

CHILDHOOD AND FAMILY IN CONTEMPORARY CHILDREN'S FICTION: RESILIENCE, AGENCY, AND EMERGENCE OF NEW GENDER NORMS

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Abstract

New awareness of re-thinking childhood in the emergent field of childhood studies inspires production of new discourse on social construction of childhood in literature. This paper looks at contemporary children's literature in the Philippines from this perspective and within the context of the globalization and transnationalization of care giving. Its interrogation of selected children's books and literature for young adult reveals that the traditional concept of childhood is now being challenged and resisted. Cognizant of the need to sustain this direction of literary production, this paper posits that children's literature in the country should mainstream this new thinking so that it can become a meaningful venue for Filipino children's socialization and construction in light of the increasingly complex world that children need to deal with.

Keywords

childhood studies, migration, transnational families

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INTRODUCTION

Motherhood is a very powerful ideological concept in the Philippine socio-political and cultural landscape. The passing on of former Philippine President Corazon C. Aquino on August 1, 2009 and the response of the people to her demise enacted this power. Reminiscent of the 1986 People Power Revolution which brought down dictatorial rule, people lined the streets wearing

symbols and flashing signs signifying the struggle for democracy, as they paid their last respects to the first woman president of the Republic, who in death had become an icon, “Ina ng Demokrasya” (Mother of Democracy). She is now remembered as a leader whose commitment to justice, democracy, and peace had become her legacy.

In national-political and family life, maternal ideology which ascribes to motherhood women’s highest, and perhaps, most noble aspiration remains pervasive. In the operation of this ideology, motherhood and childhood have become two poles which are inextricably linked to each other. Children need nurturance and care from mothers to reach maturation while mothers need children to realize their socially and culturally constructed life-world. Following this, family relations are defined along economic and social roles, with gender underlying both.

Mothers play a key role in child-rearing practice in the Philippines as in many other societies. This is expressed in a saying, “Ang ina ang ilaw ng tahanan” (The mother is the beacon of the home.) Traditionally, mother and children spend most of their time together at home, while father earns a living.

The child receives nurturance and care primarily from the mother who also presides over the introduction of the child into the core values of obedience, filial piety, and duty in the context of the family. The child’s learning of these values are reinforced and built on with more social, moral, and civil codes, in school and in the practice of religion. The disciplining of children, on the other hand, is the domain of the father who is expected to be firm and unwavering, an attribute of child-rearing practices inscribed in a number of the often quoted work of eighteenth-century poet Francisco Balagtas which is part of canonical literature being read in public schools today.¹

The foregoing describes the traditional place of a child in the family. I shall return to this in relation to the concept of childhood. Connectedness and interdependence are highly valued in family relations as inscribed in another popular saying, “Ang sakit ng kalingkingan ay nararamdaman ng buong katawan” (The whole body feels the pain of the little finger.) It means that if a member of the family is afflicted, the whole family suffers and the rest of the members, therefore, are expected to deal with it to restore the family.

The subjects of motherhood, childhood, and family relations described are the focus of this paper’s discussion of children’s literature and its representation of these subjects in the context of changes in the family structure and relations caused by labor migration and, recently, female overseas work. These changes have led to the rise of different forms of family structures such as single-parent families, mother-headed, father-headed, child-headed, blended families and many others, and in the process have probably affected the child’s position in and in relation to the family. Presumably, children’s literature may be creating venues for rethinking present conceptions of childhood and family relations, and if it does, children’s literature for Filipino

children may be helping children by providing them with “mirror books” (Gangi and Barowsky) with which to understand the complexity of their present world. One way of knowing this is to look at children’s literature and its representation of the subject. An exploration of these representations in terms of themes and ideological messages found in the literature may suggest to adult readers whether the socialization of children to traditional concepts and values continue or whether some kind of interrogation and subversion of old ways of thinking is already taking place. Apart from its educational use for children, it is hoped that this reading may instruct adults involved in the production and consumption of children’s literature on the importance of critical engagement with these texts which, for children’s literature scholars Peter Nodelman and Mavis Reimer, require “a deeper consciousness of the pleasure texts offer, how they offer it, and why they offer it—in the service of what values can only benefit both adults and the children in their charge” (23).

This reading of selected texts of contemporary children’s literature combines the perspectives of the emergent field of Childhood Studies with its recognition of the need to rethink ways of understanding childhood in light of the reality of different kinds of childhood and in its rejection of the universalism of the North American and Western European conception, and literary criticism in its interrogation of ideological messages which these texts present to its implied child readers. These ideological themes, once revealed through the method employed in the critique of ideology of texts for children, are further analyzed in the context of the changing world of Filipino children in relation to their social construction through literature and an understanding of Filipino childhood deploying the categories of agency, class, and gender.

OUTSIDE THE TEXT: FILIPINO CHILDREN IN SOCIETY

Writing for children usually invokes the principle of reflection, of crafting stories taken from day to day experiences of real children following the didactic impulse. Realism in this sense is believed to be an effective way to teach children to get to like reading by allowing them to relate to characters and events in the stories about them and in the process learn about themselves and the world they inhabit. Others call these uses of the narrative mode “mirror books.” Having said this, fantasy and magic are not less valued than realism. They are equally employed in canonical and modern children’s fiction, but in most instances their themes relate to real concerns of children. Hence, in this discussion it is necessary to look at Filipino children and what constitutes their social reality in order to give readers of children’s literature a larger social context for seeing through narrative discourse and determining its social significance or meaning.

Filipino children below 17 years old constitute nearly 40% of the country’s population. For this reason the Philippines is considered a young society. In 2002, 33 million children constitute a

population of about 85 million. Population grows at a rate of 2.11% which is expected to bring the number to 102.8 million by 2015 with an estimated 45 million children to support with education, health, and other services that will require huge resource allocation from the government. As a country with a weak economy also called “developing” as opposed to “developed” economies of the First World, majority of Filipino children who belong to the poorest of the poor families live in an environment characterized by abject poverty, neglect, violence both physical and structural, death, sickness, abuse, economic exploitation, lack of access to education and other basic children’s rights enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of Children (CRC). The Philippines is also one of the countries identified by the United Nations as having children in need of special protection (CNSP) as is common in many other poor countries. To this particular group of belong street children, child soldiers, child workers, children in conflict with the law, indigenous children, and children in the flesh trade. The numbers of children who belong to this category are in millions and continue to grow as population expands while government’s support falls behind the demand for services and interventions.

A recent study by the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS) and United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) titled “The Filipino Child, Global Study on Child Poverty and Disparities: Philippines” reveal that Filipino children suffer from economic and multiple dimensions of poverty. According to the study:

Aside from the rising income poverty, it is a disturbing situation when about half (44%) of all Filipino children are living in poverty. The lack of income can have more adverse impacts on them because unlike adults, children are still in certain developmental stages where proper nourishment is necessary and are most vulnerable to diseases. Moreover, families with inadequate income may be discouraged to send their children to school. (1)

Translated into numbers, there were 12.8 million children below the age of 15 in 2006 living in poverty which represented a 4% increase from 2003 or around one million more children. Apart from income poverty, the study considered other dimensions which include “deprivations in terms of food, shelter, health, education, water, sanitation facilities, electricity and information.” Needless to say, this situation of Filipino children calls attention to the need for an “overall development of children” perspective and immediate action. Notwithstanding the alarming reality of the situation of Filipino children, the study acknowledges some significant improvements in child survival indicators such as significant decline in infant mortality under five years of age, decrease in the proportion of children deprived of electricity over the years, and improved access to radio,

television, telephone, computer, water and sanitary facilities (“The Filipino Child” 2).

FILIPINO CHILDREN AND OVERSEAS WORK

The situation of Filipino children with OFW parents may be different from children living in poverty described above since their parents work abroad and away from home to earn income and provide for their needs. According to a recent report, there are now three to six million children of OFW parents. In this and in other studies, which will be discussed in succeeding sections, concern over the social cost of transnational families on child care and development calls for a rethinking of the policy and practice of overseas work. On the reasons for overseas work such as better income and increased opportunities for education of children, UNICEF Director Tobin doubts whether these are in fact the case and cites studies which reveal that the money sent to the Philippines is barely enough for the families (Rufo).

TRANSNATIONAL CARE GIVING AND FILIPINO CHILDHOOD

Globalization has been transforming family structures and family relations, bringing fundamental changes to social and cultural worlds of Filipino children. This process invariably implicates mainstream Filipino children’s literature in ways that re-affirm, as well as challenge, traditional representations of family and childhood.

The absent-mother seems to be the emerging common form as an increasing number of women continue to join the international labor market. According to Yinger, recent assessment shows that men no longer constitute the majority of international migrants. In the Philippines, 70% of Filipino labor migrants are women, and it is estimated that about 10 million children are growing up without a mother (Carandang and Lee-Chua 109). Migrant women labor came into demand when the need for household work and care giving in rich countries opened new work opportunities for women from poor countries. Feminization of migrant labor thus went hand in hand with the transnationalization of care giving. This trend is most evident in Asia where women migrant workers come mainly from Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, while the main destinations are Hong Kong (China), Malaysia, Singapore, and the Middle East (Yinger).

Studies have looked into globalization and the phenomenon of transnational care giving, and one that examines the experiences of children in transnational families from the lens of gender was done by Parreñas in 2006. The study reveals that the “gender paradox defines the transnational family in the Philippines, and that gender norms are being reified and transgressed” (7). Put plainly, gender role switching is not taking place in Filipino families with migrant parents. The

study shows that “each group reinforces gender boundaries in the caring work that they do for the family” (11). Of particular relevance to this discussion is the study’s examination of the discourse of abandonment among children of migrant mothers. Even if care is provided by substitutes, children in these families feel abandoned by their mothers. This strong emotion increases as families deviate from conventional practice, i.e., with father doing care giving role, and mother doing income-earning role.

An in-depth study of overseas Filipino workers’ families by Carandang et al. in 2008 describes children in families where both parents are labor migrants as “seasonal orphans.” Drawing from several case studies, it is revealed that although there is a pervasive sense of powerlessness and hopelessness among fathers and some of the children, resilience is present especially among children who try to look beyond the present and imagine a happier, complete family in the future (1-124).

Other studies cited by Parreñas qualify the generally assumed negative effect of migration on the family as a social institution. She cites Asis who acknowledges the effects migration may have on the family such as infidelity, strained kin relations, and “wayward” children, but adds that these are not as extensive as media and other scholars claim. In another study of more than 700 schoolchildren, Batistella and Conaco (1996) confirm that “severe cases of emotional disturbance” and “disruptive behavior” do not necessarily occur in transnational households but emphasize that “the single most important finding in the survey is that absence of the mother has the most disruptive effect on the life of the children” (Parreñas 94).

CHILDHOOD AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION IN LITERATURE

Understanding childhood is currently undergoing rethinking in the emerging field of Childhood Studies in the last two decades. Social scientists’ discontentment with the way their discipline dealt with childhood led to critiques on key notions found in conventional approaches such as “development” in psychology and “socialization” in education and sociology. This new impetus produced studies in which childhood was examined as social construction and children were seen as social actors in their own right (Prout 7). Childhood studies scholar Alan Prout, in his own critique of the “new social studies,” however, is dissatisfied with its framework that rests on implicit assumptions of oppositional dichotomies of social construction versus biologically-centered notions of childhood, of culture versus nature. He insists that “social relations are already heterogeneous, that is, they are made up from a variety of material, discursive, cultural, natural, technological, human and non-human resources,” and proposes a perspective that childhood as a social phenomenon be viewed in the same way. Following this theoretical position, Prout sees the

need for a “broad set of intellectual resources, an interdisciplinary approach and an open-minded process of enquiry” (2).

This examination of the social construction of Filipino childhood in contemporary children’s literature draws inspiration from this new perspective. Using categories of class, gender, and power in cultural studies employed in the current practice of reading cultural texts, this paper explores representations of childhood and family, brings to the surface ideological assumptions and ideas on Filipino childhood and family, and critiques such representations in the larger context of prevailing social conditions. The preceding discussion on Filipino children and society provides a social context against which this reading is being undertaken. What follows is a discussion of some theoretical concepts and assumptions related to social constructions in literature and a brief explanation of key concepts and assumptions involved in an adult reading of children’s text which this particular reading employs.

The function of children’s literature in education is well established in theory and practice as a fairly good venue for teaching children skills, moral, religious and social values, and aspirations, as well as for modeling social roles. This thinking rests on theories of growth taken from developmental psychology (Piaget, Vigotsky), social learning in education (Bandura), and theories of social and cultural construction in sociology (James, Prout).

In literary study and criticism, children’s literature is attracting new interest as an interdisciplinary area for those in childhood studies, literature, education, development and culture. In mapping out this development, Vanessa Joosen and Katrien Vloeberghs observe that in Western discourse the tradition of criticism of ideology of the 1960s prevails, as with the tension between pedagogy and aesthetics which continue to influence our understanding of children’s literature. Relevant to this discussion is their observation that the cultural studies framework, with its emphasis on the critique of power and the criticism of ideology, infused criticism and the production of children’s books with new insights and energy and brought back discussions of the political dimension. Cultural studies gave way to a more serious consideration of marginalized forms of cultural expression such as children’s literature. These theoretical insights on children’s literature and its relation to childhood construction inform this project.

Literature’s stable position in the social construction of childhood from the perspective of these literary and critical approaches is pretty much established which remains central to the theoretical discussion defining children’s literature, then and now. Scholars continue to deal with a fundamental question regarding the function of literature written for children in an effort to differentiate it from other kinds of literature. Whether it serves a socializing or subversive function is a question that has been pertinent to the field for as long as there has been children’s literature (Flynn 311-12). It is widely accepted that literature written for children teach children to learn about

and embrace society's many assumptions and values that the dominant authority favors at any given socio-historical milieu. This didactic impulse that influences the production of this kind of literature remains strong. As a matter of fact, observers like Hoffman insist that "even the most seemingly subversive children's books about School Picture Day reaffirm social and educational authority ... and potentially all of children's literature" (Flynn 311). Conscious of this function of literature for children, literary critics engaged in critical practice took interest in exposing ideological biases and values which prove that children's literature is not innocent on the issues of class, race, power, gender, ethnicity, and the like. And by doing so, they are led to conclude that a new radical children's literature is possible as a countercultural practice. In his critical survey of the development of ideas on the balance of power in children's literature, for instance, Charles Sarland recalls the critique of mainstream children's books as a result of the contention in Britain and America in the eighteenth and nineteenth century that these books represent certain groups in a certain way that privileges being essentially white, male, and middle class. Such representations, therefore, are class biased, racist, sexist, and promote discrimination and violence (Hunt 31). Joosen and Vloeberghs best capture the direction and underlying assumptions of this critical practice in these words:

The enlightened concept of childhood helps to explain the dominance of criticism of ideology in the study of children's literature: the belief that literature exerts a direct influence on the child governs and fuels the need to question the norms and ideologies that this literature conveys. More affirmatively, the enlightened view of children's literature values its potential to educate, to provide *Bildung* and guidance to the young. It thus invests literature with a transformative force to improve society and raise humankind to a supposedly more advanced level. (xi)

Such thinking allows for an adult reader of children's literature, say a critic, to interpellate texts, surface assumptions, and ideological ideas, and construct an understanding of childhood and society. This discussion of Filipino texts that follows takes this perspective on children's literature and grounds its reading using John Stephens's analyses of ideologies in children's fiction and, in particular, his categories of explicit and implicit ideology. Stephens offers a methodology which synthesizes "the elements of narrative theory, critical linguistics, and a concern with ideology and subjectivity" (4). He argues that:

within a literary text, relations of power and domination exists in two ways, conceptually and narratively. Conceptually, there is the dilemma for both writers

and readers that on the one hand ideological practices may be more or less directly advocated while on the other hand ideological assumptions (not necessarily the same ones) will always pervade discourse because they are always implicit within discourse itself. Narratively, these relations exist separately on the planes of “story” (what is represented) and discourse (the process of representing): that is, characters within the text are represented as affected by the operations of power, and the various mediations between writers and readers are also a form of power relations. A fictional narrative’s “meaning,” in its broadest sense, will incorporate all four possibilities, and this principle will apply to any fiction. (44)

EMERGENT CHILDHOOD: RESILIENCE, AGENCY AND NEW GENDER NORMS

Philippine stories on children belonging to families with migrant mothers (transnational families) show the child-protagonists capable of acting on their own. Whether narrating the travails of a much younger child who imagines she has special powers (Rivera, *Ang Lihim ni Lea*) or a much older child (Pacis, OCW, *A Young Boy’s Search for His Mother*) who leaves home to search for his mother and succeeds in bringing her home, albeit temporarily, these stories portray characters who have agency and in this sense, these texts advocate a different kind of childhood from the widely constructed one in mass-market picture books which foreground innocence and passivity.

AGENCY, CHANGING GENDER NORMS AND ASPIRATIONS

A number of stories illustrate children acting on their own in different circumstances. Agency is exemplified in different situations. In Vibiesca’s “Tahooey,” a mimicking of the sound of “taho” or bean curd that vendors shout when peddling this sweetish snack, a son and a younger daughter take over selling taho when their father gets sick. In Vibiesca’s “Ang Kumot ni Dora” (Dora’s Blanket), a young girl from a poor family understands what her parents say about being content with what they have while resources are limited and shares her blanket with them in the end. In Molina’s *Ang Silya ni Titoy* (Titoy’s Magic Chair), a boy born without legs is able to explore the world around him on a magical chair. In another story, Coroza’s *Imbisibol Man ang Tatay* (Invisible Though My Father), a boy who rarely sees his father and suffers doubts and peer judgment believes in the power of a charm that comes from a banana blossom to make him invisible whenever he needs to be; he discovers that he was born out of wedlock but learns to appreciate his mother’s and grandmother’s love for him, and resolves to become a good father someday. In Patindol’s *Papa’s House, Mama’s House*, the main characters – children in middle class families

whose parents have separated – are able to comprehend the reasonableness of living apart and the different ways their parents nurture them. And lastly, in Floresta's *War Makes Me Sad*, a girl who lives in war-torn Mindanao (southern part of the Philippines with a long history of armed conflicts) expresses insecurity, anxiety, and fear, unable to understand why there is war, and prays for it to end.

These characterizations are further helped by the use of the first person child narrator, which projects the child's voice and wisdom in no unclear terms. These narrative voices are effective because in the act of reading, an atmosphere of children speaking to each other (presumably the implied child reader) is easily established, avoiding the didacticism characteristic of traditional storytelling. Authorial power is diminished and rapport is created between text and reader. Uncanny links to harsh realities of childhood in the Philippines serve to inform children of the real world they are in, but at the same time empower them through the use of magic and fantasy.

It is interesting to note that in contemporary representations of Filipino childhood, none of the stories show child characters who aspire to seek work overseas. This is in great contrast to the fact that transnational families have become dominant in the Philippines.²

Filipino children's literature socializes children to conform to dominant gender roles but at the same time manifests a counter-cultural voice. Many stories on motherhood teach children the codes of domesticity by glorifying the work of mothers at home, including domestic work of migrant mothers. Mothers are almost always characterized as compassionate, self-sacrificing, and sensitive to children's needs.

Hence it is interesting that, in one of the stories, a mother has decided to take on the role of breadwinner after her husband passed away. In struggling to be able to send the child to school, the mother decides to drive the pedicab her husband had used to earn income to earn for her child's schooling. She thus has to wear clothes like that of a male driver which her child resents, embarrassed of what has become her mother's "ugly" look. The child eventually discovers that other mothers in the neighborhood and even her teacher liken her mother to a heroine and describes her as "may trabahong lalaki at may pusong babae" [with a man's job and a heart of a woman] (Chong 22). From a feminist perspective, the story socializes children to the idea that women are strong, capable, and responsible. It puts in question the common concept of feminine beauty when the child finally understands that her mother, who does not wear make-up and whose hands are not soft, possesses inner beauty, a concept taught to her by her teacher. In another sense, this story challenges gender boundaries as critiqued by scholars of transnational families.

Other new images of women presented to children include single professional mothers, mothers in separated households, and women bonding with women. On the other end of the

spectrum, unconventional images of fathers who are equally nurturing as mothers are deployed as well. There is the shoemaker who makes her daughter, born without legs, a dozen pairs of shoes as an expression of his love (Gatmaitan); a grandfather and a grandson's special bonding made strong with grandpa's stories and the child's genuine love (Gatmaitan); and a man who finds inner peace when he discovers that his life can be made more meaningful when shared with others, particularly children living in the streets (Villanueva). These images provide children with new windows with which to understand changing gender roles already evident in their lived experience.

WHEN MOTHER LEAVES HOME FOR WORK OVERSEAS

Two collections and a novel for children deal with the subject of a mother who leaves home to work abroad as a domestic helper and/or caregiver and entrusts the care of her children to the father and/or grandparents. The storybook *Uuwi na ang Nanay Kong si Darna* (My Mother Darna is Coming Home), written by Edgar Samar and illustrated by Russel Molina, projects a happy child in the care of his father who meets his mother for the first time when she arrives home after a long time. The picture book *Ang Lihim ni Lea* (The Secret of Lea), written by Augie Rivera and illustrated by Ghani Madueño, is a story of a girl who survives sexual abuse by her own father. A novel in English by Carla Pacis, *O.C.W. A Young Boy's Search for His Mother*, tells the story of a young boy, Tonyo, eldest of three children, who embarks on a journey to find his mother, a domestic helper in Hong Kong, and succeeds in his goal of bringing his mother home.

AFFIRMING FEMALE OVERSEAS WORK IN UUWI NA ANG NANAY KONG SI DARNA

Story books or picture books, according to Stephens, have "a tendency to reflect dominant social practices, advocate values widely regarded as socially desirable ... but conflicting practices may also be expressed" (199). The storybook *Uuwi na ang Nanay kong si Darna* is informed by the first tendency; that is, it reflects the widespread practice of overseas work for Filipinos and advocates its acceptance by addressing the absence of a parent (a mother in this case) using parental manipulation (father's view poised to the child). The argument in the story appears to be that if the child in this absent-mother family is happy with this arrangement, and then society should not worry. In Stephens' classification, this represents the explicit ideology of the story.

The story uses the first-person voice of the child narrator, from which vantage point he narrates the series of actions that make up the story of his mother's homecoming and projects the child-protagonist's subject position. The dual discourse of text and visual image set the dilemma of Popoy in the beginning of the story: the visual image of a thought bubble "Uuwi na!" ("She's

coming home!") is in big colorful letters set off from a background of small black and white letters, possibly a letter, and the text that describes this image as "balita ng tatay" (report of father) and describes the father's excitement which the child knows from what he sees, "nasisilip ko na halos ang ngala-ngala niya sa pagtawa" (I can almost see his palate as he laughs). The child, however, says he cannot tell whether he, too, is happy, because he has not really seen his mother ("hindi pa nakikita nang totohanan si Nanay"). The narrator then mentions details explaining why he feels ambivalent: he sees her only in photos, talked to her only once over the telephone, was very young when he last saw his mother during the family's send off in the airport. This ambivalent feeling is compounded by the child's curiosity and excitement to know one thing: is Darna really his mother? This is what his father tells him when he describes his mother's work in Hong Kong in reply to his question why his mother left, "Bakit po umalis si Nanay?" (Why did mother leave?) Listening to his father narrate how his mother fights millions of bacteria as she uses her *wonder walis* or magic broom, her power conveyed to the child reader by the visual image of a woman on top of a giant broom and giving her command "attack" while bacteria hover in fear, and in other instances that depict the mother in a fighting mood, the child infers that his mother is like Darna, a fictional character in Philippine print and popular media (film, television) who possesses magical powers. Parental authority is exercised by the father when he corrects the child's idea and insists that mother is in fact Darna herself. The child, however, seemingly not fully convinced, asks his father why mother would not just fly to arrive early, to which father replies she will indeed fly but, she needs to fly across a wide ocean. This conversation between father and child ends with the text and visual images revealing the subject position of the child—caught between belief and doubt, unsettled by fear that his mother will no longer be able to recognize him, but sure, however, about his feeling proud of her ("Aba, ipagmamalaki ko siya sa mga magiging kaklase ko sa pasukan. Si Darna yata ang Nanay ko."/ I will proudly introduce her to my would-be classmates. After all, my mother is none other than Darna.) The story ends confirming the father's version of the mother's identity with the image of the child holding a card that says "I love (heart) DarnaNanay " when the child gets to meet his mother and the image (in full spread) of the child flying with Darna. Affirming the social practice of overseas work for Filipinos, and the idea that this brings wealth both at the level of the family and national economy, the story depicts the widespread practice of visiting OFWs who bring gifts as a way of sharing "wealth," as the mother gives relatives "pasalubong" (gift by one who returns from abroad or some distant place not necessarily another country) such as electric appliances. The child receives crayons and books, signifying the oft repeated reason why parents seek overseas work, which is to send their children to school. The approving stamp on the ideological position of this text relative to the culturally constructed image of OFWs as modern day heroes is further expressed in the 2002 Salanga Writer's Prize, Grand Prize

that this book received both for story and illustration. That the story book belongs to the mass market also explains its wholesale endorsement of female overseas work.

WHEN ABSENT-MOTHER FAMILIES ENDANGER THE CHILD AND ANG LIHIM NI LEA

This story book merges two thematic ideas in a rather complex plot not usually witnessed in this genre: there is hope for a child who may suffer sexual abuse and the child is safe and happy living with his/her mother. There are two different homes which frame the story of a girl-child named Lea: one in the Philippines in which most of the story takes place, and the other, a new home away from the old where the child protagonist lives with her OFW mother, a nurse who works in London. Lea's story narrates how she is left to the care of her father while her mother works abroad, becomes a victim of sexual abuse by her own father, survives this traumatic experience, and lives with her mother in their new home in a foreign country where her mother works. The character in this story represents a child who experiences two kinds of social phenomena: an absent-mother family and child abuse. This text acquires social significance in terms of the subjects it depicts and in its use of several narratological elements that explicitly and implicitly project rejection of child abuse and separation of mother and child.

The story very clearly and explicitly advocates education in order to prevent the sexual abuse of children by providing a context by which both child and adult readers become aware of this problem. Published by Soroptimist International of HOPE (Helping Through Outreach Programs and Expertise) in Baguio, the proceeds from the sale of the book, according to the group, will help fund the establishment of a shelter for young women and children who are victims of abuse.

The story uses a third-person narrative voice which describes the girl's external situation, feelings and thoughts. Its use is appropriate if the observation of therapists and psychologists that children who experience trauma may be easily helped in the context of a story, not really their own, is to be considered. One easily recognizes the connection between the word "lihim" (secret) and the visual image of a closed and open door. Throughout the book, this image changes in color, conveying the changing atmosphere and emotions of the main character. The identical doors of many rooms in the condominium which became her new home are always closed whenever she walks its corridors, conveying a feeling of coldness. This new home, for Lea, seems to isolate her from the outside world which she seeks whenever she is at home or in their unit with her father. This changes when she discovers one day that she has the power to pass through those doors without opening them. The changes in her facial expression (image of her face drawn on the inside of different doors) may be read as her varied responses as she sees different people doing

different things. These range from surprise in the case of the old woman snoring while scratching her dog's tummy, joy as she listens to a girl practice her violin, and laughter and fun at the sight of a househelp watching TV startled by the ringing phone. This child's magical experience suddenly changes when she confronts a closed door, inside their own bedroom, her face showing fear while looking at her father seated at the edge of the bed holding a cell phone. The room is dark purple, which is the same color of the room that the father enters while Lea is shown afraid and helpless in one corner of a sofa before a television. This purple door, later on, changes to white, conveying light, as the image of her handcuffed father is being taken out.

Again, visual images effect, together with the discorsal text, the changes in the quality of the girl's relationship with her parents. The first illustration shows Leah cuddling her stuffed toy with her eyes wide open, facing the reader while the father, with his back turned, looks at the condominium. This positioning which is repeated in other frames clearly suggests distance between daughter and father. Mother and daughter, on the other hand, hug each other when the mother arrives, are shown again going out of a lightly colored open door, happy and holding each other, after the girl has gone through her therapy sessions and is deemed healed. In the last illustration which ends the story, mother and daughter are shown going out of a door of a brick-walled house and a neighborhood that suggest a foreign setting, perhaps some place in London.

The ideological position of this text is implied in the way the problem of the child is resolved. Lea stays with her mother in a happy accommodation of continuing work overseas which is possible because the mother in this case is a professional who, we may surmise, can afford to take her eight-year-old child. In a way, this resolution seems to challenge the dominant practice of handing children (of mothers working abroad) over to the care of other members of the family when the father is unavailable. However, it obviously affirms the mother's overseas work by "resolving" the issue of separation. This story educates readers, both child and adult, that sexual abuse ("things happen") may happen even when mothers are present, an idea which the teacher in the story shares with the mother by way of correcting the misconception. Moreover, this story book seems ambiguous in its portrayal of the child's character. Throughout the events in the story, the protagonist's identity evolves from an innocent child who needs protection and help from caring adults and social institutions (teacher, psychologist, social worker, and child protection unit) to a victim, and finally a survivor. Her response to sexual abuse of imagining she has magical power simply suggests escape, not resistance. The writer of the story could have explored this element to show some agency on the part of the child-victim, thus preparing readers in conceptually accepting her ability to survive and be healed later on.

WHEN A CHILD TAKES CHARGE

Nodelman and Reimer observe that “stories in which escape from home allows the preservation of some innocence tend to be for adolescents. The discovery of a secure home in which one is free to be childlike is often the culmination of novels for young people ... in which characters journey from a broken or disrupted home to a new home” (198). The novel *O.C.W. A Young Boy’s Search for His Mother*³ written by Carla M. Pacis with illustrations by Yasmin B. Ong, straddles this pattern and the typical home/away/home motif in children’s stories because the home at the end of the novel does not represent the “new home” in the story but rather an ambiguously restored home. This point will be argued later in the discussion.

The pattern follows the story of a family of three children with the main character Tonyo, already in high school, a father who drives a pedicab for a living, and a mother who works as a maid in Hong Kong. They live in a village called Lauan, far from the city of Manila, and of course, too far from Hong Kong. The novel opens with the third person narrator detailing how the mother was recruited as a maid in Hong Kong and why she is excited though sad at times at the thought of leaving. The mother, in talking to her eldest Tonyo, expresses the usual reason shared by Filipinos who seek work overseas which is to be able to send all children to school and even to college, buy father a jeep, or maybe buy a piece of land to grow rice. Things happen within three months since the mother left, inciting Tonyo to distance himself from home. The father is unable to cope with his wife’s absence, spends most of his time in the cockpit, comes home very late and drunk, and eventually starts beating Tonyo in fits of anger over his wife’s absence. Tonyo stops going to school because he starts taking over most of his mother’s chores apart from working in the rice fields. Tonyo leaves home to prevent his relationship with his father from worsening and to go to his mother while he, too, works, or asks his mother to come home. The events that follow Tonyo’s departure depict his growing maturity, although it should be noted that before he leaves home, Tonyo already displays some maturity in the way he responds to his situation: not to escape but to deal with the problem. This part of the story not only depicts the child in the world outside the home, experiencing new life in the city so different from the familiar village setting, but also exposes the social problems children in the city without homes suffer and embrace as a way of life in order to survive, which the main character himself goes through. Tonyo experiences hunger, sleeping next to street children who sniffed glue, hooking up with street gangs, eating leftovers; he gets involved in dangerous errands like snatching bags and selling drugs, but also lands a job in a bakery through the help of a priest after escaping from the street gangs and seeking refuge in a church. All these experiences teaches Tonyo to become street smart and, as a consequence, he loses his innocence. But he does not lose sight of his goal, although he would feel confused for a

while, not knowing what to do, and would even entertain the idea of going back home. Brave and resolute, he is able to refocus on his purpose for leaving home, reaches the shores of Hong Kong as a stowaway, finds his mother with the help of some Filipinos and eventually goes home with his mother.

What is the social significance of the story? What concept of childhood does it inscribe? What does the text advocate on the question of absent-mother families brought about by the transnationalization of care giving? The answers to these questions are interrelated and constitute the ideological position of the text.

Tonyo, the main character, and other child characters in the story represent concepts of childhood that the novel advocates and in some way resists. The family's low economic status, as well as the location of his home, a far flung agricultural village with limited opportunities for growth, provides the argument for several attributes of the child-character. Education is a normal aspiration of poor families in the hope that formal schooling will enable social mobility. In the case of Tonyo who is already in high school, he must be able to go to college while his two siblings will have to be schooled when they reach the proper age. Tonyo has to help raise income from their small makeshift piggery and has to divide his time between this and his studies. When his mother leaves for work overseas, shouldering her home chores pressures him to drop from school, a decision which reflects a child's orientation toward the family, rather than himself. He represents another common aspiration of adults for children, which is to become responsible members of the family. His going away to bring back his mother is an act of responsibility in the sense that he is taking charge, in great contrast to the father who shows weakness and succumbs to distractions. In every sense, Tonyo is an example of a child who knows his priorities, makes decisions, and acts on his own. This concept of childhood is evident in this characterization of Tonyo and in the choice of events that would end the narrative. Tonyo is responsible for the restoration of the family – the return of the mother and, hopefully, the return to family life and all its arrangements before it was disturbed by the temporary absence of the mother. As for himself, he knows he is going back to school ("I have to finish school first") (171). He changes his attitude toward his father in the end; pity replaces his deep-seated anger and this suggests that respect and love for his father is likewise restored.

It is important to note, however, that apart from employing focalization in creating the character of Tonyo, there are some elements in the narrative, such as statements made, and other use of details, which point to a counterdiscoursal position on childhood and family. For instance, the narrator comments in connection with the scene on leave-taking:

The children crowded around Nanay. They would all miss her, especially Ryan who

was only five and Neneng who was three. **They were still too young to be without a mother.** But Nanay tried not to be sad and promised she would send them toys and clothes as soon as she could. (13, underscoring in original)

The portrayal of street children, child labor, children engaged in criminal activities, and children without home and family call attention to social problems that children in poor families experience. Such representations of childhood have the effect of questioning many of society's values and priorities. With their presence, the text invites readers (adult and young adult) to reflect on these realities in relation to the culturally accepted notion of Filipino childhood which regards children as "gift of God," "hope of the future," and "blessing." The author's note is also relevant to the discussion of the novel's position regarding overseas work and its negative effect on children. She explicitly expresses her rejection of overseas work for women especially mothers and maintains that:

Because of this diaspora, many families have come undone, those suffering most being the children. This is a sad reality of the OCW. Hopefully, with the help of the government, our OCW's can come home to stay, to enjoy their families and their hard-earned prosperity. (Pacis 177)

Filipino sociologists have pointed to Filipinos' special concern for children and specific sensitivity to the future of a child (Dalisay). One may ask in consideration of prevailing social conditions of Filipino children discussed in the earlier section of this paper whether this "special concern" really and substantially translates to social practice and policy. As long as these harsh realities put the majority of Filipino children to risk, such "special concern" remains an ideological mask that literature for children should continue to interrogate and reject.

Filipino children are living in an increasingly complex world brought about by changes in the socio-cultural and economic conditions at the national and global levels. Their social construction through literature is likewise undergoing changes that reflect the complexity of this world, and puts into question assumptions of childhood, traditional notions of care and child-rearing practices, and gender construction. In this way, contemporary children's literature serves as a venue for re-educating Filipino children to better prepare them to discern and deal with future challenges – a function that, however, has yet to be fully realized.

NOTES

- ¹ These are: “Ang laki sa layaw karaniwa’y hubad/sa bait at muni’t sa hatol ay salat (202); “di dapat palakhin ang bata sa saya, /at sa katuwa’y kapag namihasa, /kung lumaki’y walang hihinting ginhawa” (197); “sa taguring bunso’t likong pagmamahal/ang isinasama ng bata’y nunukal/ang iba’y marahil sa kapabayaan /ng dapat magturong tamad na magulang” (203). (Balagtas *Florante at Laura* 1838)
- ² It is relatively easy to understand that in a country where transnational families have become dominant that children would “naturally” aspire to seek jobs overseas just like their parents did. This is evident, for instance, in Malano’s “Coping with Life with OFW Parents.”
- ³ There is a discrepancy in the title of this work. In the cover it reads *O.C.W. A Young Boy’s Search for His Mother*, while in the title page it reads *O.C.W. A Young Man’s Search for His Mother*. Underscoring mine. There is no explanation offered in the book for this.

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