

From Dream Weavers to Night Monkeys

Transformations in Filipino Children's Short Stories in English

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IT IS WIDELY AGREED that the nature and characteristics of children's literature change along with changing conceptions of the child. Sociologists Allison James and Alan Prout maintain that "childhood is... to be understood as a social construction" and that the "ways of understanding this period of human life—the institution of childhood—vary cross-culturally" (3). Karin Lesnik-Oberstein similarly states that "the idea of what children are like, what they think and feel, changes in different historical and cultural settings... and between people who hold, for instance, different views on morality, politics or gender" (198). Donna Norton points out that, consequently, "authors of literature written for or adopted by children often write books that reflect the views of childhood and the family that are common for the time" and that researchers have increasingly begun to regard children's literature 'as a vehicle for looking at these changing attitudes" (60). And Karen Coats likewise maintains that "the conventions of children's literature change with the changing conceptions of children and what they need and want."

The literature written for Filipino children is therefore, to a certain extent, different from the literature written for Western or even other Asian children. Filipino children's writer and scholar Lara Saguisag observed that in her writing classes in the U.S., the way she wrote for children was quite different

from the way her American classmates wrote, and she realized that “our writing for children was greatly affected by our different notions [of childhood]. Many of my classmates often thought I was writing ‘too young’ for my intended age group, so I came to realize that that was because the children I knew in the Philippines seemed to me [to be] much more ‘dependent’ than their American counterparts” (Corinne). Filipino writers apparently perceive the Filipino child as someone who must be protected and taken care of, and the literature produced for Filipino children is, as a result, close to ‘sanitized.’ Saguisag states that one of the reasons this Filipino notion of childhood is collectively magnified is that this is the only literature produced for Filipino children, and that there is therefore a need to critique the body of work available to Filipino children (Corinne).

A similar observation about Filipino children’s literature is made by Ani Almario, the Product Development Manager of Adarna Books, the biggest children’s book publisher in the Philippines, which was founded by Almario’s father, writer and academic Virgilio Almario. Almario laments that in the last two decades, the insistence of teachers and parents that children’s books “be filled” with values has resulted in limitations placed on these books. Adults have expressed concern over children’s books that depict actions or topics that they consider to be either politically incorrect, violent, or too depressing for children, such as poverty and broken families (Almario 40). Almario remarks:

...there are limitations set on creating children’s books that were not present two decades ago. There is political correctness to watch out for, violence to be conscious of, and pedagogical and moral values to espouse. Making children’s books has never been so complicated...Can this upsurge in adult opinion regarding our publications be read as parents’ and teachers’ increased consciousness about the educational and moral value of children’s books? (40)

Thus, though there may be Filipino writers who write children’s books that are innovative and challenging in content and style, they are not as widely read or disseminated as books that conform to a more traditional notion of the Filipino child. However, a look at a recently published collection of national award-winning short stories for children in English entitled The Night Monkeys (2008) reveals that a number of young and prolific Filipino

writers are introducing a gradually evolving concept of the Filipino child, one that may be partially influenced by Western values but still retains recognizable Filipino features. This change becomes even more evident and significant when these stories are compared to those in a similar anthology, The Golden Loom, published earlier in 1997. The Golden Loom, containing ten stories published between 1991-1996, and The Night Monkeys, containing ten stories published between 1998-2005, were both distributed by Tahanan Books, one of the major publishers of children's books in the Philippines. Both collections are recommended for readers in the 8 to 12 age group. The stories in these collections are also all winners of a Palanca Award, the Philippines's most prestigious award for writers of literature in English, Filipino, and a few regional languages. These stories can therefore be considered some of the best examples of literature in English for Filipino children today. Stories that win Palanca Awards are chosen not only because they are well-written but also because they help promote Filipino culture, history, and values.

I shall compare selected stories in The Golden Loom and The Night Monkeys to show what the traditional concept of the Filipino child is and how it is gradually changing. This change is also a result of changing notions of the family, which plays a very important role in Filipino culture, and I will therefore also look at how families and adults as figures of authority are represented in these short stories.

The Golden Loom

One of the most significant characteristics of Filipino culture is the importance placed on the family, which reflects the typical Filipino's cultural orientation towards collectivism. Many Filipinos regard the family as their source of identity and of emotional and material support; it is thus also the focus of their primary duty and commitment: "Dependence on, loyalty to, and solidarity with the family and kin group are of the highest priority" (Harrington). The Filipino family is predominantly child-centered, and according to one study, "two ideas which permeate family interactions are: that parents know best; and that the family is inviolate. Parents, because they know best, are to be trusted regarding decisions directly affecting the child. Parents' decisions regarding their children are to be upheld even if

they are in direct opposition to the child's own choices...This practice rests on the cultural assumption that no parent wishes harm on their children" (M. Ong).

In a number of stories in The Golden Loom, adults are depicted as either sources of wisdom, guidance, and affection, or as stern but understanding authority figures. Michelle Ong states that "In Philippine society (as in many societies around the world), the child is thought to be passive, dependent and vulnerable...[therefore parents or parent figures] find it difficult to surrender their power and not impose their own standards, their own wishes on their children." They are comfortable with the role of guide and disciplinarian, in which they use their own lives as guides or templates for their children.' These attitudes are evident in the story *The Blanket*. The story's child protagonist Gaia, who lives with her family in a village in the mountains, cannot understand how her grandmother and mother can spend so much time weaving. Gaia is intent on leaving for the city to study medicine and to live what she believes will be a more exciting life. However, her grandmother asks her to watch her weave first, and then she tells Gaia how she herself had also left their village as a young girl to study medicine in the city. But she and her new husband eventually returned to their village to raise a family and to serve as doctors. By the end of the story, Gaia is convinced that she will also return to her village someday and also learn how to weave.

In *The Daughter of the Wind*, typhoons (probably the Philippines' most frequent natural disasters) are personified as a father, 'The Wind,' and his daughters. The youngest daughter, Luisa, is unwilling to become a powerful typhoon but is equally afraid of displeasing her father, who is 'known for his senseless fits of rage' and is described as 'quick-tempered, loud, and often unpredictable' (Lacuesta 20). Luisa eventually takes pity on the people of the islands who will suffer from her fury, and instead of becoming 'the most terrifying Typhoon in history' (Lacuesta 26), she chooses to become a gentle wind and rain. Nevertheless, she is terrified of facing her father because she believes that 'she had disobeyed him and shamed herself in front of her sisters. She had turned her back on her destiny' (Lacuesta 26). The story has a happy resolution, however, because it turns out that 'The Wind knew and understood all along that Luisa's destiny was different' (Lacuesta 26).

Another study of the Filipino family describes the “exceptionally strong and intimate bond” that parents and children share: “They give each other much mutual affection and respect. Children are taught by their parents to be gentle and deferential to elders, and this is carried on after they get married” (Nadeau). This mutually affectionate relationship is depicted in the story *What is Serendipity?* in which the child protagonist Mica learns the new word ‘serendipity’ and is determined to discover its meaning ‘so she could surprise her mother with some of it’ “because ‘Mama was looking very tired lately” (Macaraig 56). Mica makes a number of serendipitous discoveries, attributes magical powers to them, and offers all of them to her mother, such as candy-colored food which will give her mother ‘super strength’ (Macaraig 62) and a doll which will keep evil spirits away so that her mother will ‘find success for sure’ (Macaraig 63).

Part of the way in which the stories in The Golden Loom uphold the notion of the Filipino child as dependent and in need of protection is by depicting them as deriving their strength and identity from their membership in a group—if not the family, then the community or the peer group. A number of stories contain child protagonists who learn that it is important to be loyal to the practices and traditions of the group. In *The Dream Weavers*, the dream weaver Bugan’s role in the Itneg village¹ is to weave magical blankets for her people which will enable them to dream of growing into the specific roles assigned to them by their community. However, none of the village maidens are interested in taking over Bugan’s role, so when Bugan eventually dies, the villagers cease to dream and become lazy, restless, and disrespectful. They are finally saved when a young weaver from a faraway village agrees to live with them and become their new dream weaver. She also teaches the now-willing village women to weave, for they have now “learned to value and love the craft, especially after they had nearly lost their dreams and with it, their old ways” (Pacis 14).

In *Pan de Sal Saves the Day*, Pan de Sal is ashamed of being different from her classmates due to her lower social status, and the happy ending of the story comes about when she wins her classmates’ approval by sharing her unique (unique because different) toys, food, and singing talent with them. And in *Chun*, Chun finally realizes that he will never be accepted by the Filipino children in his neighborhood because of his Chinese ancestry.

After defiantly declaring, “I don’t want to belong anymore! I am different and I always will be!” (Blanco 18), he avoids his Filipino neighbors and eventually moves to a Chinese neighborhood with his family. This story is told, however, from the point of view of an unnamed Filipino boy who feels secure in his status as a member of the Filipino group, and it is only at the very end of the story that he admits: “I am older now and many of my young nieces and nephews have slit-eyed friends with pale, unsunned skin and frail bodies. But they cannot tell the difference. I often wish I also had never seen a difference...when I was once their age” (Blanco 18).

Finally, another important characteristic of Filipino culture, a strong faith in a Catholic God², may also partly explain why the Filipino child is perceived as dependent and deeply respectful of authority. In the story *The Gem*, the protagonist Paro, a devout young girl, loses a precious gem while swimming in the river. This gem is a family heirloom that had been given to her at her first Holy Communion. As she searches for it, Paro anxiously prays to San Antonio (St. Anthony), the patron saint of lost things, for its return. Miraculously, San Antonio appears to her in a vision and assures her that she will find her gem because of her strong faith in God. Shortly afterwards, Paro’s mother does indeed find the gem safe in Paro’s closet.

In all of these stories, children are depicted as being essentially obedient and respectful of parental wisdom and authority. They are also seen as deriving meaning and importance from being members of a group (such as the family, peer group, or community) and on concentrating on the needs of either the group as a whole or its respected members (e.g. the parents in a family).

The Night Monkeys

Donna Norton discusses studies which reveal that American children’s literature in the late 1960s and the 1970s “began to suggest an erosion of adult authority and a widening of the generation gap...adults were shown as less authoritarian and critical in their relationships with children. Children in turn were more outspoken and critical of the adult characters in the stories. They also asserted their independence while portraying less affectionate and more competitive natures” (67). She adds that “[t]he belief that hard work, self-denial and moral rectitude were their own rewards gave way to a

notion...that the 'self' and the realization of its full 'potential' were all-important pursuits" (Stacks qtd. in Norton 67).

To a certain extent, this description of the changes in American children's literature in the '60s and '70s can be applied to the stories in *The Night Monkeys*, placing them in marked contrast to the stories in *The Golden Loom*. A number of stories in *The Night Monkeys* depict child protagonists who are, in a sense, more empowered than the children in *The Golden Loom*. These child characters realize early on the importance of following their dreams and of improving themselves and developing their potential. They are more individualistic and are not overly concerned about being part of a group. In the title story, *The Night Monkeys*, the monkeys that visit Bea every night are actually concrete manifestations (although they only appear to Bea) of the unfulfilled dreams of the adults in her world; for instance, her mother, a bank supervisor in real life, has a monkey that sings the blues, and her father's monkey is a biker with a leather jacket and a Hell's Angels bike. But Bea herself has no night monkey because she is still young and life's numerous possibilities are still open to her. As her school principal's night monkey advises her: "Promise us, Bea, that when the time comes, you will always do what is important to you. Listen to your heart and heed your mind, because nobody else can decide what you must do" (Sitoy 14). Although Bea is sad that "her Monkey friends were only so many thwarted dreams," the story ends with her rejoicing that "[the] he sun was out, and there were a million things she could do, and no one in the whole world could stop her, no one at all" (Sitoy 16).

In *The Dancers of Malumbay*, Thalia is born with a gift for dancing. Unfortunately, in her hometown, Malumbay, there is a law against dancing: "No one knew why. But why question the law, which had been there for as long as people remembered?...What use was dancing anyway?" (Rivera-Falgui 54). Nevertheless, at one town fiesta, music is played, Thalia is unable to control herself, and she dances. Fortunately, the town mayor does not punish her for breaking the rule against dancing and instead confesses to everyone that, as a boy, he had wanted to become a dancer himself, but his parents and grandparents had forbidden it. He therefore lifts the law against dancing and everyone in the town starts to dance and is happy. Thalia herself leaves for the city to study dancing and eventually becomes a successful dancer who is able to dance all over the world.

In *Menggay's Magical Chicken*, Menggay goes on a quest to retrieve her magical chicken which has been stolen. As in the quests in many Western fairy tales, her qualities of generosity, politeness, and common sense help her to succeed and return home with both her chicken and a treasure of pearls. More importantly, she realizes that the magic that she had attributed to her chicken was actually a talent that she herself possessed. Finally, the story *How My Sister Turned Me Into a Worm* is about how a girl teaches her younger brother to love reading and how they become closer to each other in the process.

In these stories, the central concerns are the realization of one's possibilities or talents and the fulfillment of one's dreams. While the protagonists of these stories are still depicted as being respectful of adults and having loving and supportive families, the focus is more on how the protagonist is able to develop herself or himself as an *individual* rather than merely as a dutiful daughter or son. This is probably what gives these stories a more 'Western' feel in contrast to the stories in *The Golden Loom*. Raissa Rivera-Falgui, author of *The Dancers of Malumbay*, admits that her story does combine aspects of both Filipino and American culture:

I feel that the story reflects traditional Filipino cultural values: the closeness of the nuclear and extended family, the respect of the younger for the elder, the desire to assimilate or go along with others ('pakikisama'). There is also the sense of a connection with nature in the main character, which has its roots in indigenous Philippine culture.

Certain Western elements seem to bring out the conflict. The rejection of aesthetic pleasure as interfering with the discipline of work is more of an American Puritan value. Also American is the focus of workers on productivity... Giving importance to individual talent and self-expression is mainly a Western value too. (Rivera-Falgui)

It is also worth noting that a number of adults in these stories are portrayed as being more human—the mayor of Malumbay, for instance, talks about his own frustrated dream of becoming a dancer—and more supportive of the goals and decisions of the child characters.

Two other stories in The Night Monkeys also combine Filipino and Western elements and contain topics and attitudes towards children that are still somewhat uncommon in Filipino children's literature. *Kulog* is about a *kapre*³ that befriends a little girl and saves her one day from her abusive father. The neighbors, however, chop down his tree and he disappears, and the girl never sees him again. The story's author, Yvette Tan, says that her use of a monster as the story's protagonist, as well as the monster's death after sacrificing his existence to save the little girl, is "a sad ending, but one I feel is more true-to-life and not so Pinoy [Filipino]."

Mico and Friends, on the other hand, is about a boy whose three friends disappear one by one after participating in reckless experiments with time travel, rocket ships, and lightning, respectively. In each of these adventures, Mico is depicted as being the voice of reason and caution, while his three friends possess well-known negative traits identified with Filipinos such as tardiness, easily losing interest in new ventures, and the passively fatalistic attitude towards life known as '*bahala na*' in Filipino. The story's author, Luis Katigbak, also admits to using a recognizably Western attitude in his cautionary tale:

There's a Roald Dahl influence in the sense that the children who err are made to suffer bizarre and/or cruel fates. Of course that kind of thing probably goes back to way before Roald Dahl (Oscar Wilde could be terribly cruel to the child-protagonists in his fairy tales, and of course sad fates are not uncommon in the older tales as well). The combination of their 'comeuppances' with a kind of twisted humor owes a lot to Dahl specifically though, I think.
(Katigbak)

These two stories both challenge the conventions of traditional Filipino children's literature by using uncommon subject matter—child abuse and fantastic experiments—combined with sad or disturbing endings. Tahanan Books editor Frances Ong, who helped select the stories for inclusion in The Night Monkeys, observes: "If you compare Night Monkeys with Golden Loom, the writers seemed to be experimenting more and taking more risks with themes and styles. There was fantasy, historical fiction, realism...."

Torres-Yu observes that most families in the Philippines regard the child as “a gift from God and a symbol of grace”—children are seen as sources of inspiration and as security for their parents in the latter’s old age (223). They are also often regarded as the future of their family and of the country. The authors of the stories in The Night Monkeys, however, conceptualize the Filipino child as one who is no longer too dependent on the approval of the family or the group; who is eager to explore different possibilities in life; and who has talents and interests to develop and dreams to follow. The Filipino child is also perceived as someone who should not be overprotected but should instead be made aware of painful yet realistic matters such as child abuse and prejudice. As Ani Almario declares: “Children’s books have no obligation to present all sides of an issue, nor only the positive side of things. Nor should they always be aligned with the generally accepted social and moral codes. Children’s books, like all literary works, should be free to express their creators’ opinions and beliefs” (41).

Notes

¹ The Itneg are a tribal people who live in the mountains in the northern part of the Philippines.

² The Philippines is still a predominantly Catholic country.

³ A creature in Philippine mythology that lives in trees and resembles a tall, dark, hairy human male with a beard. The story implies that the *kapre* will die when the tree in which it resides is cut down.

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