



Speaking From Margins: Subaltern Voice and Resistance in Joi Barrios-LeBlanc's Selected Poems

Krestien Adreana Mordeno Bajenio

University of Southeastern Philippines, Iñigo St., Bo. Obrero, Davao City, Philippines 8000

Corresponding Author Email: krestyen02@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v8i5.2700>

APA Citation: Bajenio, K. A. M. (2026). Speaking From Margins: Subaltern Voice and Resistance in Joi Barrios-LeBlanc's Selected Poems. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, 8(5).35-49. <https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v8i5.2700>

Received:

23/06/2026

Accepted:

28/07/2026

Keywords:

Joi Barrios-LeBlanc, subaltern voice, postcolonial feminism, Spivak, Third World Filipina

Abstract

This study examines how selected poems by Joi Barrios-LeBlanc stage subaltern speech and resistance through a postcolonial feminist reading anchored in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concepts of subalternity, representation, epistemic violence, and audibility, with support from Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of the homogenized Third World woman. Using qualitative descriptive literary analysis, the article interprets six poems: *Liham ng Pag-Ibig ng Isang Nagsisimulang Feminista*, *Babae Akong Nagmula sa Bayang Mahirap*, *Sagot ng Puke*, *Ang Kapatid na Babae ng Ilustrado*, *Ang Babaeng Nagsasalita Bilang Kababayan*, and *Habilin kay Mebuyan*. Findings show that the poems construct the Third World Filipina as a historically situated subject who speaks through self-definition, bodily reclamation, historical insertion, public testimony, and collective memory. The article's theoretical intervention is that Barrios-LeBlanc's poetry does not merely confirm Spivak's difficulty of subaltern speech; it shows how lyric address, vernacular naming, embodied language, and communal memory create provisional conditions for hearing. The analysis argues that subaltern speech in the poems is not simple access to voice, but a contested struggle for recognition within systems that misread, overwrite, or silence marginalized women. Barrios-LeBlanc's poetry therefore extends Filipino feminist poetics by presenting resistance as a struggle over audibility, not only as a declaration of empowerment.

1. Introduction

Poetry has long served as a space where marginalized subjects confront silence, recover memory, and name social violence. Lorde (1984) argues that poetry is not merely ornament but a mode through which women transform unnamed feeling into knowledge and action. Read beside Spivak's theory of subalternity, Lorde's argument becomes more than a claim about self-expression. It suggests that poetic language can expose the gap between speaking and being heard, especially when women's knowledge is dismissed as emotional, excessive, local, or politically dangerous. This connection is important for postcolonial societies such as the Philippines, where women's experiences are shaped not only by patriarchy but also by colonial history, class inequality, militarization, migration, labor extraction, and the politics of language. In this context, feminist poetry may be read not only as personal expression but as historical testimony, political intervention, and a struggle over audibility.

The poetry of Joi Barrios-LeBlanc offers a rich site for this inquiry because her works repeatedly foreground Filipina women who speak from the underside of power. Her poems present women as workers, migrants, lovers, activists, mothers, sisters, survivors, and comrades. These figures are often marked by poverty, gendered discipline, state violence, colonial memory, and imperial domination, yet they are not reduced to passive suffering. They

speak, question, accuse, remember, mourn, and organize meaning from conditions that attempt to silence them. This makes Barrios-LeBlanc's poetry significant for a postcolonial feminist reading of the Third World Filipina.

Barrios-LeBlanc is also an especially relevant author because her academic and creative work is situated within Philippine women's literature and theater. Her University of California, Berkeley profile identifies her as a scholar of Philippine women's literature and theater, while her institutional biography records her teaching and scholarship in Filipino and Philippine literature. These details matter because her poetry does not separate literary craft from cultural work. It joins feminist poetics, vernacular expression, translation, memory, and political commitment.

Existing discussions of Barrios-LeBlanc and Filipino women's poetry have productively emphasized female embodiment, feminist awakening, resistance, and the social value of women's writing. Estocapio's (1995) archived thesis, for instance, reads Barrios's poetry through *écriture féminine* and stresses the redemption of the female body and the value of women's writing. Jocson (2020) similarly demonstrates how contemporary Filipino women poets articulate awakening, agency, and collective feminist meaning, while Angeles (2020) situates Filipina feminisms within nationalist and transnational tensions. These readings are valuable, but they tend to foreground representation, empowerment, or feminist articulation more than the specific problem of audibility. What remains less developed is how Barrios-LeBlanc's poems dramatize the conditions under which a marginalized Filipina's words become legible, credible, threatening, or refused.

This article addresses that gap by focusing on subaltern voice and resistance in selected poems by Barrios-LeBlanc. It is guided primarily by Spivak's question, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Spivak (1988) argues that the subaltern woman is often placed within structures that deny the legitimacy of her speech, especially when she is caught between imperial and patriarchal systems. Her claim does not mean that oppressed women have no words or consciousness. Rather, it points to the difficulty of being heard within dominant systems of knowledge that translate, overwrite, or appropriate marginalized speech. This insight is crucial in reading Barrios-LeBlanc's poems because the personae do not simply possess voice in an uncomplicated way. Their speech emerges as struggle, correction, accusation, witness, and refusal.

The study also draws from Mohanty's critique of the homogenized Third World woman. Mohanty (1984) cautions against feminist readings that treat women in the Global South as one uniform class of victims. Her critique is introduced here as an essential companion to Spivak because the selected poems do not present one general Filipina victim. The personae occupy different positions, including lover, migrant subject, revolutionary sister, survivor, citizen-witness, and mourning comrade. They share marginalization, but they do not collapse into sameness. Their resistance must be read through the specific historical and social relations that produce their vulnerability and agency.

This two-framework focus is strengthened by related postcolonial and feminist scholarship that treats representation as a political problem. Lorde (1984) understands poetry as a means of transforming silenced experience into knowledge and action, while Lugones (2010) and Parashar (2016) show that gender, coloniality, state power, and postcolonial histories are deeply entangled. These supporting works help contextualize the reading, but the actual theoretical framework of the article remains limited to Spivak and Mohanty so that the analysis stays focused and coherent.

Philippine feminist scholarship strengthens this context. Hega, Alporha, and Evangelista (2017) show that the women's movement in the Philippines developed through long struggles across colonization, dictatorship, labor, law, and contemporary politics. Encinas-Franco and Laguna (2023) likewise identify persisting barriers to women's political participation despite formal legal gains. These studies help situate Barrios-LeBlanc's speakers within a society where women continue to negotiate visibility, authority, and credibility.

The article's contribution lies in its shift from the familiar claim that Barrios-LeBlanc gives voice to marginalized women to a more specific argument: the poems investigate the unstable social conditions that make voice audible or inaudible. In this reading, resistance is not only what the speakers say. It is also the formal and political work by which the poems contest misrecognition, shame, erasure, and institutional forgetting. The Spivak and Mohanty framework therefore reveals something that empowerment-based readings may miss: the poems do not simply celebrate subaltern speech; they show how such speech must continually remake the conditions of its own reception.

This article analyzes six poems that foreground subaltern speech and resistance: *Lihang ng Pag-Ibig ng Isang Nagsisimulang Feminista*, *Babae Akong Nagmula sa Bayang Mahirap*, *Sagot ng Puke*, *Ang Kapatid na Babae ng Ilustrado*, *Ang Babaeng Nagsasalita Bilang Kababayan*, and *Habilin kay Mebuyan*. The central argument is that Barrios-LeBlanc's poetry presents subaltern speech not as a simple act of speaking, but as a resistant process through which women challenge the meanings imposed upon them and demand recognition as historically situated subjects.

The argumentative arc of the paper proceeds in five movements. First, it establishes postcolonial feminist voice as a problem of audibility rather than expression alone. Second, it situates Barrios-LeBlanc within Filipino feminist literary and political contexts. Third, it reads the selected poems through the themes of counter-representation, bodily reclamation, historical insertion, testimony, and collective memory. Fourth, it shows how these themes prevent the Third World Filipina from being reduced to a single victimized figure. Finally, it argues that Barrios-LeBlanc's poems expose both the usefulness and the limits of Spivak's framework by showing that poetry may not guarantee institutional recognition, but it can produce alternative scenes of hearing through address, memory, and collective witness.

Beyond its contribution to literary scholarship, the study is relevant to multidisciplinary education because it shows how Philippine poetry can be used to develop critical literacy, gender-sensitive discussion, and postcolonial awareness among learners. By examining how the personae speak from marginal positions, the article also supports the teaching of literature as a space for ethical reading, social reflection, and recognition of voices often excluded from dominant histories.

Research Questions

1. How do the selected poems by Joi Barrios-LeBlanc stage subaltern voice through the personae?
2. What forms of resistance are articulated by the personae in response to patriarchal, colonial, classed, and state-centered oppression?
3. How do the selected poems construct the Third World Filipina as a speaking, remembering, and resisting subject?

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze how subaltern voice is represented in the selected poems of Joi Barrios-LeBlanc.
2. To examine how the personae challenge imposed meanings through speech, self-definition, testimony, memory, and refusal.
3. To synthesize how the poems construct the image of the Third World Filipina within postcolonial feminist discourse.

2. Literature Review

Postcolonial feminist criticism challenges interpretive frameworks that universalize women's oppression while ignoring colonial histories, class location, race, migration, nation, language, and cultural difference. Mohanty (1984) identifies the danger of constructing the Third World woman as a singular victim who is presumed to be poor, traditional, dependent, and powerless. In literary analysis, this critique requires attention to how female figures are

produced by specific social conditions rather than by an abstract feminine essence. For the present article, Mohanty's critique helps guard against reading Barrios-LeBlanc's Filipina personae as a generalized category of women who suffer in the same way. Their speech is always tied to particular locations, such as the body, the nation, the diaspora, revolutionary memory, political violence, or the community of struggle.

Spivak's (1988) theory of the subaltern deepens this concern by shifting attention from voice itself to the conditions of audibility. The question is not only whether the oppressed speak, but whether their speech can enter the dominant structures that define what counts as knowledge, truth, and legitimate political address. Spivak also warns that representation is unstable because speaking for the oppressed can reproduce the power that silences them. Thus, a literary text that stages subaltern speech must be read carefully. It may reveal not a transparent recovery of voice, but a struggle against the systems that mishear, appropriate, translate, or discipline that voice.

The relation between Spivak and Mohanty is central to this article's intervention. Spivak clarifies why speech may fail to become audibility, while Mohanty clarifies why the speaking woman must not be turned into a generalized Third World victim. Taken together, the two frameworks allow this article to ask not only who speaks in Barrios-LeBlanc's poems, but also how the speaker is historically located, what forms of power attempt to misread her, and what poetic strategies make her speech resistant without making it simplistic.

Related postcolonial feminist scholarship supports this two-framework orientation without replacing it. Tyagi (2014) explains that postcolonial feminism questions both Western feminist universalism and male-centered postcolonial theory by insisting that colonized women experience oppression through overlapping structures of gender, empire, culture, and nation. Parashar (2016) also emphasizes that postcolonialism and feminism must be read together because states, wars, citizenship, and national belonging are often organized through gendered forms of power. Lugones (2010) further argues that coloniality does not merely add gender oppression to colonial domination, but reorganizes gender itself through racialized, colonial, and modern systems of classification. These works justify a historically grounded reading of Barrios-LeBlanc's poems, while the article keeps Mohanty and Spivak as the governing lenses for analyzing Third World Filipina representation, subaltern audibility, and resistance.

For this reason, the present study treats voice not as a stable possession but as a relation between speaker, listener, institution, archive, and history. A poem may contain a speaking persona, yet the critical question is how that persona is positioned within systems that determine whether her speech appears credible, excessive, shameful, dangerous, emotional, or unintelligible. Spivak's framework is therefore useful for reading poetic utterance as both expression and struggle. In Barrios-LeBlanc's poems, the woman speaker does not merely announce herself. She enters a field of prior meanings shaped by patriarchy, nationalism, class hierarchy, colonial memory, migration, and state power. Her speech becomes resistant because it revises the terms through which she has already been named.

In the Philippine context, the issue of women's voice is inseparable from colonial and patriarchal history. The Filipina has been represented across different periods as daughter, wife, mother, martyr, worker, migrant, activist, and symbol of the nation. Such images may grant women visibility while still limiting their authority to define themselves. Sobritchea (2020) emphasizes that women's human rights in the Philippines remain connected to social, legal, reproductive, and institutional struggles, showing that formal recognition of equality does not automatically remove gendered constraints. Valdez, Lilly, and Sandberg (2022) likewise show that violence against women in the Philippines persists alongside barriers to help-seeking, including fear, shame, family pressure, and weak institutional support. These studies help situate Barrios-LeBlanc's speakers within a national context where women continue to negotiate visibility, safety, participation, and authority.

Direct work on Barrios-LeBlanc and Filipino feminist poetry also shows why this study is needed. Estocapio (1995) examines Barrios's poetry through *écriture féminine* and emphasizes

the poet's reclamation of the female body and the value of women's writing. Jocson (2020) argues that contemporary Filipino women poets use poetic language to articulate awakening, agency, resistance, and collective feminist meaning. Angeles (2020) shows that Filipina feminisms have historically negotiated nationalist and transnational frames, often turning marginality into a strategic position for critique. These studies establish the importance of embodiment, feminist agency, and political location, but the present article adds a more focused account of how Barrios-LeBlanc's poems make audibility itself a field of struggle.

The diasporic and migrant dimensions of Filipina subjectivity are also important in reading Barrios-LeBlanc's poems. Migration often appears as an opportunity for work and survival, but feminist migration studies show that women's mobility is shaped by gendered labor, care responsibilities, family separation, and state-supported labor export. Lam and Yeoh (2016) discuss how migrant mothers and left-behind fathers negotiate gender roles across borders, showing that migration changes but does not erase expectations placed on women as carers and providers. The UN Women report on the gender and reintegration of overseas Filipino workers likewise highlights the need to analyze OFW experiences through gender because women migrant workers often face different burdens, risks, and reintegration challenges. These insights are relevant to poems such as *Babae Akong Nagmula sa Bayang Mahirap*, where the Filipina persona speaks from poverty, migration, foreignness, and dignity without allowing these conditions to define her as merely dependent or powerless.

Postcolonial feminist readings of literature must also attend to form. Herrero (2007), in her study of Merlinda Bobis's poem-plays, shows that hybrid literary forms can recover women's voices across cultures while linking communication, identity, and ethical responsibility. This argument is useful for reading Barrios-LeBlanc because her poems also use form as resistance. Address, repetition, vernacular naming, testimony, bodily language, and collective invocation do not merely carry political content. They are poetic strategies through which marginalized women reorganize meaning and make themselves audible. In this sense, form becomes part of the poems' feminist and postcolonial work.

The significance of language is particularly important in Barrios-LeBlanc's poetry because many of the selected poems speak in Filipino or through bilingual expression. Postcolonial feminist criticism recognizes that language is not neutral. It can preserve memory, mark exclusion, or become a site of struggle against colonial authority. Tyagi (2014) notes that postcolonial feminism must account for how identity is shaped through culture, nationalism, and colonial discourse. In Barrios-LeBlanc's poems, the use of Filipino, direct address, and embodied terms allows the personae to resist the forms of respectability and silence imposed upon them. A love letter becomes feminist self-definition; a body part becomes a sign of collective militancy; a sister becomes a historical subject; and a vigil becomes an archive of the fallen.

The poems that deal with violence and testimony also require attention to how women's speech confronts institutional power. Valdez et al. (2022) show that violence against women in the Philippines is shaped not only by individual abuse, but also by social and institutional barriers that affect whether women seek help and whether their experiences are recognized. Hernandez, Dela Paz, Chua, and Teng-Calleja (2020) similarly show that human rights workers in conflict-affected areas in the Philippines face serious risks while continuing rights work because of justice-oriented commitment and strong bonds with communities. These studies support the reading of *Ang Babaeng Nagsasalita Bilang Kababayan*, where the speaker's vow never to be silenced transforms survival into public witness. Her testimony is not simply a personal confession. It is a political act that contests the social and institutional conditions that try to make violence unspeakable, unbelievable, or forgettable.

At the same time, Barrios-LeBlanc's poems resist the reduction of women to suffering alone. Lugones (2010) argues that decolonial feminist thinking must reveal how colonial modernity creates oppressive classifications while also attending to practices of resistance from within lived worlds. This is important because the selected poems do not present the Third

World Filipina as a flat victim of patriarchy, poverty, or empire. Instead, the personae speak from different positions: lover, migrant woman, violated body, revolutionary sister, citizen-witness, and mourning comrade. Their resistance appears through self-definition, refusal of shame, testimony, historical insertion, and collective remembrance. These forms of resistance show that marginality is not a single condition but a field of unequal yet active struggle.

The selected poems are significant because they move across different registers of feminist address. Some poems speak intimately to a lover, while others speak to the nation, to history, to the violated body, or to a community of mourners. This range prevents the Third World Filipina from being fixed into a single narrative of suffering. Following Mohanty's critique, the analysis recognizes that marginality is lived through different relations: class, gender, sexuality, national belonging, exile, revolutionary memory, migration, and political violence. The poems therefore invite a reading that is attentive to differences within shared oppression.

The gap addressed by this article lies in its focused attention to subaltern audibility in Barrios-LeBlanc's selected poems. Existing discussions of Filipino women's writing often emphasize empowerment, embodiment, resistance, gender roles, or the historical development of women's movements. This study contributes by asking how the poetic personae speak within conditions that threaten to distort or erase them. It brings Spivak's theory into dialogue with Philippine feminist poetry to show that resistance is not only a theme in the poems but also a struggle over who can define the woman, who can hear her testimony, and how memory is preserved when institutions fail to recognize marginalized lives.

3. Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design through close textual analysis. The design was appropriate because the article sought to interpret how selected poems construct meanings of voice, resistance, and subalternity. The poems were treated as literary texts whose personae, diction, imagery, tone, lineation, address, and rhetorical strategies reveal how women speak from historically marginalized positions. The analysis was guided mainly by Spivak's theory of subalternity, epistemic violence, representation, and audibility, with support from Mohanty's critique of homogenized Third World womanhood.

Data Sources

The primary data sources of this study were six selected poems by Joi Barrios-LeBlanc from *Bulaklak sa Tubig: Mga Tula ng Pag-ibig at Himagsik / Flowers in Water: Poems of Love and Revolt* (2010) and *Sa Aking Pagkadeستیero: Mga Tula / In My Exile: Poems* (2021). These poems are *Liham ng Pag-Ibig ng Isang Nagsisimulang Feminista*, *Babae Akong Nagmula sa Bayang Mahirap*, *Ang Kapatid na Babae ng Ilustrado*, *Ang Babaeng Nagsasalita Bilang Kababayan*, *Sagot ng Puke*, and *Habilin kay Mebuyan*. These poems were selected because they foreground Filipina personae who speak from marginalized positions and articulate resistance through self-definition, bodily reclamation, testimony, historical insertion, and collective remembrance.

The study used both the Filipino texts and their available English translations to support close reading of diction, imagery, tone, address, and political meaning. Secondary sources included scholarly works on postcolonial feminism, subaltern studies, Philippine feminism, women's poetry, migration, political violence, and feminist literary criticism, with Spivak's concept of subalternity and Mohanty's critique of the homogenized Third World woman serving as the main theoretical guides.

Data Analysis

The study used thematic close reading. Textual details were interpreted through Spivak's concepts of subalternity, epistemic violence, representation, and the difficulty of audibility. The analysis also used Mohanty's critique of homogenization to avoid reducing the personae to a single image of Third World womanhood. The findings were grouped into five major

themes: counter-representation, bodily reclamation, historical insertion, testimony, and collective memory.

Analytically, each poem was first read on its own terms before being compared with the other selected texts. The first reading identified the speaking position and immediate conflict of the persona. The second reading examined images, repeated words, pronouns, forms of address, lineation, and shifts in tone. The third reading connected these textual details to the theoretical categories of representation, epistemic violence, audibility, and anti-homogenizing feminist critique. This layered process helped avoid reducing the poems to illustrations of theory. Instead, theory functioned as a guide for asking how the poems make marginal speech visible as a contested and politically meaningful act.

Ethical Considerations

Since the study analyzed literary texts and did not involve human respondents, it did not require the collection of personal data, interviews, or direct participation from individuals. Ethical care was observed by properly acknowledging the author, translators, publishers, and cited scholars. The analysis used poem excerpts for scholarly close reading and treated the poems as creative works requiring respectful interpretation.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study is primarily anchored in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) theory of the subaltern, particularly her concepts of subalternity, representation, epistemic violence, and audibility. Spivak's framework is used to examine how the Filipina personae in Joi Barrios-LeBlanc's selected poems speak within structures that attempt to silence, misread, translate, or overwrite marginalized women's experiences. In this study, subaltern voice is not treated as simple access to speech, but as a contested struggle for recognition within patriarchal, colonial, classed, and state-centered systems of power.

To support this reading, the study draws from Chandra Talpade Mohanty's (1984) critique of the homogenized Third World woman, which warns against reducing women from the Global South to a single image of passivity, poverty, or victimhood. Mohanty's critique ensures that the selected personae are read as historically and socially differentiated figures rather than as interchangeable signs of oppression. The framework therefore allows the analysis to ask three linked questions: how the poems expose structures that make women's speech difficult to hear, how they resist reductive representations of Filipina womanhood, and how poetic form creates alternative scenes of recognition through address, body, history, testimony, and memory.

5. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings according to the research questions through thematic close reading. The discussion is organized into five themes: counter-representation, bodily reclamation, historical insertion, testimony, and collective memory. These themes guide the reader through how the selected poems construct subaltern voice and resistance.

The organization of the discussion also follows the article's theoretical intervention. Each theme is treated not only as content, but as a poetic strategy for making marginalized speech audible. Thus, counter-representation, bodily reclamation, historical insertion, testimony, and collective memory are read as different answers to the same problem: how can the Filipina speak when dominant systems have already named, shamed, or erased her?

Counter-Representation and the Rewriting of Feminist Womanhood

One of the clearest forms of resistance in Barrios-LeBlanc's selected poems is counter-representation. The personae resist being spoken for by patriarchal, colonial, or classed systems that attempt to define what a Filipina woman should be. In Spivak's terms, representation is never neutral because dominant discourse can translate the marginalized into meanings that serve power. The poems challenge this by allowing women to correct the meanings imposed upon them.

In *Lihang ng Pag-Ibig ng Isang Nagsisimulang Feminista*, the persona challenges the assumption that a feminist woman must be hostile, loveless, or stripped of tenderness. The poem states:

*Nang magpasya akong panindigan
Ang pagiging feminista,
Walang nabawas sa aking pagmamahal.
When I decided to assert myself
Becoming a feminist,
I lost no love for you.
(Barrios-LeBlanc, 2010, lines 32-34)*

The persona later concludes:

*Nagpasya lang akong
Mahalin din ang aking sarili.
I just decided
To love myself as well.
(Barrios-LeBlanc, 2010, lines 46-47)*

These lines are crucial because the speaker does not merely defend herself from accusation. Rather, she reclaims the authority to define feminism on her own terms. The poem refuses a patriarchal framework in which feminine worth depends solely on self-sacrifice and emotional availability to others. Instead, the speaker redefines womanhood as capable of both love and self-assertion. Through Spivak's discussion of representation, this act of self-definition may be read as resistance to the imposed meanings that confine women within roles they did not choose.

This moment directly returns to Spivak's concern with audibility. The speaker does not merely produce words; she interrupts a patriarchal system that has already decided how a feminist woman should be heard. Her utterance becomes subaltern speech because it corrects the framework that misreads self-love as selfishness and feminist assertion as emotional failure.

A related act of counter-representation appears in *Babae Akong Nagmula sa Bayang Mahirap*, where the persona refuses to be reduced to poverty, migrant precarity, or racialized inferiority. She insists:

*Nais kong maniwala:
Babae akong nagmula
Sa isang liping may dangal
I want to believe:
I am a woman come up
From ancestry of honor.
(Barrios-LeBlanc, 2010, lines 23-25)*

The speaker later affirms:

*isang babaeng may sariling bayan.
I am a woman with a country.
(Barrios-LeBlanc, 2010, line 57)*

These lines challenge the reductive gaze that sees the Filipina only as poor, displaced, or available for exploitation. The poem does not deny poverty. Rather, it refuses to make poverty the total meaning of the Filipina. The persona's self-naming becomes a form of political reclamation because it asserts ancestry, dignity, and national belonging against structures that render poor women disposable or inferior. This supports Mohanty's warning against reducing Third World women to a single image of lack.

Through Spivak's distinction between being represented by others and re-presenting oneself, the persona's declaration becomes a struggle over the terms of visibility. She does not accept a dominant discourse that makes the poor Filipina intelligible only as a figure of lack. Instead, she makes herself audible through dignity, ancestry, and national belonging, thereby refusing the epistemic reduction of her identity.

Bodily Reclamation and the Refusal of Shame

Sagot ng Puke offers one of the most direct forms of resistant speech in the selected poems. The poem reclaims language that has historically been used to shame and control women. By transforming the stigmatized female body into a sign of struggle and militancy, the persona refuses the system that makes womanhood a site of degradation. The poem declares:

*Ang aking puke,
ang ating mga puke,
ay mandirigma.
'Pagkat naiwaksi na ang kalakarang
Paniniwala na katawan ang nagtatakda
ng kasarian, halaga sa lipunan,
at ating kapalaran.
My cunt, our cunts: these are fighter-cunts,
cunts that triumphed over systems that seek
to extinguish our bodies, our worth, our destiny
(Barrios-LeBlanc, 2021, lines 58-64)*

The poem later closes with a collective affirmation:

*Ang ating puke ay dakila,
'pagkat mandirigma
Our cunts are heroes, our cunts are warriors.
(Barrios-LeBlanc, 2021, lines 68-69)*

Here, language historically used to diminish women is repossessed and transformed into a sign of strength, endurance, and militant value. The persona does not simply reject insult; she overturns its meaning. Spivak's idea of epistemic violence helps explain the significance of this reversal. Violence operates not only through institutions but also through language that decides whose body is dirty, shameful, available, or inferior. In this poem, the speaker refuses respectable silence and rearticulates the female body as a site of collective power.

This reading strengthens the article's link to epistemic violence because the poem exposes how domination may operate through the very vocabulary used to name women's bodies. The persona speaks back by making the stigmatized term carry militant value. In doing so, the poem challenges the conditions that allow patriarchal language to define which bodies are respectable, which bodies are degraded, and which bodies may speak.

Historical Insertion and the Woman Beside the Ilustrado

Ang Kapatid na Babae ng Ilustrado challenges a colonial-patriarchal script that confines women to domestic stillness while men occupy the world of education, authorship, and revolution. The poem ends:

*Siya'y taong-bahay.
Ngunit marahil,
nang inanyayahan siyang
lumahok sa himagsikan
hiniwa niya ang kanyang balat
at sinulat ang kanyang pangalan
nang pulang-pula.
She keeps the home
hungers still to make revolution,*

she breaks her skin
to write the reddest letters
the crimson shape of her very own name.
(Barrios-LeBlanc, 2010, lines 21-27)

The speaker does not remain enclosed within domestic invisibility. The act of writing her own name in blood-like letters signifies a refusal to remain secondary to masculine history. Nationalist histories often recognize women only as supporters of male heroism. They appear as mothers, sisters, lovers, or muses, but not always as historical subjects. Barrios-LeBlanc's poem challenges that arrangement by making the sister inscribe herself into the revolutionary field. Through Spivak, the poem exposes the difference between women's presence in history and women's recognition by history.

The scene of self-inscription also clarifies the problem of representation in Spivak's framework. The sister is not simply added as a decorative female figure beside the male revolutionary. She actively contests the archive that renders her secondary. Her written name becomes an answer to historical inaudibility because it insists that women are makers of revolutionary memory, not only its silent witnesses.

Testimony and the Political Force of Refusing Silence

Ang Babaeng Nagsasalita Bilang Kababayan presents speech as direct defiance. After recounting kidnapping, torture, and attempted murder, the persona declares:

*Nagbalik sa Pilipinas upang mag-alay
ng paglilingkod, ng pagpupunyagi.
ng lahat ng kakanyahan,
ng buong sarili.
Sumusumpang hindi mananahimik.
I returned to the Philippines in hope of
Offering
my strengths, my work,
all of myself.
With all my power,
and all my person,
I swear never to be silenced.*

(Barrios-LeBlanc, 2010, lines 42-46)

The speaker refuses the very effect that state violence seeks to produce. Torture does not only wound the body; it also attempts to instill fear, enforce silence, and erase testimony. Having been subjected to political violence and coercive terror, the persona resists by narrating what was done to her and transforming testimony into defiance. This is consistent with Hernandez, Dela Paz, Chua, and Teng-Calleja's (2020) findings that human rights workers in conflict-affected areas continue advocacy despite risks because such labor is tied to justice and community responsibility.

Viewed through Spivak, the persona's vow is not only an individual declaration of courage. It is also a challenge to the institutional conditions that decide whether testimony will be recognized as truth. The poem therefore stages audibility as conflict: the woman speaks even when the state attempts to convert her experience into silence, fear, or disbelief.

The title is already important: the woman speaks as kababayan. She is not a private sufferer whose story belongs only to herself. She speaks as a fellow citizen, as part of the nation, and as someone whose wounded body reveals the violence of the political order. Spivak's concept of the subaltern does not allow a simplistic celebration of voice. The question remains whether such speech can be heard within the institutions that authorize truth. The poem answers this difficulty by staging speech as insistence. Resistance lies not in guaranteed recognition but in the refusal to allow violence to have the final word.

Collective Memory as Resistance to Erasure

Habilin kay Mebuyan shifts the analysis from individual speech to collective remembrance. The poem invokes ritual, vigilance, and naming in order to preserve the memory of the fallen. The poem promises:

Hindi tayo kailanman,
kailanman maduduwag.
we should never, not once, give in to fear.
(Barrios-LeBlanc, 2021, lines 35-36)

It then continues:

*Ipinagtitirik ka namin,
naming lahat ng kandila,
at inuulit-ulit ang iyong ngalan
at aming pagpugay
sapagkat walang kasama
na nabubuwal nang mag-isa.*
With burning candles we will keep vigil,
And recite your name, and pay you tribute
because no comrade falls alone.
(Barrios-LeBlanc, 2021, lines 37-42)

The speaker's act of reciting the dead comrade's name is a refusal of disappearance. In Spivak's terms, such remembrance resists the condition in which the marginalized are absorbed into silence or rendered unreadable within dominant discourse. When institutional recognition fails, collective ritual and naming become alternative ways of preserving political presence. The fallen are not surrendered to silence, nor detached from the community that continues the struggle. Thus, memory becomes a mode of resistance.

This act of naming becomes an alternative form of knowledge against epistemic erasure. If dominant institutions fail to record the fallen with justice, the community creates its own archive through vigil, repetition, and tribute. The poem thus shows that subaltern resistance may appear not only as direct speech, but also as shared remembrance that keeps the marginalized politically present.

This theme is especially important in Barrios-LeBlanc's poetry because many of her personae speak not only for themselves but with others. Their voices are relational. They speak as lovers, sisters, comrades, workers, daughters, and citizens. Habilin kay Mebuyan shows that subaltern resistance may occur through collective forms of speech that do not depend on an isolated individual voice. Naming the dead becomes a way of keeping political meaning alive, especially when institutions fail to recognize the value of the marginalized.

Synthesis: The Third World Filipina as Speaking, Remembering, and Resisting Subject

Across the selected poems, the Third World Filipina is constructed as a subject who speaks from conditions of marginality but is not exhausted by them. In *Lihim ng Pag-Ibig ng Isang Nagsisimulang Feminista*, she redefines feminism against patriarchal caricature. In *Babae Akong Nagmula sa Bayang Mahirap*, she refuses to be reduced to poverty and asserts dignity. In *Sagot ng Puke*, she reclaims the stigmatized body as militant. In *Ang Kapatid na Babae ng Ilustrado*, she writes herself into history. In *Ang Babaeng Nagsasalita Bilang Kababayan*, she transforms testimony into political defiance. In *Habilin kay Mebuyan*, she preserves collective memory against erasure.

The synthesis also shows that the poems use different scales of resistance. At the personal scale, the speaker defends her right to love herself and to name her body without shame. At the historical scale, the woman claims a place in revolutionary memory and national belonging. At the political scale, testimony refuses the silence demanded by violence. At the communal scale, mourning becomes a practice of keeping the dead present. These scales are connected because

each poem contests a different form of erasure. Together, they reveal that subaltern resistance in Barrios-LeBlanc's poetry is not limited to one dramatic gesture. It appears through repeated acts of naming, remembering, correcting, and refusing.

These patterns show that Barrios-LeBlanc's poetry does not present subaltern voice as simple recovery. The poems understand that speech is contested. Women's words may be misread, mocked, appropriated, or ignored. Yet the personae continue to speak through intimate address, bodily language, public testimony, historical self-inscription, and communal ritual. Their resistance lies in challenging the structures that decide who may be heard and on what terms.

The selected poems also avoid the homogenization that Mohanty critiques. The personae are not one flat image of the Third World woman. They are differently located and differently wounded, but they share a struggle against systems that seek to define them from above. This is the central force of Barrios-LeBlanc's postcolonial feminist poetics: it makes the Filipina speak from below without reducing her to a mere emblem of suffering.

Taken together, these findings show how the poems both use and test Spivak's framework. Spivak's theory helps explain why the personae cannot be read as fully audible simply because they speak. However, Barrios-LeBlanc's poetry also presses beyond a strict reading of Spivak by imagining lyric forms of reception outside dominant institutions. The poems create temporary communities of hearing through lovers, readers, comrades, witnesses, and mourners. Their contribution to Filipino feminist poetics lies in this formal movement from voice to audibility, from individual utterance to collective recognition.

6. Conclusion

This study examined subaltern voice and resistance in selected poems by Joi Barrios-LeBlanc through a postcolonial feminist lens anchored primarily in Spivak's theory of the subaltern and supported by Mohanty's critique of the homogenized Third World woman. The analysis showed that the poems stage speech as a difficult but necessary struggle against representational control, bodily shame, historical erasure, state violence, and political forgetting. The personae do not simply speak because they already possess full access to recognition. Rather, they speak within structures that attempt to silence, distort, or appropriate them.

The findings reveal five major forms of resistance: counter-representation, bodily reclamation, historical insertion, testimony, and collective memory. Through these forms, Barrios-LeBlanc constructs the Third World Filipina as a speaking, remembering, and resisting subject. Her poems refuse to present Filipina women as passive victims of patriarchy, poverty, or empire. Instead, they show women actively reworking language, identity, body, history, and memory in order to challenge oppression.

The article's main contribution is its argument that Barrios-LeBlanc's poetry should be read not only as feminist empowerment or political protest, but as a poetics of audibility. Existing readings of Filipino women's poetry have rightly emphasized agency, embodiment, and resistance. This study extends that conversation by showing that Barrios-LeBlanc's poems ask a sharper question: what must poetry do when a woman's speech is already exposed to misreading, shame, historical erasure, or disbelief? The answer offered by the poems is not a simple recovery of voice, but a set of poetic acts that remake the conditions through which voice can be received.

The findings also clarify the limits of Spivak's framework for reading poetry. Spivak remains crucial because she prevents the analysis from treating subaltern speech as automatically liberated once it appears in a text. At the same time, Barrios-LeBlanc's poems suggest that poetry can produce alternative scenes of audibility that are not identical with institutional recognition. A lover, a sister, a kababayan, a comrade, or a community of mourners may become part of a listening structure that dominant archives cannot fully provide. In this sense, the poems do not refute Spivak. They revise the application of her framework by

showing that lyric address can dramatize both the failure of official recognition and the creation of provisional feminist publics.

This insight extends existing understandings of Filipino feminist poetics. Barrios-LeBlanc's poems show that Filipina feminist writing does not only represent wounded women or heroic women. It also builds relational forms of hearing across body, nation, diaspora, memory, and struggle. The Third World Filipina in these poems is therefore not a fixed symbol of victimhood or resistance. She is a historically situated subject whose speech becomes political because it contests the terms by which she has been named, heard, and remembered.

For literature education, these findings suggest that Barrios-LeBlanc's poems may help students practice critical literacy by connecting textual analysis with questions of gender, history, power, and social justice. More specifically, teachers may guide students to examine how lineation, diction, repetition, address, translation, and imagery shape the authority of a poetic speaker. Students can then connect close reading to larger questions: who is believed, who is dismissed, whose body is shamed, whose memory is preserved, and whose testimony is denied? Such teaching moves beyond generic appreciation of poetry by training students to recognize how literary form participates in ethical and political interpretation.

These educational implications are particularly relevant for Philippine literature, gender studies, humanities, and postcolonial criticism courses. The poems can be used to help learners see that literature is not separate from public life. Rather, literary texts can train readers to notice the social conditions that make certain women vulnerable to silence and to understand how language can challenge those conditions. In this way, Barrios-LeBlanc's poetry supports a pedagogy of careful reading, historical consciousness, gender sensitivity, and responsibility toward marginalized voices.

7. Recommendations

First, future studies may examine other poems by Joi Barrios-LeBlanc using related postcolonial feminist concepts such as exile, language, labor, decolonial memory, and translation.

Second, scholars may compare Barrios-LeBlanc's poetry with works by other Filipina poets to deepen the study of subaltern speech in Philippine literature.

Third, literature teachers may use the selected poems in courses on Philippine literature, gender studies, and postcolonial criticism to help students understand how poetry can function as testimony, critique, and resistance.

Finally, future research may include translation studies to examine how English translations carry, transform, or limit the political force of Filipino feminist poetic speech.

8. References

- Angeles, L. C. (2020). Only in the Philippines? Postcolonial exceptionalisms and Filipina feminisms. *Critical Asian Studies*, 52(2), 226-247. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2020.1719535>
- Barrios-LeBlanc, J. (2010). *Bulaklak sa tubig: Mga tula ng pag-ibig at himagsik / Flowers in water: Poems of love and revolt* (M. Pangilinan, Trans.). Anvil Publishing.
- Barrios-LeBlanc, J. (2021). *Sa aking pagkadestiyero: Mga tula = In my exile: Poems*. University of the Philippines Press.
- Encinas-Franco, J., & Laguna, E. (2023). *Barriers to Filipino women's political participation*. University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies. <https://cids.up.edu.ph/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Barriers-to-Filipino-Womens-Political-Participation.pdf>
- Estocapio, M. A. (1995). *The application of ecriture feminine on a collection of poems by Joi Barrios* [Bachelor's thesis, De La Salle University]. Animo Repository. https://animorepository.dlsu.edu.ph/etd_bachelors/1236

- Hega, M. D., Alporha, V. C., & Evangelista, M. S. (2017). Feminism and the women's movement in the Philippines: Struggles, advances, and challenges. *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Philippines*. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/philippinen/14072.pdf>
- Hernandez, J. F., Dela Paz, J. N., Chua, E. C., & Teng-Calleja, M. (2020). An exploration of factors that motivate human rights workers in areas of armed conflict in the Philippines. *Philippine Journal of Psychology*, 53, 27-54. <https://doi.org/10.31710/pjp/0051.02.02>
- Herrero, D. (2007). Merlinda Bobis's poem-plays: Reading ethics and identity across cultures. *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies*, 4(1), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.5130/portal.v4i1.153>
- Jocson, J. V. (2020). A feminist reading of Filipino women poets. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 12(6), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v12n6.23>
- Lam, T., & Yeoh, B. S. A. (2016). Migrant mothers, left-behind fathers: The negotiation of gender subjectivities in Indonesia and the Philippines. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 23(1), 104-117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2014.991702>
- Lorde, A. (1984). Poetry is not a luxury. In *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches* (pp. 36-39). Crossing Press.
- Lugones, M. (2010). Toward a decolonial feminism. *Hypatia*, 25(4), 742-759. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2010.01137.x>
- Mohanty, C. T. (1984). Under western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Boundary 2*, 12(3), 333-358. <https://doi.org/10.2307/302821>
- Parashar, S. (2016). Feminism and postcolonialism: (En)gendering encounters. *Postcolonial Studies*, 19(4), 371-377. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2016.1317388>
- Sobritchea, C. I. (2020). Toward gender equality and women's human rights. *Aghamtao*, 28, 159-175. https://pssc.org.ph/wp-content/pssc-archives/Aghamtao/2020/6%20Aghamtao%20Vol%2028%20159-175%20%20CSobritchea_Toward%20Gender%20Equality%20and%20Womens%20Human%20Rights.pdf
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271-313). University of Illinois Press.
- Tyagi, R. (2014). Understanding postcolonial feminism in relation with postcolonial and feminist theories. *International Journal of Language and Linguistics*, 1(2), 45-50.
- UN Women. (2023). Gender and reintegration of overseas Filipino workers. UN Women Asia and the Pacific. https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/ph-UNW-BRIDGE_Gender-and-Reintegration-of-OFWs.pdf
- University of California, Berkeley, Department of South and Southeast Asian Studies. (n.d.). Joi Barrios-LeBlanc. Retrieved June 23, 2026, from <https://sseas.berkeley.edu/people/joi-barrios-leblanc/>
- Valdez, I. K. M., Lilly, M. M., & Sandberg, D. A. (2022). Violence against women in the Philippines: Barriers to seeking support. *The Lancet Regional Health, Western Pacific*, 23, 100471. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lanwpc.2022.100471>

AUTHORS' BIO

Krestien Adreana Mordeno Bajenio is a Master of Arts in Literature graduating student at the University of Southeastern Philippines. Her research interests include Philippine literature,

postcolonial feminism, feminist poetics, and marginalized Filipina voices in contemporary literary texts.