprisingly, the long history of misogynistic and androcentric mythmaking has been a point of contention in feminist circles. Many authors undertake what is now known as revisionist mythmaking, expanding upon Adrienne Rich's concept of re-vision, "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (18). For Alicia Ostriker and Carter, best known in such endeavor, revisionist mythmaking is filling an "old vessel" with "new wine" to then "make the old bottles explode" (Ostriker 213; Carter, *Notes* 69). The revisionist process entails rewriting old myths to produce new meanings, to challenge their legitimacy and promote female subjectivity and empowerment.

In *Ponti*, Teo uses the cinematic spectacle to satirize the creation of female monsters in patriarchal mythmaking and problematize notions of normality and deviance. The fictional trilogy embedded in the text includes the eponymous *Ponti!* (1978) and two sequels, *Ponti 2* (1979) and *Ponti 3: Curse of the Bomoh* (1980). In the first film, a hunchbacked, disfigured girl named Ponti seeks the help of a *bomoh*

(a Malay shaman) to become beautiful. Unbeknownst to her, the cure comes with a curse. In order to remain beautiful, she must feed regularly of men's blood. In *Pontianak*, the original 1957 film by Cathay-Keris studios, the protagonist turns into a pontianak in an attempt to save her husband's life. In Teo's rewriting, she chooses to become a monster in order to sustain her beauty. The emphasis is thus placed on Ponti's need to become beautiful in order to fit in, because as she reasons, "a lifetime of ugliness is unbearable" (7). This revised element clues us in right away on some of the main issues that the author seeks to explore: the creation of "deviant" identities, the embedment of beauty as the paragon of ideal femininity, the marginalization of women who do not conform to this ideal, and the internalized shame engendered by such marginalization. Ponti is emblematic of the outsider status of the characters—all three, Amisa, Szu and Circe, are in their own way pariahs in the society—but also of women who do not correspond to dominant standards of femalehood.

The metareferential *mise-en-abyme* of the films in the novel, which puts emphasis on the production process of the film and on the technicalities of cinematography, points to the artificiality of the female-as-temptress and female-as-monster archetypes. The stage curtains are drawn back as the characters reveal how gore scenes are produced off-screen. Watermelons are stabbed to produce the sound of a knife stuck into the stomach, or otherwise dropped from a certain height to mimic the cracking of a skull. For blood, corn syrup is used, producing a color a tad too pink to be realistic (173). The characters recount the scenes by emphasizing the movements of the camera, for instance in Circe's account:

> The screen flickers on and the title credits appear; *PONTI 2*, unsteady white words across a canopy of brown and green. The sound of strings gives me a sense of rising dread. The camera pans out from a quiet dirt road into wet green paddy fields flanked by traveler's palms with their parched, fanlike leaves. The shot keeps broadening until it takes in the entire landscape of sparse houses with thatched orange roofs, sheds of rusty corrugated steel, and the odd silo, joined together by thin, snaking roads.…When one of the men starts to talk, he is dubbed over in a gravelly American voice.
>
> […] Once she's invited inside, the camera pans out and we see her face. Amisa smirks. The hero's good wife gasps. The Pontianak reveals her true, hideous nature, and thunder claps. She looks garish, deranged, red lipped, with monster makeup caked on like papier-mache. With a flutter like a sheet being aired out, the Pontianak flies away. The body of a plantation worker is revealed under

> the fronds of a nearby tree, bloodied and bruised. The camera zooms in on his face with one eyeball sucked out, the socket a gelatinous prosthetic pulp, like splattered raspberries. She's torn his stomach open. Blood everywhere, slightly too pink to be fully convincing, but it's sickening to look at. (170)

Szu's retelling of the film also underscores metafictional aspects:

> My mother was nineteen when she filmed it, close to my age. *Please, Datuk, I beg you,* she says to the camera–and the voice that comes out is a total stranger's: and American dub, sweet and small and foreign. […] Blood splatters. And then the camera pans to the tops of palm trees. You can see the leaves shaking. The sound of hungry slurping offscreen. They didn't have the budget for more gore, so we are spared the actual defilement. (7-8)

The readers are not simply "watching" the film but are also witnesses to its production circumstances. The flickering of the screen, the rolling of the credits, the dubbing, the fixation on camera movement, the shots, and the panning all contribute to highlighting the fictionality of the film.

Film apparatus theory hypothesizes the effects of the layout of the cinematic/theatrical space where the camera is placed behind the spectators. Because the apparatus, material but also ideological, is out of view—that is to say that the process of film-making is hidden—the spectators identify with the subjects on the screen, unaware of its ideological control. Here, it is the contrary: the cinematographic apparatus is rendered visible and the spectators are obsessively aware of the labor process. Insisting on the film's status as an artifact, Teo questions the very process that fabricates mythic female monsters, while illustrating a grander fiction in the social fabric, that of femininity. Female specters are not born, but rather produced, just as female standards—what it means to be "normal"—are created inorganically. The film symbolizes thus patriarchy's production of female monsters, i.e., women demonized in patriarchal mythopoesis as sources of temptation and corruption, but also women who become "monsters" for deviating from standards of ideal femininity.

The film's artificiality is best emphasized in Amisa's preparation to immerse into the pontianak character. In the beginning, Amisa is unable to successfully act the monster figure and show the expressions demanded of her. To remedy this, the director who scouted her, Iskandar Wiryanto, sets up sessions in his home to transform her into "[his] Pontianak, [his] murderous ghost, inside and out" (213).

Through these acting sessions, where Iskandar degraded her, verbally abused her and broke her "spirit" (217), Amisa creates the mask of Ponti. Cracks in this artificial mask reveal themselves, however, as Amisa's acting leads to disruptions in the film. Her emotions are often incongruent with the scenes. After eating a prey, Amisa looks "defeated" with her shoulders "uncharacteristically slouched" (8). In Ponti 2, while chasing a potential victim, she is smiling, "bright" and "happy" (171-172). This symbolism of masks is recurrent in the novel and is an important element in Teo's metafictional enterprise. For instance, as a child, Amisa mistakes a couple for Orang Minyuk (a monster covered in grease who abducts young women) only to realize they were workers in a charcoal factory. Mythic characters haunt the imagination of the three women in the novel, but ultimately reveal themselves as figments of their imagination. This fracturing of masks metaphorizes the disruption of the illusionary norms instituted in male-centric mythmaking.

Through the acting lessons given by Iskandar, Teo draws a two-fold caricature in this novel: that of patriarchy's production of docile female bodies, and that of the demonization of female bodies through the creation of "monster-masks". Iskandar represents the voice of patriarchy, the voice that insists on women as objects, instead of Subjects allowed to exhibit their own desires. He tells Amisa that "her beauty meant nothing in a murderous world where men just wanted to fuck and kill her and nobody cared what she thought"; and that sleeping with "many men", or acting on her desires, is a cause for disgust. In a revelatory scene, Iskandar makes her "repeat lines of the script to him over and over until the words stopped making sense" and after a while, she started to "expect the degradation", as though it was something she "deserved" (216). By way of disciplinary regimes, represented here by Iskandar's teachings which Amisa herself calls "myths", not only are traditional female archetypes internalized by women, a sense of shame and subordination are also incorporated into their bodies. The cracks in Amisa's mask as Ponti, i.e., the incongruence between her acting and the narrative scenes, reveal themselves as ruptures in female subjectivity. The pervasiveness of the myth of femininity which establishes women's bodies in dissonant prototypes, as both objects of desire and sources of fear, causes women to question their identities and bodies.

Beautiful Specters and Consumed Bodies

If the film *Ponti!* and its production circumstances exemplify the fabrication of the patriarchal mythos of femalehood, its titular main character is representative of othered women who diverge from normative corporeal ideals promoted by this mythos. Ponti's obsession with attaining physical beauty, with changing her body

and undergoing a supernatural cosmetic surgery, echoes Szu's own insecurity and her belief that not being beautiful is a curse. The pontianak figure serves as a doppelgänger of Szu who herself is plagued by "ugliness" and an obsession to be beautiful. She looks at the mirror, her body "too long and too wide" (26) to fit into small clothes, and concludes that there's something wrong with her. Szu's existential crisis is rooted in her disgust towards her physical self, which does not align with dominant norms of female body acceptability.

Contemporary society establishes beauty as the paragon of ideal femininity, encouraging women to strive to attain this ideal through bodily transformation/mutilation and producing within them a sense of shame when the ideal is not achieved. Like Ponti, Szu wishes to "morph" into someone beautiful, and is constantly tormented by her self-avowed "hideousness" (42). Szu incessantly analyzes the difference between her and the popular girls, concluding that she is not good enough or that something is wrong with her, because she does not have porcelain skin, long legs or a defined nose. This "pervasive sense of bodily deficiency" results from the disciplinary regimes institutionalized in patriarchal culture (Bartky 33). Women are not only urged to look for "signs of imperfections", a form of self-discipline which in turn engenders insecurity and internalized shame, they are also taught precisely how to "see" bodies the patriarchal way (Bordo 57). It is then with this normalized, but skewered, perspective that they perceive their own bodies, in a panoptic cycle of "gaze and interiorization" (Foucault, "The Eye"). Bourdieusian theory reminds us that masculine domination is buttressed precisely by this cosmos of psychosomatic self-discipline, a kind of corporeal loyalty to the "natural" or *naturalized* order of things ("La Domination"). Inundated with pervasive patriarchal discourses surrounding normative physicality, Szu stops eating and develops anorexia. Her condition worsens after Amisa is diagnosed with cancer and passes away. Szu examines her altered body, convinced that her thin, frail body is a sign of physical, aesthetic improvement.

The cult of thinness essentially relies on the patriarchal discourse of social mobility: to be thin is to be beautiful, and to be beautiful means to be able to accomplish things "unfit" bodies cannot. Beauty, in mediatic patriarchal model, is the ultimate form of empowerment. Szu and Circe believe that upward mobility is in direct correlation to one's beauty. Szu's classmates are "invincible" (4) because they look like models while Circe's colleague Jeanette can have any man he wants because "she is so good-looking". For Szu, being punished in school for being eccentric is avoidable were she as beautiful as her mother. Circe goes as far as considering to buy an expensive bag, thinking it would "improve [her] existence"

and turn her into a "better person" (75). Conditioned from a young age to conform to normative discourses on the ideal woman, Szu and Circe come to believe that "beauty is an armor"—as long as one is beautiful, one can have it all (Bordo 184). The body, in Foucauldian concept of discipline, is only useful when they become "subjected" or "improved" bodies—i.e. "docile" (Foucault, *Discipline* 136). This "intelligible" body, which implies a culture's standards of beauty, well-being, or health becomes a "useful" body only after being reproduced through rigorous training to conform to this first (Bordo 181-182). A beautiful body once achieved is thus a useful body, now ready to be an effective member of the society; while Other(ed) bodies become specters, mere shadows to the ideal.

The myth of femininity insists that beauty is empowerment; and it is a kind of empowerment that women can and *should* buy. Like Ponti who seeks the help of the bomoh to buy beauty—the price to pay is her hunger for blood—Szu and Circe also start to believe that beauty can be bought in today's consumer culture. If one is not "blessed" with an aesthetic body, there is still a remedy, for one can acquire le "*capital-beauté*" in today's globalized consumer world (Apfeldorfer 73). Szu and Circe both try on Japanese skincare, following the advice of women's magazines, and idolizing and emulating European models as figures of acceptable physicality.

Teo explores how modern forms of surveillance encourage both the panoptical disciplining of the body and the remediation of outsiderness through consumerism. Szu notes that in the bus she takes to go to school, there is a camera, and passengers are able to view themselves in the footage. For Szu, it is torture to see her reflection and be reminded of her "hideousness" (42). This scene illustrates and parodies the format of biopower in the Digital Age. The criticism of influencer culture is indeed omnipresent in Ponti. Circe sees fashion bloggers and models posing for photos, noting they can put themselves out there because they are beautiful. Images of femininity are now inscribed in digital bodies, and it is these digital intelligible bodies that become samplers of the useful body that one can achieve just by clicking on the link! The useful body, i.e. thin and beautiful, is the ultimate persona of empowerment, able to showcase herself in the public sphere and is recognized in her capacity to "influence" the society. The globalized homogenization of aesthetic corporeal standards, seems to be fueled by this new form of influencer media, where to be beautiful is now equated to resembling a European, a Japanese or a Korean model (once again, thin but also white).

Beauty-as-empowerment is now promoted under the pretext of self-care, self-love, personal development and determination. Mass culture, within which the beauty myth perseveres, promotes the self-affirming mantra that women should

love themselves by taking care of their bodies. They should strive for the end goal, that thin body emblematized by female models, because it represents their capacity to persevere, to not let anything get in their way, and reach the summum of self-emancipation. But what become of bodies that are beautiful? Is striving for beauty an empowering way for women to take control of their bodies? If patriarchal cultures dictate that the acceptance and survival of women in the public arena rely on achieving beauty, does beauty then represent a currency of visibility and agency?

The story of Amisa, ethereally beautiful but nevertheless fails to have it all, manifests as a criticism of the beauty-as-empowerment myth. Amisa's attempt to become "Full Time Actress and Most Beautiful Woman in Asia" (210), to be in the cinematic limelight, functions as a hyperbolic illustration of the promise of inclusion and visibility in the public spheres by means of ideal physical appearance. Teo's *Ponti* shows the contradictions in this promise by depicting the realities lived by Amisa, who incessantly becomes an object of consumption and whose integration in the public arena hinges on becoming no more than a physical body.

In *Ponti*, indeed, beauty is shown not so much as empowering than it is commodifying. Throughout the text, Amisa's beautiful body is depicted as consumable flesh. Men look at her as though they want to "gobble" her up, out of desperate "hunger" (69). Iskandar likens her to a "chilli padi" (bird's eye chili) (218). Her father compares her pink mouth to an ang ku kueh, a red tortoise cake. Her husband, who calls her "mei nu" (beautiful girl) like those men who leer at her, kisses her "hungrily", "maul[s]" her (137), confessing a "groping, incessant hunger" for her body (254). Amisa is incessantly depicted as food. For Naomi Wolf, the "beauty myth" does not only encourage women to "embody" beauty, it also prompts men "to possess women who embody it" (12). By way of satirical gastronomic discourse, i.e., Amisa's body as edible, Teo shows how beauty ultimately serves as a tool of objectification. Patriarchal discourse produces and perpetuates a specific economy of consumption where women, much like Ponti whose hunger is monstrous and too illicit to show on screen, cannot be Subjects of desire, cannot be the ones to feed. Instead, they are relegated to Objects of desire, the ones to be fed on, like the beautiful Amisa consumed by the men around her. In this economy of gender-based consumption, feasting is reserved for men, and fasting for women; while beauty becomes a criterion through which the palatability of the consumable flesh is gauged.

If beauty is currency, what then is its value? The modern world which institutes beauty-as-capital projects the promise of a successful, healthy life, and owing to the reification of influencer culture, the promise of social acceptance and recognition.

When the three films fail to take off, Amisa auditions for a Hongkong telemovie, and a Chinese agent proposes a quid pro quo. She sleeps with the Chinese agent, in an attempt to use her body as payment for social advancement, but is never offered the role. Amisa's selling of her body, and her realization of its "true" value or the value accorded to it by patriarchy, highlights the contradictions in masculinist constructions of the female body. The patriarchal, capitalist "meat market" promotes the accumulation and development of beauty as capital, but nevertheless confers little to no value to these beautiful bodies.

Unlike Circe and Szu's narratives, that of Amisa is told in the third person. On one hand, this specificity in her narrative perspective enacts the consumption of female bodies: the act of looking in from the third person perspective symbolizing the male gaze and the voyeuristic tendencies that accompanies female objectification. At the same time, it presents a cautionary tale, that markedly delineates the universal patriarchal script imposed on women (Szu and Circe's) and the realities of women who live in patriarchy. By confronting the stories of Circe and Szu, both outsiders and firmly influenced by society's ideal femininity, with that of Amisa, one who fits this ideal but nevertheless fails to acquire social power, Teo demonstrates the illusions and fallacies of society's images of femalehood. To be beautiful is ideal, but to be ideal is to be an object, a body that is no longer one's own (*I* is replaced by *She*, in an attempt to show how Amisa does not own her body). The third person narrative of Amisa questions the value of beauty and complicates the expectations from women promoted by society. In a telling reversal, this cautionary tale warns its readers that it is beauty, not ugliness as the monster Ponti believed, that is the curse.

Unruly Stomachs and Self-erasure as Resistance

In *Ponti*, women's bodies are systematically entangled with structures and discourses of social control, inscribed as sites of objectification and commodification. Teo demonstrates how the enforcement of beauty ideals shapes both female consumption (women's eating habits) and the consumption of female bodies (women's bodies as consumables). These pressures, in turn, predispose the characters in the narrative to psychological and physiological distress. Central to the text is the portrayal of anorexia as both a symptom of the violence embedded in constructs of femininity and simultaneously, a complex response to this very violence.

As Szu's existential crisis deepen, so too does the progression of her anorexia. She becomes as thin as "chopsticks" (68), and, like their garden that "stank of rotting vegetation" (267), begins to wither. Though the emaciation of her body

becomes more and more pronounced, Szu proclaims being happy in this new body, even wondering if her classmates and Circe would notice how much her body has "improved" (180). For Bordo, one of the most pervasive and nefarious requirements of ideal female beauty is thinness. Cultures that promote thinness as an important parameter of femininity does not only participate in the spread of eating disorders, but in fact produces it:

> Most women in our culture then are disordered when it comes to issues of self-worth, self-entitlement, self-nourishment, and comfort with their own bodies; eating disorders far from being bizarre and anomalous are utterly continuous with the dominant element of the experience of being female in this culture. (57)

Bordo's project of analyzing eating disorders espouses a feminist cultural paradigm, emphasizing the role of culture in the production of eating disorders, while veering away from defining them as "psychopathologies" or as resulting from "individual dysfunction" (54). The perpetuation of an ideal body size in cultural discourse leads women to see their bodies through the dominant, oppressive lens of patriarchy. To achieve a slender body, cultural discourse dictates, is to be accepted in the public arena, and to be able to show the capacity to regulate one's desires, overcome gross corporeality and become a "perfectly regulated self" (68). In Szu's eyes, indeed, the anorexic body, closer to the perfect female body, is the exemplification of body success.

It is important to note that Bordo's seminal work presents an analysis of beauty ideals in the context of Western, mainly American, culture. Notwithstanding, globalization and colonial legacies have contributed to the perpetuation of similar beauty standards in Southeast Asian metropoles. I am not attempting to homogenize the imaginaries of femininity in these spaces and their impact on the female bodies inhabiting them. Indeed, in certain cultures, obesity is equated with beauty, and women suffer from concomitant oppressive practices, for instance, force-feeding (leblouh) in Moorish and Tuareg societies in Mauritania (Fortier). Rather, I seek to highlight here how the universalization of beauty standards is an important aspect to be included in the analysis of the concept of the *modern beautiful woman*. Exploring this universalization means taking into account the Westernization of femininity and the effects of colonial influence on gender ideology. In 1993, Bordo asserted that "there is a strong likelihood that by the end of the twentieth century, men of different ethnicities will find thin women beautiful" (102). Today, the myth of thinness remains omnipresent in many Southeast Asian countries. A case in point

is the Trim and Fit program implemented in schools in Teo's native Singapore from the early 1990s until 2007. The program, shortened to TAF (a heteropalindromic play on the word *fat*), required children deemed overweight to follow rigorous exercise programs. Even after its abolition, the program continued to generate controversy, often associated with fat-shaming behaviors in the country.

That the incarnation of an ideal woman is the hyperthin woman speaks volumes about the expectations on women but also the social spaces that they live in. The consummate hyperthin woman should not eat because she must demonstrate a complete control of her appetite (i.e. her desires), and because being fleshy, having "too much body" is a source of disgust (Sykes 132). This homogenizing mechanism of body management entails thus the ascetic repression of desire in women, but also the refusal of excess corporeality. In the Ponti trilogy films—which as I have argued earlier represent a microcosm of patriarchal metanarratives about the feminine myth—one does not show how the pontianak devours her victims. Instead, like Victorian novels where eating only "happens offstage" (Bordo 183), such scenes are left to the imagination of the viewers. This omission is metaphoric of the relegation of female consumption and indulgence, i.e. female desire, to a furtive and illicit act, one that must necessarily be hidden. Women, according to patriarchal mythos, cannot be Subjects of desire, cannot be consumers, cannot be hungry. This underscores the social worth accorded to them in the public social order: in Wolf's words, "[w] hom a society values, it feeds well.…We think you're worth this much of the tribe's resources" (189).

Alongside this effacement of female bodies as Subjects in the macroeconomy of desire and consumption, the hyperthin woman also exemplifies the space that women occupy in society. Their thinness is symbolic of their "limited 'place' in the world" (Bordo 68). In *Ponti*, years after their friendship falls apart, Szu becomes a ghost in Circe's imagination. She sees her at night at the foot of her bed, or sometimes in the streets, now in the form of a specter. Like Szu's anorexic body, her spectral form becomes a "hyperliteral" (Bordo 175) text that shows the emaciation of the female body, and its ultimate disappearance in the social arena. The specter is a caricature of how patriarchal society transforms women into ghosts: ghosts lose their bodies as women loses possession of theirs; ghosts represent the hyperbolic effacement and obliteration of the female body in an attempt to achieve extreme thinness; and finally ghosts have no place in the living world, like women who become outsiders according to society's concept of physicality.

Toward the end of *Ponti*, Szu, now in her thirties, admit to suffering an eating

> disorder:
> I can name it plainly with a developing detachment, now that I'm well: my eating disorder, the way I tried to use the numbness I felt from denying myself to blanch and stymie the gushing, greedy chaos of everything else. (288)

Teo depicts anorexia nervosa from a perspective that is deliberately non-scientific, eschewing its classification as an individual pathology and favoring instead an emphasis on its social dimensions. Eating disorders are thought to be influenced by the society and culture a patient inhabits. Feminists have suggested that ideals of femininity, particularly what Kim Chernin describes as the "tyranny of slenderness" in the West, may play a role in contributing to the development of these disorders (Chernin ; Nasser). Teo's choice to deviate from a more medical-oriented approach is clear, for while she makes extensive use of scientific descriptions in the novel—among others in describing Circe's tapeworm infection or in detailing how the hundred-year-old egg served during Szu's birthday is made—Szu's eating disorder is only announced as such at the last chapter and is not diagnosed as anorexia.

The narrative highlights that anorexia cannot be fully understood solely as a medical condition, insofar as it operates within and is complicated by the societal context of consumption. Szu's disorder is rooted in a complex circuit of emotional and social factors. Her outsider status in society linked to body image norms, her longing for love and kinship, the death of her mother and the dissolution of her friendship with Circe all contribute to her existential crisis, which culminates in her disordered eating. Szu's self-imposed deprivation is portrayed as intricately intertwined with her identity crisis and self-shaming. At the same time her emaciated anorexic body, which takes up little space and manifests in spectral form multiple times throughout the novel, becomes a text through which to read societal alienation.

Szu's spectrality, i.e. her gradual development from being barely present to being ghost-like, evokes a body disappearing from the material plane and the real world (read: the public arena). Teo uses this imagery to highlight a broader pattern of women's disappearance, specifically their erasure in public life on account of non-conformity to prescribed ideals. In fact, *Ponti* is ultimately a story about the erasure of three women—Szu who becomes ghostly due to alienation, Amisa who fades from public memory, and Circe who remains unseen despite being entrenched in the social media world.

While the polarity between starvation and self-indulgence might suggest counterintuitively different objectives, scholars agree that to not eat can also

represent a political choice. Abstaining from food can also be a means of reclaiming the body. Bordo points to the possibility of resistance through the corporeal production of meaning, what she terms "labor on the body":

> From this perspective, anorexia, for example, is never merely regressive, never merely a fall into illness and chaos. Nor is it facilitated simply by bedazzlement by cultural images, "indoctrination" by what happens, arbitrarily, to be in fashion at this time. Rather, the relentless pursuit of excessive thinness is an attempt to embody certain values, to create a body that will speak for the self in a meaningful and powerful way. (67)

For Bordo, the anorexic body can be a speaking body. The body is not only a surface upon which femininity is inscribed, but can be interpreted as a caricatural and hyperbolic text about gender. The hyperthin body thus "speaks for the self" and fashion "meaningful" counter-texts to dominant discourses (169). Postcolonial feminist Ketu H. Katrak shares a similar point of view in her interpretation of Nyasha's bulimia in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* as an "expression" (once again the rhetoric of voice and language is used) of oppressive identity markers and colonial education (122, 136). Disordered bodies are "aggressively graphic text[s]" that relate the oppression of the female body and materialize a protest against the circumstances that bring about this oppression (Bordo 169, 175-176).

Considering this, the specter figure serves as a metaphorical doubling or mirroring of the anorexic body of Szu. Szu's corporeality, alongside the many suggestions in the narrative on how femininity is inscribed in female bodies in contemporary Singapore, can thus be interpreted as a "demonstration" against the destructive logic of hegemonic femininity—*demonstration* here is a pertinent term to employ, in that it is a protest that focuses on "demonstrating" through the corporeal body visible signs of rebellion. Certainly, this is not without contradictions. This mode of resistance can be perceived as problematic, in that anorexic bodies in both symbolical and literal planes, self-efface as they enact rebellion. But while both Bordo and Katrak recognize the negative consequences of this revolt, they nevertheless argue that for some women, such "embodied protest" is the only means through which to resist (Bordo 175-177; Katrak 3).

Conclusion

The three elements that have informed our close reading of the novel—spectacle, stomach and specter—function not only as subversive narrative elements that allow

for the exploration of feminist themes, but also as categories of analyses through which to read the novel *Ponti* as organically feminist. The spectacle represents the enforcement of, as we have shown, artificial myth of femininity; the stomach evokes the regulation of women's consumption and by extension, their bodies; while the specter textualizes the nefarious effects of beauty ideals and their erasure in the public sphere. Together, these elements map the intersections between beauty standards, objectification, and their effects on women's physical and mental well-being, particularly in the manifestation of anorexia. The significance of *Ponti* extends beyond its triadic metaphorical architecture to its broader engagement with contemporary issues, such as social media-driven body dysmorphia and the global commodification of beauty. By embracing fragmented, (dis)embodied, and haunting imagery, the novel offers a distinctly feminist aesthetic that disrupts mythical/normative structures and reimagines the potential of narrative as a tool for confronting and dismantling patriarchal ideals of femininity.

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