

# The Ghosts of Empire: Asian Horror and Postcolonial Pastiche in the Filipino Visual Novel *The Letter* (2017)

Christoffer Mitch C. Cerda

Ateneo de Manila University  
ccerda@ateneo.edu

## ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes the horror visual novel *The Letter* (2017) developed by the Filipino video game company Yangyang Mobile. Using theories of postmodernism and postmodernism, the essay proposes to use the concept of postcolonial pastiche to describe the ability of *The Letter* to mimic the form of the visual novel and reuse the tropes of Asian horror to depict the personal anxieties and social inequalities experienced by the seven main characters of the game as perennial problems inherent in the modern global capitalist society. By using familiar and popular genres, *The Letter* provides a sincere portrayal of social marginalization of migrants, minorities, and other marginalized groups.

## Keywords

Visual novel, postcolonialism, postmodernism, Asian horror, Filipino video games

## INTRODUCTION

*The Letter* is a horror visual novel developed and published by the Filipino game development studio Yangyang Mobile on July 25, 2017 on the web distribution platform *Steam*. For a visual novel from a relatively unknown indie studio from the Philippines, it achieved great success when it was released. A perfunctory search on Youtube would give dozens of let's plays or playthroughs of the game. It has since been released on the Apple App Store on November 22, 2017 and ported to the Microsoft XboxOne and the Nintendo Switch in December 15, 2021 and the Sony Playstation 4 in March 28, 2022. The success of *The Letter* has made Yangyang Mobile as one of the more successful Filipino video game development studios and they have developed and released two more visual novels, *Love Esquire* (PC, 2019) and *Perfect Gold* (PC, 2021). A fourth visual novel, titled *Saint Maker*, was released on February 23, 2023.

This paper will analyze the narrative and mechanics of *The Letter*. In particular, this paper will use postcolonial theories as a basis for video game criticism to theorize a possible way of interpreting *The Letter* and other video games made outside of North America, Europe, and Japan. can be made and how this outsider status has given the developers Yangyang Mobile the ability to both mimic mainstream trends but also offer something new and different to the international market.

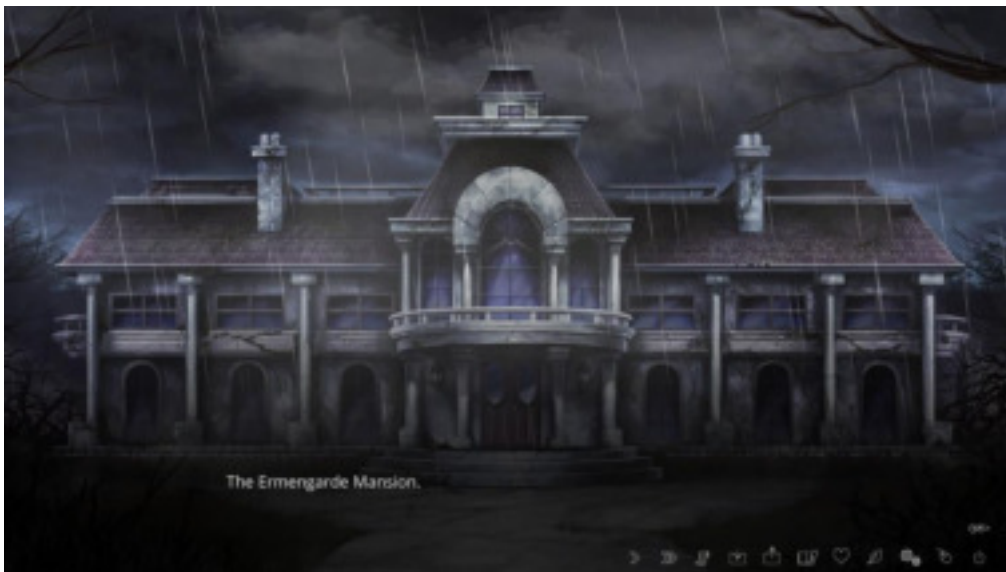
## SUMMARY AND MECHANICS OF THE LETTER

*The Letter* follows seven characters for a span of 2 weeks from October 17 to November 1 in Luxbourne, a fictional city in the United Kingdom. The game is divided into seven chapters that takes the point of view of each of the seven characters. The first chapter begins from the perspective of Isabella Santos, a Filipino real estate agent working for

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Briar Realty Corporation and assigned to sell the Ermengarde Mansion, a historic and sprawling property dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century (see Figure 1). During the open house of Ermengarde Mansion, Isabella reads the letter that instructs her to show and pass it to seven more people or she will die. She then encounters the ghost that would be the main antagonist of the game. She would then intentionally or unintentionally, depending on the choices of the player, show the letter to the six other main characters of the game. Three characters are her close friends namely Zachary Steele, an African-American photographer and filmmaker, Rebecca Gales, a Scottish teacher who teaches history at a primary school, and Ashton Frey, an American-Japanese detective for the Luxbourne police. The three other main characters are the rich English couple Luke and Hannah Wright, who would eventually buy Ermengarde Mansion, and Marianne McCollough, the Irish interior designer that the Wrights hired to help them renovate the mansion. All the characters would read the letter discovered by Isabella and, as the popular horror trope goes, would become cursed.



**Figure 1:** Screenshot of Ermengarde Mansion.

Each chapter delves deeply into the backstory and psyche of each character as they experience the effects of the curse and hauntings that surround them through out the story. In this way, the player would be able to understand the anxiety and trauma that each character has experienced. This is important as the ghost used these anxieties and traumas to haunt the characters. There are two levels in the anxiety and trauma that each character has: a personal and a social. For example, Isabella is burdened by the demands of being a migrant worker in a different country. By being a migrant worker, she needed to forego her dream of finishing her degree in the Fine Arts and become a painter in exchange for providing her family. On the social level, Isabella suffers from the homesickness and racism experienced by many migrant workers.

As each chapter is told from the point of view of a particular character, the game repeats some of the same events but from a different perspective. Key events in the game are 1) the open house of Ermengarde Mansion, 2) the housewarming party after the completion of the renovations of the mansion, and 3) the final confrontation of the characters with the ghost at the end of the game. Chapter 1 follows Isabella Santos and the sale of Ermengarde Mansion to the Wrights. Chapter 2 covers events from the open house until the housewarming party from the point of view of Hannah Wright. Chapter 3 is focused on Zachary Stelle's experiences as he becomes the photographer assigned by a magazine to cover the renovations of Ermengarde Mansion. Chapter 4 follows

Marianne McCollough and her work as interior designer of Ermengarde Mansion. Chapter 5 takes the point of view of Rebecca Gales and her attempts in understanding the history behind the mansion. Chapter 6 follows Ashton Grey and his investigation of Luke Wright’s connection with criminal activities in Luxbourne and other parts of the UK. Chapter 7 focuses on Luke Wright and how he grapples with the revelations within the mansion.

*The Letter* has multiple endings that are dependent on the choices made by the player. The more important choices are relevant not only in forwarding the plot but also to build the relationships between characters. This development of relationships within the game affects the paths that the game will take within the branching paths of the game (see Figure 2). Most of these are subtle changes within the characters that affects their endings like whether Isabella and Ashton would end up together at the of the game. Other effects of the player’s choices are more drastic like how, depending on how the characters treat him, Luke Wright could become a hero in the game or the main villain at the end.



**Figure 2:** Screenshot of the relationship guide.

Other choices that the player can make that greatly affects the ending that the player achieves is based on whether a character would live or die at the end of the chapter. In essence, the player has the power to choose if the character would live or die. They can choose to save or kill all the characters. Characters can die if the player fails in the quick time events (QTE) spread through out the narrativebut these are not catgorized as “true death endings”. True death endings are triggered by the choices that the player has made through out the chapter and can only be achieved as an ending of a particular chapter that would trigger the opening of the next chapter. Though killing off a character can be undesirable, the game gives the players an incentive to achieving a true death ending as these endings unlock fragments about the past that will be used to paint a more complete picture of what happened at Ermengarde Mansion centuries ago. Depending if these fragments were unlocked, it will be revealed that the mansion is haunted by Takako, a Japanese woman who was a servant in the mansion, and her spirit would haunt the mansion until the present.

## THE VISUAL NOVEL AND THE DATABASE

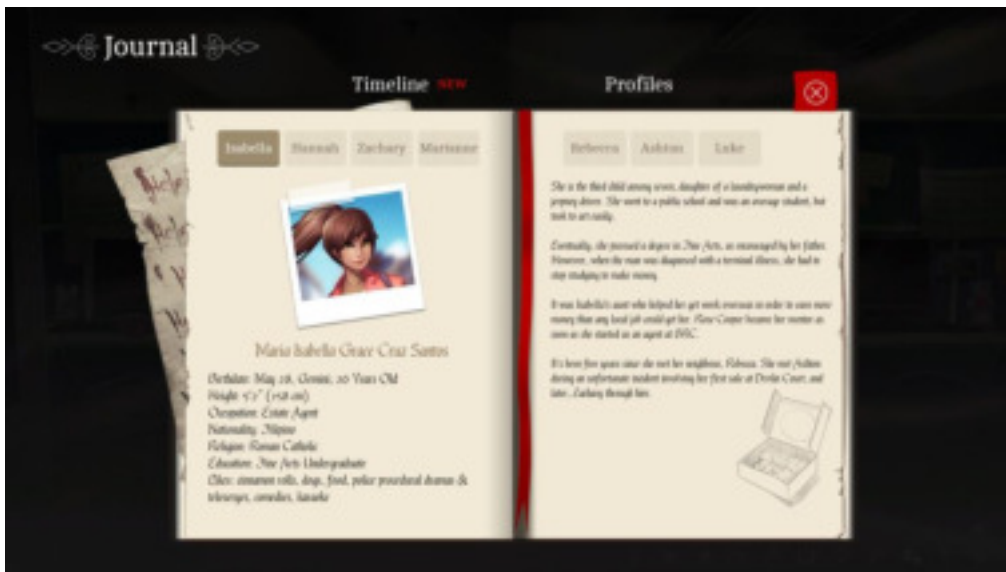
The visual novel, as a video game genre, was developed and popularized in Japan and from there exported to other countries. For Hiroki Azuma in his *Otaku: Japan’s*

*Database Animals*, the popularity of visual novels in Japan is rooted in the popularization of moe aesthetics (based on cute anime girls) within otaku culture (2009, 76). *The Letter*, much like the Japanese visual novels that it draws inspiration from, has many characters with many possible narrative paths and endings. This branching structure and multiple endings of the visual novel is possible because of what Azuma calls database consumption. As stated by Azuma (2009),

In the database world of postmodernity, however, these two are no longer directly connected. Reading the grand nonnarrative partially creates small narratives, but numerous different small narratives can be created from the same nonnarrative, and no agency exists that determines which is superior. In other words, one can revert back from small narratives to a grand nonnarrative. Therefore, what we have is an endless movement of slipping sideways, in which one tries to revert back from the small, visible things before one's eyes to the invisible, but the invisible turns into a small narrative the moment it becomes visible, and, disappointed, one heads once again for the invisible. (105-106)

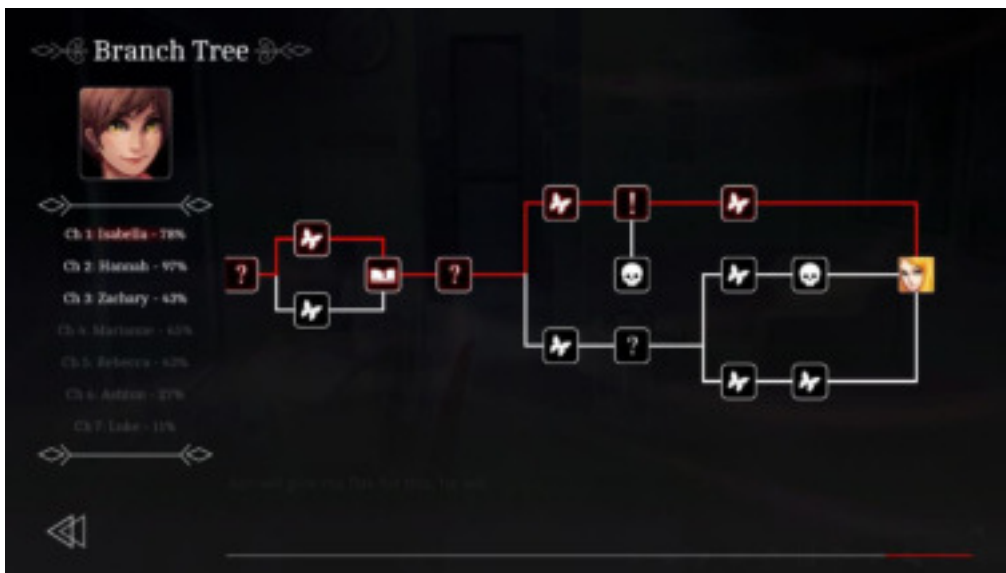
For otakus who play visual novels, there is no definitive or stable version of the grand narrative of a visual novel. Instead, visual novels have what Azuma calls a grand nonnarrative that exists in parallel and in conjunction with the small narratives within the game. This is why, in the example of *The Letter*, the characters can both be alive and dead and even be both good or evil. But no matter what path or ending that the player chooses, the characters of *The Letter* have core characteristics that the player can hold on to. Playing a visual novel, then, is very different from reading a literary novel. Though a player can playthrough one path of the branching narrative paths of *The Letter*, a fuller experience can only be made by playing through game multiple times, finding the different paths through the forking narrative, and unlocking the many endings of the game.

Though not strictly following the moe aesthetic dominant in Japanese media mix of manga, anime, and visual novels, *The Letter* still follows that principles of database consumption in how it creates and depicts its characters. The game has a dedicated character profile page in the in-game journal that describes in fair detail the character's background (see Figure 3). The character profile contains the character's full name, birthdate, Zodiac sign, age, height in both imperial and metric measurements, occupation, nationality, religion, educational background, likes, and a short character history. These profiles of the characters, much like a database, gives easily digestible and understandable information for the players. These profiles help the players with a basic understanding of the characters. But in playing through the game, the players can build their own grand nonnarrative based on the choices that they have made. The cast of characters are made of a multinational, multicultural, and multiethnic group that come together not because it is "realistic" but because it provides an opportunity for the game to pair different characters together for the player to play with.



**Figure 3:** Screenshot of the profile page in the in-game journal.

Through multiple playthroughs that unlocks different branches of the narrative tree, the game then creates a multiverse experience where different version of the characters can exist at the same time. Though the game has what it calls “true endings,” it is up to the player to create their own version of the ending or even see the endings not as end points that closes the narrative but as achievements that need to be unlocked (see Figure 4). It pays off, then, to explore the many branching paths to unlock secrets in the narrative.



**Figure 4:** Screenshot of the branching tree guide of Chapter 1 that shows three different paths to the end of the chapter.

## ASIAN HORROR AS DATABASE

*The Letter* also follows many conventions of Asian horror film. Its Steam store page description explicitly references Asian horror films like *Ringu* (1998) and *Ju-On* (2002). Takako, the ghost that haunts *The Letter*, is clearly inspired by Sadako of the

*Ringu* series (see Figure 5). The game is very aware and conscious of this inspiration with the characters and these very same characters can even laugh at the unbelievability of the curse that they have been experiencing.



**Figure 5:** Screenshot of Takako bursting through a TV screen, a reference to how Sadako of the *Ringu* series also comes out of the TV screen.

Bliss Cua Lim, in her book *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique*, problematizes the idea of “Asian horror movie.” “Asian horror” as a term was born during the horror movie boom that came out of Asia during the late 1990’s and early 2000’s. But “Asian horror” is a homogenizing term that lumps together horror movies from Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Thailand without giving due diligence to the specific historical and cultural differences that each movie is rooted on (Lim, 2011, 204-205). For Lim, this homogenizing of Asian horror is important for Hollywood, specifically, and Western audiences, in general, to easily capture and categorize this phenomenon that was becoming popular at the turn of the millenium. This homogenization of Asian horror makes it easier to “deracinate—that is, uproot, efface, and delocalize” (Lim 2011, 199) and remake these same movies by Hollywood studios so that these can be made more accessible to a Western audience.

But to use Azuma’s terms, like how basic moe elements is deconstructed and reconstructed from conventions of otaku culture and its database consumption, Asian horror also creates its own database of Asian horror elements that audiences that are fans of this genre can easily access and appreciate. *The Letter* has a ghost that haunts a mansion. The curse and hauntings must be confronted and resolved by finding out the mystery surrounding the mansion. The ghost feeds off the personal and social anxieties that the characters experience. Resolution can only be achieved once the mystery is uncovered and the anxieties of the characters is overcome. *The Letter* then has a wealth of stock tropes, images, plotlines, and characters that it can tap to effectively create its grand nonnarrative and small narratives.

### **THEORIZING POSTCOLONIAL PASTICHE**

It can be argued, then, that there is nothing original in *The Letter*. But instead of seeing this as being a problem, this can be seen as key to the success and appeal of *The Letter*. The game banked on the familiarity of its audience with both the mechanics of the visual novel and the Asian horror tropes that it embraced fully. At moments, *The Letter*

could be self-conscious and make fun of itself. But it can also be sincere in depicting the struggles of its characters, not just in surviving the curse inflicted upon them, but also in confronting their anxieties and trauma.

Hiroki Azuma sees database consumption as a product of postmodernity. But this is slightly different from the theory of postmodernity developed by Fredric Jameson. For Jameson, it is pastiche that exemplifies postmodern aesthetics. As stated by Jameson (1998),

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared with which what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humour... (5)

For Jameson, postmodernity is rooted in the death of the subject and the collapse of the possibility of creating new and individual styles (1998, 5-7). But this presupposes that there was a stable idea of the individual subject in the first place, a subject that was created during the height of high modernity and dissolved or fragmented during postmodernity. For Azuma, it is possible to achieve postmodernity without going through modernity as in the case of Japan (2009, 17). According to Azuma, "Whereas modernity equals the West, postmodernity equals Japan. To be Japanese is thus to be standing at the forefront of history (17)." Azuma therefore challenges the idea of the linear progress of modernity giving way to postmodernity. In the case of Japan, postmodernity arrived before Japan became fully modern.

But what about countries outside of Western Europe, the United States, and Japan? Could countries like the Philippines, a formerly colonized country that has not been industrialized like Japan, also achieve postmodernity without going through modernization? This highlights the unequal development of each country in relation to the dominant culture developed by global capitalism. Homi Bhabha, following other theorists like Houston Baker and Arjun Appadurai, also questions the homogeneity of the idea of modernity, along with postmodernity. As Bhabha (2004) pointed out,

What becomes properly urgent... is that the 'simultaneous' global locations of such a modernity should not lose sense of the conflictual, contradictory locutions of those cultural practices and products that follow the 'unequal development' of the tracks of international or multinational capital. Any transnational cultural study must 'translate', each time locally and specifically, what decentres and subverts this transnational globality, so that it does not become enthralled by the new global technologies of ideological transmission and cultural consumption. (346)

Being a product of global capital (Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter 2009, xxxiv), it is easy to forget that video games are products produced by specific national and cultural groups. It is too easy to think of video games as a homogenous product all competing in the equal playing field of the global market. As can be seen in Azuma's analysis, visual novels were a product that was developed and flourished among Japan's otaku culture that would later be exported from Japan. The visual novel, therefore, has an unequal and uneven development through out its history and has only broken through the international market only recently with the popularization of otaku culture outside of Japan.

How can we then analyze video games made by developers from countries like the Philippines, a country peripheral from video game discourse and development? As Souvik Mukherjee (2017) argued in the importance of postcolonialism in video game analysis,

The difficulties notwithstanding, videogames have shown considerable potential in representing the multiplicity of perspectives and possibilities that postcolonial discourses tease out of the seemingly unchanging fabric of colonialism. The retellings from multiple perspectives that videogames facilitate help in presenting voices and experiences that have not been commonly represented. The identification with the so-called colonial Other as the player's avatar points at problems in thinking through questions of identity and indeed agency from the position of the colonial subject. Finally, the possibility of playing out alternative histories provides opportunities to both critique and perpetuate the logic of empire. (108)

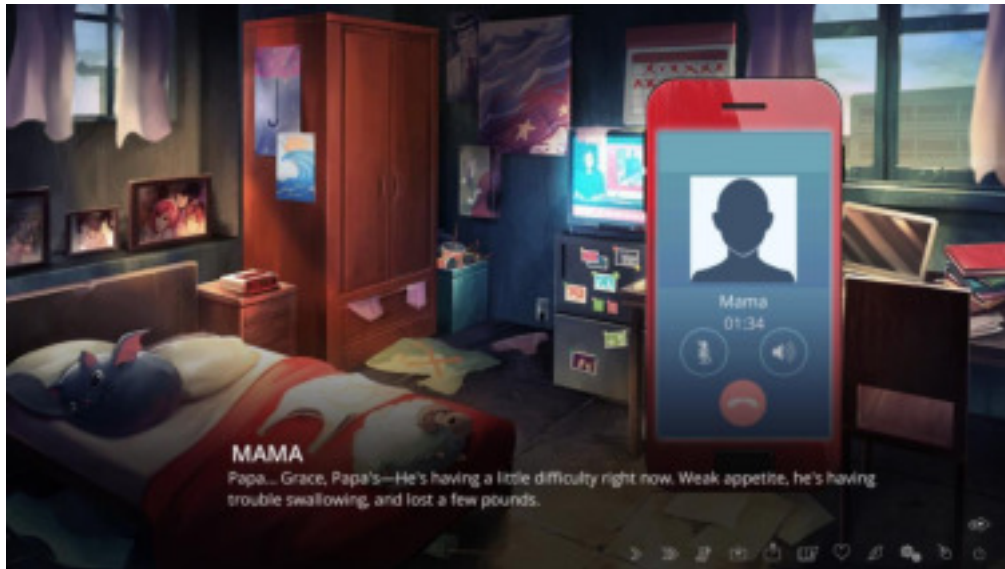
It is important then to consider not just the content or form of the video game but also its context. Who made the video game? What culture produced this? In this way, a deeper understanding of the video game can be made.

To delve deeper into *The Letter*, I would like to propose the idea of the postcolonial pastiche in the analysis of video games. Combining Jameson's ideas on the postmodern pastiche and postcolonial theory's ideas on translation and mimicry, I would like to argue that Yangyang Mobile used postcolonial pastiche in their development of *The Letter*. *The Letter* is a pastiche of Japanese visual novels and Asian horror film. But instead of an empty and humourless postmodern pastiche formulated by Jameson, *The Letter* has a lot of moments of serious introspection contrasted with moments of levity. And though it uses images and jump-scars from Asian horror films, it was still able pull off genuinely creepy and even terrifying moments. It also builds a complicated and intricate of interactions between its characters that players can latch on to and build genuine interest in the game.

## **THE CURSE OF MIGRANT LABOR AND GLOBAL CAPITAL**

As already noted earlier by Mukherjee, it is important to tell stories from a postcolonial perspective. Again, if we look at the cast of characters in *The Letter*, one can see that it is made of predominantly European characters. But in their own way, each character has aspects that place them in the margins of society whether it be gender and sexuality, class, and race and nationality. I have already noted the position of Isabella as a Filipino migrant worker, more commonly called Overseas Filipino Worker (OFWs) in Philippines. Depiction of the struggles of OFWs abroad is very common in Filipino media like TV shows and movies. TV shows and films have depicted the culture shock, homesickness, physical hardships, psychological stress, and even racism that Filipinos abroad experienced. Here in *The Letter*, this is forefront to what drives Isabella as a character. As breadwinner of her family back home, she has focused most of her time and effort in earning money. This is why her room is so messy and why she just eats instant noodles—to save money that she can send back home (see Figure 6). This is what drives her to work hard and hunt for that next commission as a real estate agent. Along with providing for the expenses for food, water, electricity, clothing, and school tuition, her father is also sick and has been in and out of the hospital for the past few years.





**Figure 6:** Screenshot of Isabella’s phone conversation with her mother and receiving the news of her father’s worsening health condition. In the background is her messy apartment.

It must be noted that OFWs are a very modern phenomenon in the Philippines. Though Filipino migrants have been leaving the Philippines since the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century during the height of Spanish colonization of the Philippines, it has been official government policy to export Filipino labor abroad to alleviate the chronic unemployment and underemployment in the Philippines. This policy was instituted in 1974 during the dictatorship of former President Ferdinand Marcos when the Philippines encountered an economic downturn. Thought to be a temporary policy, it has been official government policy to support the mass migration of Filipinos to go to countries in need of cheap labor. Officially, nearly 1.83 million Filipinos are working abroad and have sent remittances totaling 151.33 billion Philippine pesos (2.76 billion US dollars) (Mapa 2022). But migrants leaving the Philippines that do not seek jobs through official government channels should push the number higher.

OFWs represent how Filipino labor has become globalized. By putting the story of Isabella in Chapter 1, Yangyang Mobile puts forward the story of Filipino migrant workers in a medium that can be played by non-Filipinos. In this way, Filipino stories and experiences can be known by non-Filipinos and how globalized capital feeds off their labor. Isabella, then, represents the everyday struggles of OFWs. The fear that Isabella battles through out her chapter, the fear that the ghost feeds on, is rooted on the anxiety of failing to provide for her family back in the Philippines and the failure to achieve her dream of becoming an artist.

### **THE CURSE OF RACIAL DIFFERENCE**

Zachary or Zach Steele’s chapter (Chapter 3) has race as a source of anxiety that the ghost could feed on. W. E. B. Du Bois’s double-consciousness is in full effect in Zach. As Du Bois said, “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity (8).” Before moving to the UK, Zach witnessed the death of his parents in an apparent act of racial violence. This has traumatized Zach but this has driven his creative work as a photographer and filmmaker as he has made a documentary about the history of slavery in the United States (see Figure 7). Though soft-spoken and creative, his race has been a source of

anxiety for Zach as people outside of his core group of friends see him as the “Other.” Though his circle of friends has accepted him, through out the game, Zach experiences racism like how Luke calls him a “negro” a few times. These shocking moments of casual racism shows the kind of racist gaze that Zach experiences. It can be said that both Isabelle’s and Zach’s race have pigeon-holed them as Isabelle has been infantilized by Rebecca as child-like while Zach has been fetishized by Hannah when she began to flirt with him.



**Figure 8:** Screenshot of Ashton, Rebecca, and Zach outside the movie theater where Zach’s movie is premiering.

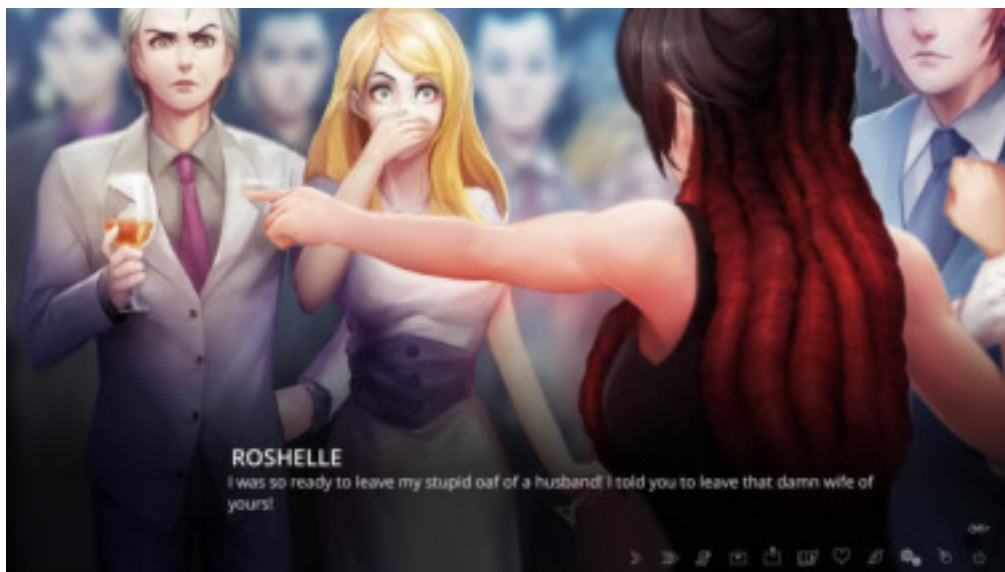
Using the tropes of Asian horror, Zach is both the source of otherness and difference, especially for the white characters in the game, but is also the victim of this otherness and difference. Reversing the usual depiction of African-American people as alien bodies that need to be feared, Zach’s confrontation with the ghost shows that racism itself is the true source of fear and horror. Takako herself, the ghost that haunts the characters through out the game, is a Japanese slave brought to Europe and the hauntings that she brings is rooted in the racist colonialism that brought wealth and prosperity to much of Western Europe.

### **THE CURSE OF FEMININE DESIRE**

The other characters have also experiences of being in the margins like their gender and sexuality. For Hannah Wright’s chapter (Chapter 2), the anxieties of being a wife is highlighted and how this puts her in a position of powerlessness. Heir to the Evans family business empire, she graduated with a degree in Finance and even had a masters in business administration. A capable finance manager, she is very much capable of leading the companies that her family owns after her parents have died. All of these changed when she married Luke Wright. For Simone de Beauvoir, women experience marriage differently than men. According to Simone de Beauvoir,

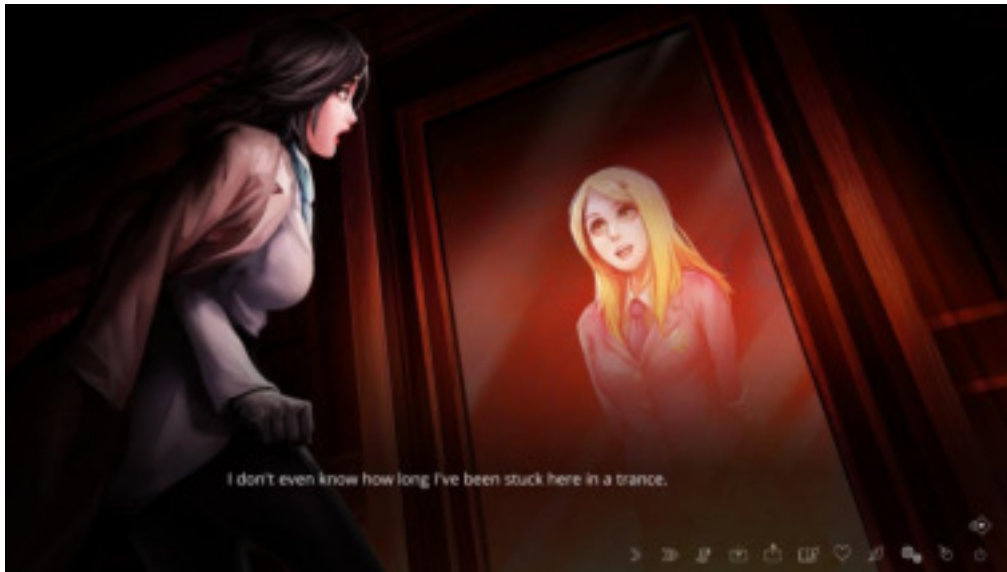
In marrying, the woman receives a piece of the world as property; legal guarantees protect her from man’s caprices; but she becomes his vassal. He is economically the head of the community, and he thus embodies it in society’s eyes. She takes his name; she joins his religion, integrates into his class, his world; she belongs to his family, she becomes his other “half.” (442)

After marrying Luke, she lost a part of herself. She lost the Evans family name and her businesses were merged with Luke's and became a part of Wright group of companies. This loss of control creates fear and anxiety for Hannah as doubts creep in regarding the rightness of her relationship with Luke, if she still loved him. Along with the sense of loss of identity is the strain put by Luke on their relationship because of his infidelity. An important event in the game is the scandalous accusation of a family friend that she is pregnant with Luke's child, a revelation done in the middle of the housewarming party held by the Wrights at Ermengarde Mansion (see Figure 7). Hannah Wright's story has three possible endings, in one she dies in the hand of Luke as she tries to reassert her independence, which threatens Luke's business plans. In another, she is possessed by Takako, which lead her ultimately losing control of her self as she becomes a monster obsessed in fulfilling her desires. The last ending for Hannah is the revelation that she is actually pregnant with her and Luke's first child. For *The Letter*, Hannah's story is set between total loss of control—even death—and the ideal of a happy family. She could not fully escape Luke or the curse of Takako.



**Figure 8:** Screenshot of the revelation that Rochelle, a friend of the Wrights, is pregnant with Luke's child.

Marianne McCollough's chapter (Chapter 4) shares her experiences working for the Wrights as their interior designer. Though her sexuality is not explicitly stated, Marianne can have relationships with both men and women though it would seem that she leans lesbian for the most part. This can be said as the most important relationship that Marianne cherishes developed was with her high school best friend, Lorraine. Both were students at a Catholic boarding school in Ireland and have developed a romantic relationship. But Marianne lost Lorraine when Lorraine died falling from an open window after confronting a bully that has been harassing Marianne. Lorraine's death was officially recognized as an accident but Marianne hints that she was killed by the bully. This death traumatized Marianne and she blames herself for Lorraine's death. Coupled with her Catholic upbringing, this lesbian desire by Marianne for Lorraine is depicted as sinful. This dual feeling of sin and guilt by Marianne would be used by the ghost to haunt Marianne (see Figure 9).

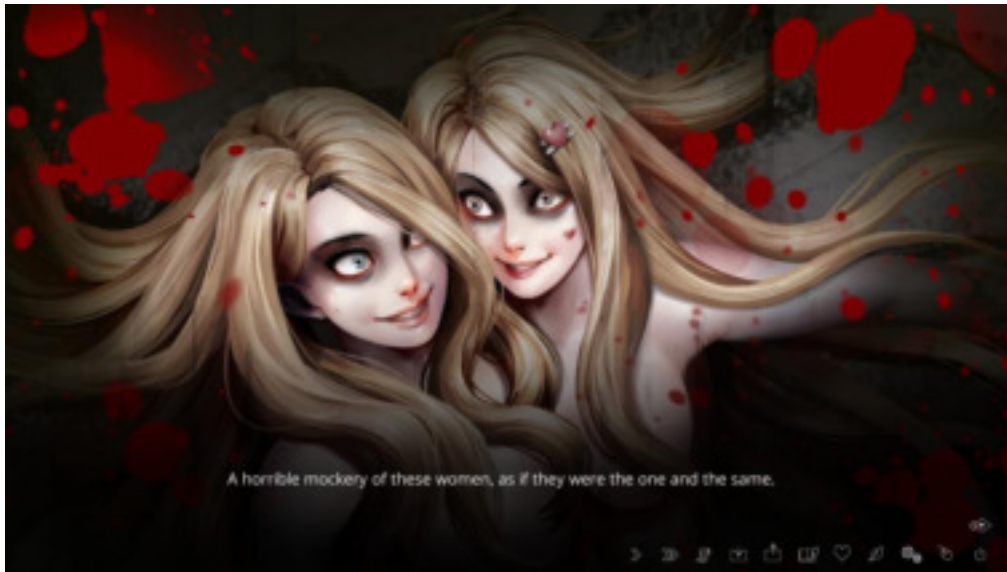


**Figure 9:** Screenshot of Marianne seeing Lorraine through a mirror as the ghost used her memories of Lorraine to haunt her.

As a third character inserted between Hannah and Luke Wright, Marianne becomes a foil to the strained relationship between Hannah and Luke. The game offers the player the option to build a meaningful relationship between Marianne and each of the Wright couple. Marianne could become, depending on the player's choices, to be a source of emotional support for both Hannah and Luke. But even if she becomes a source of comfort for the other characters, her trauma and sexual desire marks her as different and a prey for the ghost. In Julie Abraham critique of lesbian novels, heterosexual plot still dominates lesbian novels of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century lesbian novels from Britain and America. According to Abraham,

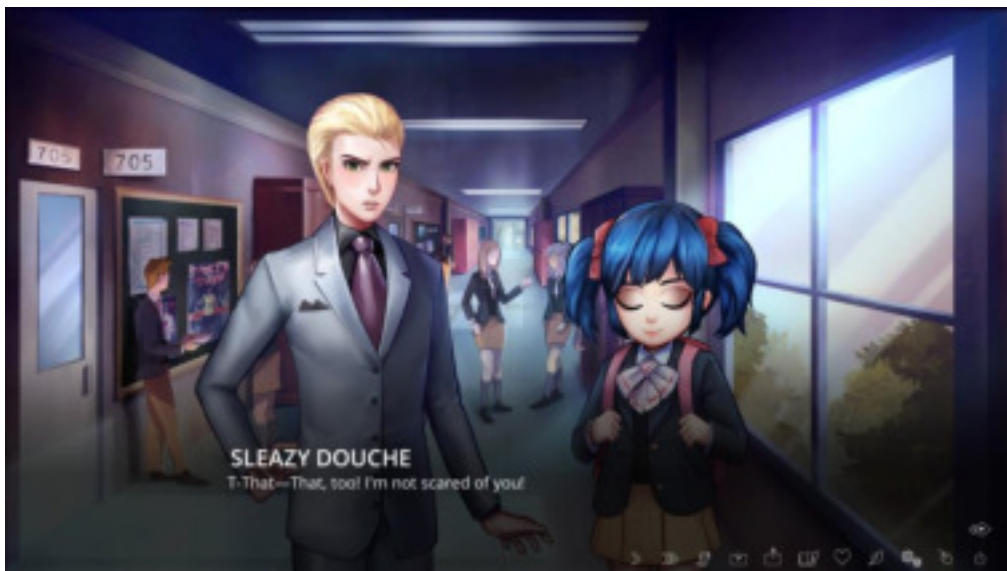
The heterosexual plot constructs heterosexuality—which is to say it constructs heterosexuality as the norm—not only by supplying the structure and the focus for representations of women but, regardless of whether love or sexuality are the subjects of the text, by providing a basis for narratives into which the heterosexuality of the subjects can disappear. (3)

Like those early 20<sup>th</sup> century lesbian novels that uses heterosexual plot as a beginning structure to craft lesbian desire, Marianne's chapter uses the heterosexual plot of Hannah and Luke as a frame to craft her own plot, especially with coming to terms with her trauma and sexuality. Throughout her life, Marianne has chosen loneliness and isolation as a reaction to her trauma. But the ghost feeds off Marianne's desires by posing as a double-headed being that embodies her past guilt for Lorraine and current attraction for Hannah (see Figure 10). Marianne can only escape the clutches of the ghost by forging new relationships that would heal her trauma and pave the way for her to escape her loneliness.



**Figure 10:** Screenshot of Marianne seeing a double-headed ghost, transfiguration of Hannah and Lorraine.

Rebecca Gale's chapter (Chapter 5) focuses on her unrequited love for Ashton Frey, whom she has been in love with since they were children. This one-sided love and the feeling of neglect that she feels from her professor parents has shaped Rebecca's sense of self. She feels inadequate as a person to be loved in spite of having a cherished group of friends and for being a successful history teacher in her own right. This sense of lack that Rebecca feels is what the ghost would latch on to. She would need to confront and resolve her feelings for Ashton so she can move forward. She would also become a foil to Luke Wright as she encounters him as a godfather to Kylie, a student in the school where she teaches (see Figure 10). Rebecca, then, becomes a foil for Luke for him to come to terms with his desire to become a father.



**Figure 10:** Screenshot of Rebecca's first encounter with Luke Wright.

Of all the characters in the game, Rebecca is the most peripheral in the hauntings of Ermengarde Mansion. It was only through her interactions with Isabella, Ashton,

Hannah, Marianne, and Luke that she gets involved with the mansion in the first place. But it is through Rebecca, who graduated with a degree in History, that some of the mystery behind the mansion is revealed. She stumbles upon documents in the archives of the Luxbourne Library that would uncover the events from the forgotten past of Ermengarde Mansion, like the witch trials against Takako (see Figure 11).

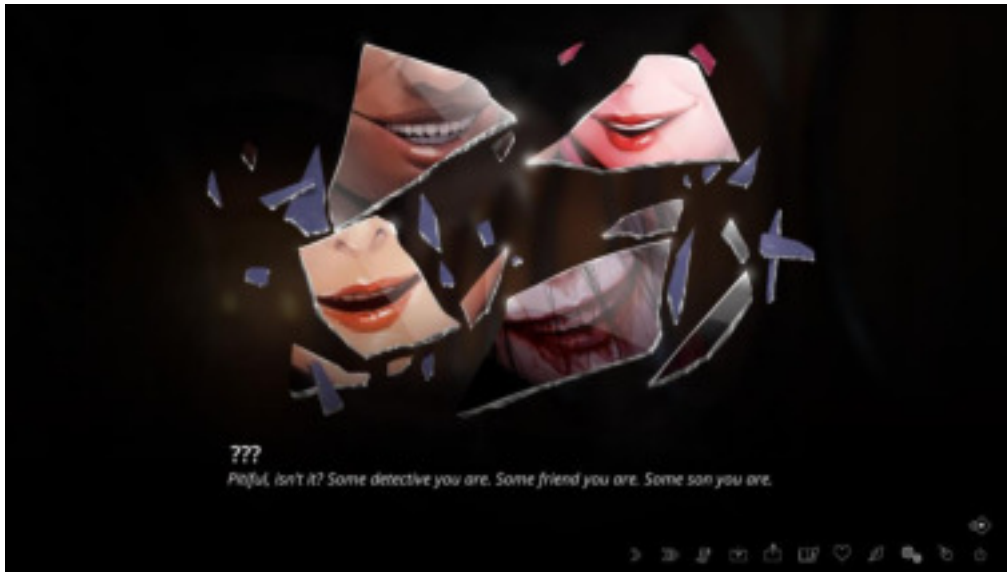


**Figure 11:** Screenshot of the news clippings about the witch trials that was related to Ermengarde Mansion.

Men casts a great shadow for these three women characters in the game. This shows the secondary status of women in the fictional world of *The Letter*. But this can be interpreted as a critique of the patriarchal system that imposes itself on women because of the suffocating way that the narrative shows the women struggle under the weight of the heterosexual plot for a happy ending. One can critique the game's narrative design choice to limit the options for the women that gives them a limited option for escape and independence for men. But the game is less interested in finding individual freedom for the women but a more social solution for their happiness, though Hannah's happy ending with Luke can be noted as supremely conservative.

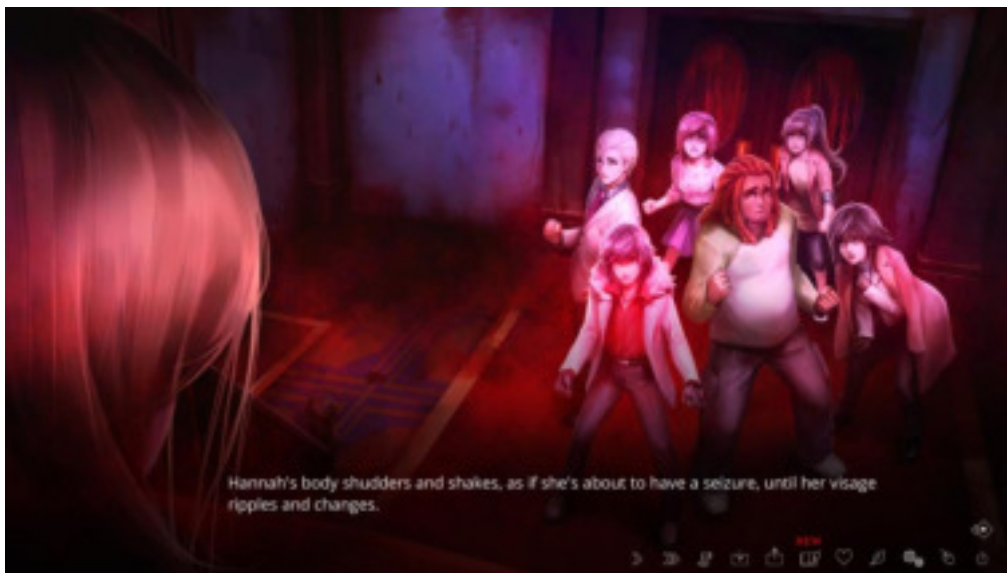
### **THE CURSE OF MASCULINE JUSTICE AND REDEMPTION**

The last two chapters focusing on Ashton and Luke is the culmination of the choices made in the previous five chapters. This make these chapters relatively complex as reverberations of choices made earlier are felt here. Ashton Frey's chapter (chapter 6) focuses on his investigation of Luke Wright's possible links to criminal activities. This investigation is personal for Ashton as he suspects Luke as having a hand in an arson case that caused the death of the wife of his teacher, Professor Andrew Clark. The Clarks became Ashton's parental figures as his actual parents, an American and a Japanese, divorced when he was young. But his difficulty in uncovering Luke Wright's secret criminal activity heightens his feelings of inferiority rooted in the trauma of the divorce of his parents. His anxiety to succeed in finding justice for the Clarks is what the ghost fed on as she haunts and taunts Ashton (see Figure 12).



**Figure 12:** Screenshot of the ghost using the voices of Ashton's friends to taunt his lack of success in investigating Luke Wright.

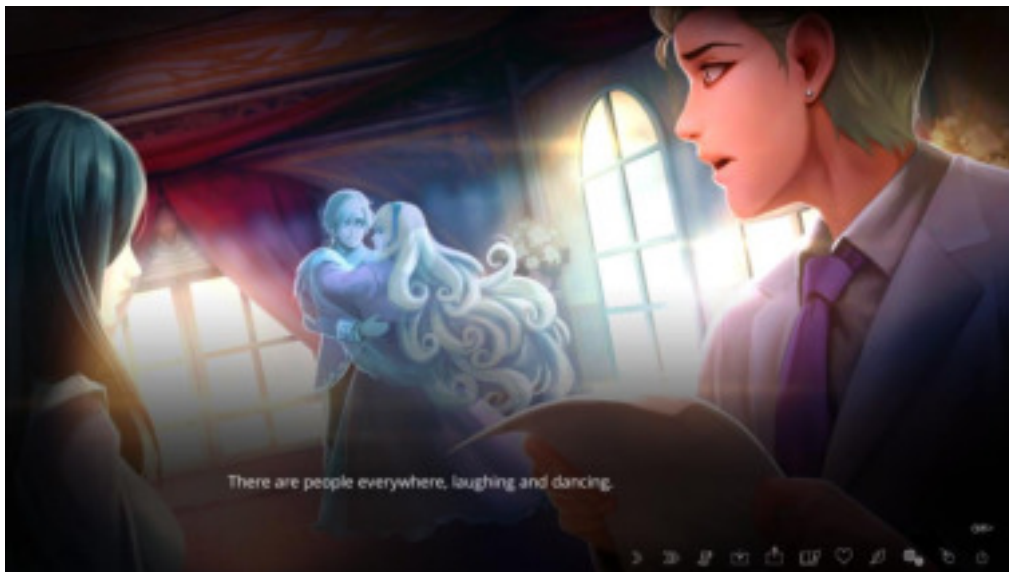
The direction of Ashton's chapter, then, is very much dependent on the survival of Isabella, Zach, and Rebecca as his story would change if one or all of his friends dies. For example, the romantic relationship between Isabella and Ashton that the player can build in chapter 1 would culminate in an acceptance or rejection of Isabella of Ashton in chapter 6. But this budding relationship would be left hanging and unfulfilled if Isabella dies in chapter 1. Ultimately, which ever path the player chooses, a confrontation between Ashton and Luke would come by the end of chapter 6 and the ghost would ultimately reveal itself for all to see (see Figure 13).



**Figure 13:** Screenshot of the characters confronting the ghost inside Ermengarde Mansion.

Luke Wright's chapter (chapter 7) reveals much of his background and how this affects his current state of mind. It is revealed that he was a son of a prostitute and spent much of his youth in abject poverty. When his mother died, he became a beggar until he was

taken in by his father to be the heir of the Wright group of companies. He would grow up and be married to Hannah but he has felt great inferiority being married to the high achieving Hannah. It is his chapter that is the most complex. Depending on how the other characters interacted with Luke in the past chapters, he can become a hero or a villain in the narrative. If the player pushes Luke to kill Hannah and develop bad relationships with the other characters, Luke will take the path of the villain. If Hannah survives or is possessed by the ghost, Luke would take a path of redemption. But whatever direction that the player chooses, the ghost of Takako would be attached to Luke because she would be reminded of her original master, Eduard (see Figure 14). It would be revealed that Takako witnessed the infidelity of the mistress of the mansion, Charlotte Ermengarde. Charlotte would have Takako tried and executed as a witch. Upon her death, Takako would haunt Charlotte Ermengarde that would lead to Charlotte's death. Their tormented souls would merge this would start the haunting at Ermengarde Mansion until the present time of the narrative of the game.



**Figure 14:** Screenshot of Luke's witnessing the ghostly apparition of the past shown by Takako.

As already noted earlier, Luke's chapter can go in many directions. One path for redemption is through Hannah and their child and by owning up to his past sins. Another path is when he throws away his chance for a happy ending with Hannah when he chooses to kill her. But with this ending, Luke can still redeem himself by sacrificing himself to save the other characters from the clutches of the ghost. He would burn the mansion along with himself—and knowing that the ghost has attached itself to him—both he and the ghost would burn to the ground.

Justice is the main theme for Ashton's chapter while redemption is the theme for Luke's chapter. Ashton and Luke have contrasting trajectories in life but both are in search stability and happiness. The centrality of these two chapters is apparent in the way that these chapters eventually close the loose ends of the previous chapters. The themes of justice and redemption are given to the hands of the male characters, and in the narrative structure of the game, the last two chapters represent the center of the narrative web of the game. This is what I would call the curse of masculine centrality in many narratives and plots. The game pastiches the heroic tale of men finding justice and redemption. But with the branching structure of visual novels undermines this centrality of masculine redemption. It is not through the acts of the men that they find justice or



redemption, it is through the connections that one builds that justice and redemption can be achieved.

## **CONCLUSION: THE GHOST OF EMPIRE**

The curse of Takako, then, represents the curse of the marginalized. She represents the ghostly manifestation of the personal anxieties and social isolation that each of these characters experience. But ghosts also represents other causes for hauntings. According to Bliss Cua Lim, “The ghost film’s core conceit, visualized in its mise-en-scène, is that *space has a memory* (2011, 205).” For *The Letter*, this memory haunting Ermengarde Mansion, that was intentionally forgotten, was this injustice done to Takako. She is the embodiment of vengeance after being falsely accused and punished for the sins of Charlotte Ermengarde, the original owner and master of Ermengarde Mansion. Takako, then, can be read as an allegory for the sins of capital. It must be noted that Takako was formerly a slave. Though not well known, there was briefly a period of time when slaves from Japan was sold and traded by the Portuguese during the late 16<sup>th</sup> to the early 17<sup>th</sup> century with records and estimates that between 200 and 3000 Japanese slaves were bought by the Portuguese (de Sousa 2019, 293-302). Takako, then, is not just the curse brought by the sin and injustice done to her by Charlotte Ermengarde but also the legacy of slavery integral to the growth of empire and capital during the early modern period.

Social inequality is therefore the true curse that haunts *The Letter*. Through out the game, the individual stories of each character highlights these inequalities though it can be said that this can be uneven. The marginalization of each character is different in scale and impact. The racism experienced by Isabella, Zachary, and even Takako is different in texture from the classism and prejudice experienced by Luke and Marianne. Even characters that come from privileged backgrounds like Hannah and Rebecca are sidelined by their femininity. But no matter how uneven these depictions are in *The Letter*, it can be said that all these social inequalities are rooted in modern system of globalized capitalism. Just like how early modern capitalism of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century was rooted in slavery, so is modern global capitalism is only possible by the uneven development of countries, the uneven relations of race, gender, and sexuality and how this unevenness is used to keep the growth of the system.

Postmodern pastiche has a tendency towards an acceptance of the emptiness of subject. According to Fredric Jameson (1998),

What we have to retain from all this is rather an aesthetic dilemma: because if the experience and the ideology of the unique self, an experience and ideology which informed the stylistic practice of classical modernism, is over and done with, then it is no longer clear what the artists and writers of the present period are supposed to be doing. (6-7)

Postmodern art and literature, then, became not about the individual but “about art itself in a new kind of way; even more, it means that one of its essential messages will involve the necessary failure of art and the aesthetic, the failure of the new, the imprisonment in the past” (Jameson 1998, 7). The visual novel is the perfect embodiment of this aesthetic as it is possible to continually subvert the idea of the grand narrative centered on the unique individual.

But postcolonial pastiche, in contrast to postmodern pastiche, attempts to create narratives that could create sympathy if not empathy for the marginalized characters of the game. Though it follows much of the mechanism of the visual novel and the tropes of Asian horror, *The Letter* offers a humane view of looking at each of its characters. It

does not fall into the total destruction of the subject but instead focuses on the unevenness of modernity that marginalized peoples experienced, which reaffirms these experiences and narratives as an alternative way of seeing the world. As Homi Bhabha (2004) has noted in the ambivalent portrayal of colonized people as the mysterious Other (101), *The Letter* rejects the dehumanization of Other. What it does is to question the dominant modes and systems by mimicking the narratives that came from the center. According to Bhabha again, “The menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority (126).” Though Bhabha talks about mimicry here in the colonial context of India, how the mimicry of the colonial subject of Western political ideas is in itself a destabilization of colonial authority. I would like to argue that postcolonial pastiche does the same for the current global capitalist order. When postmodernism supposes the desolution of the subject, postcolonialism rejects this. Even if *The Letter* pastiches Asian horror and the visual novel, it attempts to provide an authentic, if not a sincere, portrayal of social marginality from a position of marginality that the developers, Yangyang Mobile, have as they come from a country outside of the mainstream of the video game development industry. Specifically, the game’s reliance on the relationship mechanic found in many romantic visual novels deconstructs the centrality of the individual subject as the core of a singular grand narrative. It is not the individual subject that is central to the resolution of the game but is through the network of complex and interconnected relationships that is the key to successfully navigate and resolve the game’s grand nonnarrative. This, I would argue, is the achievement of *The Letter*, and the key to its success—the reinvigoration of forms and tropes from the center to challenge the center itself. *The Letter* provides a way forward from the nihilistic destruction of the subject in postmodernity by providing a resolution rooted in the social. It is through communal struggle that Takako’s curse is eventually exorcized.

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