The Paradox of Being Female: Reading Palanca Award-Winning Children's Stories from a Gender Perspective

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Barbara J. Risman in her book, *Gender Vertigo: American Families in Transition,* asserts that "gender itself is a social structure and one that operates at every level: individual, interactional, and institutional" (2). It is on this assertion that Julia McQuillan and Julie Pfeiffer base their critical analysis of *Anne of Green Gables.* Using Risman's Gender Theory, McQuillan and Pfeiffer analyze the multiple ways by which gender operates in the classic girls' book. Through their analysis of the novel, they show how gender is "co-created by situated behavior and social structure," so that even "when heroines like Anne lack gender specific attributes, they still reinforce the social construction of gender" (18). Highlighting the importance of reading literature from a gender perspective, they claim that "gender theory provides a lens to see how girls' books and their independent heroines paradoxically provide lessons that reinforce gender-based inequality even as they challenge it" (18).

Using McQuillan and Pfeiffer's study as a model, this paper aims to analyze not only how gender operates in six Palanca award-winning stories for children but also how Filipino female writers portray gender in the individual, interactional, and institutional levels. To achieve these objectives, only the stories written by women authors and those that focus on female characters were chosen from the anthology, *The Golden Loom: Palanca Prize Winners for Children.* These stories are "The Blanket" by Maria Elena Paterno (first prize, 1991), "What Is Serendipity?" by Twink Macaraig (first prize, 1994), "Pan de Sal Saves the Day" by Norma Olizon-Chikiamco (first prize, 1995), "Pure Magic" by Lakambini Sitoy (first prize, 1996), "Dream Weavers" by Carla Pacis (second prize, 1995), and "The Gem" by Lina Diaz de Rivera (second prize, 1996).

A study that focuses on the portrayal of gender in children's stories written by Filipino women writers is relevant for a number of reasons. For one, it can contribute to the development of children's literature in the Philippines the history of which is still "young" compared to that of other countries. Although children's literature in this country is steadily growing and more books for Filipino children are published each year, very few critical studies are done on Philippine children's literature. And if ever such studies are done, these very seldom focus on issues like gender. But it is not only in the light of the history of children's literature in the Philippines that this study is relevant. It is likewise relevant because of its focus on Filipino women authors who, compared to their male counterparts, get relatively little attention from literary critics. This study also emphasizes an aspect of children's literature often forgotten (or ignored) by parents and educators who choose books for young children—the issue of gender. This emphasis on "gender content" is important in the context of the growing clamor for quality children's literature that can be used in teaching different subject areas, particularly in the preschool and elementary levels. As educators gradually discover the benefits of a literature-based curriculum, it is important that they be made aware of pertinent issues.

Gender as Structure

In formulating her own theory of gender as structure, Risman integrates three different theoretical traditions in the study of gender. The first tradition includes the sociobiological theories that explain how sex differences may have evolved through natural selection, the biosocial theories that explain how biological predisposition interacts with the environment, social learning theories that explain how behavior is shaped by gender- differentiated reinforcement, and the psychoanalytic theories that explain how children experience their early family environments. According to Risman, what makes these theories weak is their supposition that gender is something static—they "expect too much continuity in individual behavior regardless of later circumstances" (1).

While the first tradition focuses on individual behavior and personality, the second tradition emphasizes social structures (people's actual experiences in the world) and claims that such social structures organize people's behavior more than their socialization (how people have been told

to behave). This tradition sees females and males acting differently because they have different positions in organizations and groups. But it also argues that females and males are placed in those different positions so routinely that people easily mistake the resulting behavioral differences for personality differences. According to the results of sociological studies done by Risman and her associates, women and men would act the same way if they were placed in the same organizational positions (2). For instance, Risman maintains that men could nurture children if called upon to do so. Although the social structure theory has its merits, Risman finds it insufficient because this approach still considers gender an important predictor of behavior even after other structural variables have been taken into account.

The third tradition in the study of gender started with Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman's concept of "doing gender" (Risman 2). According to this perspective, gender is based not on what people are but on what they do. People are said to place one another in gender categories and interact on the assumption that others will conform to gender expectations. Such gender stratification legitimates inequality. This view is good because it focuses on interaction, but it is also weak because it fails to see gender at the institutional and individual levels.

Integrating all three traditions, Risman has formulated a theory that sees gender itself as a social structure and one that operates at every level—individual, interactional, and institutional. She asserts:

> By continually creating gender difference at all these levels, people perpetuate gender inequality. At the institutional level, for example, gender affects the distribution of material rewards, the organization of work, and the formation of ideologies. Gender theories have focused too heavily on individual motives, overlooking the interactional expectations and institutional conditions that constrain choices (2).

Risman, as cited by McQuillan and Pfeiffer, argues that gender can be explored simultaneously at multiple levels: the individual level (commonly applied in literary studies), the institutional level (commonplace in discussions of social feminism), and the interactional level (the most novel approach to gender, and one that has been ignored in literary studies). McQuillan and Pfeiffer further explain: "while each of these theories individually only expresses a part of the picture, together they provide a sense of the comprehensive and multifaceted creation of gender through individuals and the social structure as a whole" (20). Gender as structure, therefore, understands the creation of difference as the foundation on which inequality rests.

Gender at the Individual Level

At the individual level, gender is explained as a result of socialization or the process by which people learn to live in their societies. According to sociologists, socialization is the process by which social roles are learned. Andersen, in particular, considers it as a form of social control in that it first gives people a definition of their selves; then it defines the external world and people's place within it; and finally, it provides a definition of others and one's relationship with them (Kintanar 7). According to McQuillan and Pfeiffer the phrase *individual level* refers to the notion that individuals are gendered and at this level, "we learn who we are and want to be within a world where boys and girls are treated almost as though they are different kinds of creatures" (19).

That "boys and girls are treated almost as though they are different kinds of creatures" can be seen in seemingly unimportant and "harmless" details in children's stories. For instance, in "Dream Weavers" the Itneg weaver Bugan weaves different patterns for different people:

> For the young maidens, Bugan wove blankets full of flowers. When they tucked themselves under these blankets, they dreamt of the handsome warrior they would one day marry and the strong and healthy children they would bear.

> For the older women, she wove butterflies. They, in turn, dreamt of their daughters marrying brave warriors and their sons, dutiful wives. Bugan also filled their blankets with stars, and they dreamt of the wonderful moments in their lives and of their future with their ancestors.
>
> For the warriors, Bugan wove animals: the deer for agility and swiftness and the horse for valor and strength. For the old men, she wove the snake or the frog, for these animals endowed wisdom. Protected by these blankets, the wise men planned the destiny of their little village (9).

We see here Bugan expressing her gendered self in the blankets that she weaves. The chosen designs for the blankets show how gender operates, so that it reinforces the idea of *essential* sex differences. Dainty things like flowers, butterflies, and stars are considered appropriately and "naturally" feminine while animals like the deer, the horse, the snake, and the frog that signify agility, swiftness, valor, strength, and wisdom are considered appropriately and "naturally" masculine. The concerns of the women and the men are also presented as "naturally different" with the women's concerns more personal (and selfish in a sense) and domestic (being wife and mother) while the men's concerns more "selfless" and communal (e.g., planning the destiny of their village). Likewise, women, regardless of age, see marriage to a handsome and brave warrior as the ultimate dream as if it is the only thing that can make them feel fulfilled. That the older women dream of *dutiful* wives for their sons gives one the sense that these older women are themselves dutiful wives to their husbands, and that their idea of being dutiful is not just having a sense of duty, but being deferential to their supposed superiors who are no other than their husbands.

Bugan need not be a dutiful wife for she has no husband. She need not dream of having dutiful daughters-in-law for she has no children either. She is portrayed as an atypical woman in the context of the village to

which she belongs because she lives alone and she is strong, independent, self-reliant, hardworking, patient, and creative. Moreover, unlike the women who use the blankets that she weaves, she seems not to need a man, and a brave warrior, to make her life complete. And as such, she can make women proud. Bugan is not the typical romantic woman dreaming of a life with a man, but, upon closer reading, one sees she still is typically a "bearer of tradition"—a role expected of women and a role that Bugan plays so well through the blankets that she weaves. The importance of Bugan as weaver of dreams and bearer of tradition is seen after she dies:

> The village slowly began to change after Bugan's death. The warriors became restless and adopted the bad habits of the lowlanders. The women became lazy and neglected Itneg customs and traditions. They forgot to teach their children the wise ways of the elders (10).

In this passage it is clear that Bugan, though she is not a wife nor a mother, plays an important female role—that of teaching the village how to dream, i.e., how to play their respective gender roles. The passage also shows how women are expected to be bearers of tradition—literally, because they bear the children who would continue the tradition, and figuratively, because they are expected to teach their children the ways of the elders, or to continue the Itneg customs and ways. Though a woman has no children of her own, she is not excused from this role. And it is no wonder then that the woman who takes Bugan's place, Imbangad, is a childless widow. Because she has no children to teach, she is also to be a weaver of dreams—the dreams that perpetuate the supposed essential difference between women and men.

The theme of women as weavers and bearers of tradition is also found in "The Blanket." Gaia, the daughter of old Luning, is weaving a blanket for her 15-year old daughter, also named Gaia. The young Gaia is impatient to leave the Cordillera Mountains and go to the city to become a doctor just like her grandmother Luning when she was Gaia's age. Gaia does not know the importance of weaving, but through the story that her

grandmother Luning tells her, the young Gaia realizes that weaving is a "skill, but it is also love" (34). And this is why at the end of the story she makes a promise: *I will learn to weave.* This promise is young Gaia's expression of her gendered self. With her realization that weaving is also love comes her realization that it is her duty as the daughter of the older Gaia and the granddaughter of old Luning to continue the tradition: in a way, to return to where she belongs. In the context of the story, a woman is free to be what she wants to be, so that old Luning herself became a doctor and the young Gaia is about to become one. Paradoxically, it is because of the freedom given to her that a woman decides to bind herself, just like a weaver "trapped to her loom." When young Gaia asks her mother, "Why do you need to be strapped like a prisoner?" her mother smiles and answers, "When you weave, you will understand" (32). Gaia does not realize that she answers her own question as she decides to return to her village someday and learn to weave. In making this decision, young Gaia accepts the gender role that her mother and her grandmother before her also accepted. She is made to believe that she will never be truly happy and her life will never be truly meaningful unless she accepts her role as a bearer and keeper of tradition. And if she tries to strike a balance between being free to do what she wants to do, e.g., work and earn a living for the family, and being bound to tradition, i.e., taking care of the family and making sure that the children are taught well—life may prove stressful and tiring for her.

This is what happens to Mica's mother in "What Is Serendipity?" It is implied that both Mica's parents are working but Mica notices that "Mama was looking very tired lately" (56). There is no mention at all of the father looking tired like the mother. Mica tries very hard to find serendipity "so she could surprise her mother with some of it" (56). At the end of the story, Mica succeeds because she notices that "for the first time in a long, long time, Mama didn't look tired at all" (63). Through Mica, the mother finds serendipity, and once again, a working woman finds her true happiness in her child, the same way that the doctor Luning in "The Blanket" finds happiness in having her own child, even carrying this baby—strapped close to her—as she performs her duties as a doctor. Thus, though a woman is free to work and help earn a living for her family, it is the things that bind her to home, e.g., her child, that make her life happier and more meaningful. There is definitely nothing wrong with this idea except that the stories regard this as true of mothers but not necessarily of fathers.

Other stories show traditionally "female" tasks being done only by women, reinforcing the idea that women and men do have essentially different roles to play in this world. In "Pan de Sal Saves the Day," for instance, Pan de Sal and her mother wash the dishes and prepare dinner while Pan de Sal's father fetches water from the well. There is also mention of Pan de Sal's grandmother having woven a blanket for them (just like what Bugan, Luning, and Gaia do) and her mother teaching the children songs she learned as a child (in keeping with the motif of mother as teacher of the "old ways"). Even Pan de Sal's teacher Miss Flores is very motherly— a variation of the motif of mother as teacher, i.e., that of teacher as mother. In "Pure Magic" and "What Is Serendipity?" only women are shown as caregivers: Yaya Paz who takes care of Mica, and Gracia who takes care of Ellen. In "The Gem" it is Paro's mother who orients her to the tradition of giving a gem to the daughters in their family on their first Holy Communion.

Aside from performing conventionally female roles, the girls and women in the stories show their gendered selves through other seemingly innocent and harmless details: Pan de Sal's favorite sipa is pink and white (colors often associated with women); in Paro's family it is implied that women have only two options: getting married or entering the convent (as if no other "career" options were open to them); Yaya Paz hums a lullaby (often associated with putting a baby to sleep—another conventionally female task); and Mica plays with dolls and a mini rice cooker (in preparation for being a wife, a mother, and a homemaker) and likewise wishes for a baby brother (as if a family were not complete without a male child).

Gender at the Institutional Level

According to Risman, analyzing gender at the institutional level is emphasizing "how the social structure (as opposed to biology of individual learning) creates a gendered behavior." McQuillan and Pfeiffer explain that

> Risman conceptualizes gender as a social structure that seems so "natural" that we rarely notice it, yet it is ubiquitous in shaping our lives. Particularly in families and in

> intimate relationships, gender is considered a reasonable and legitimate basis for the distribution of rights, power, privilege, and responsibilities. It is at home that most people come to believe that men and women are and should be essentially different. Gender is a hierarchical structure that legitimizes inequality (24).

The basic institution of society is the family. In the stories, it is in the context of the family that gender is seen working at the institutional level. Within the family there is a hierarchy in which the husband is the head (the leader) and usually the "final" decision-maker and the wife is a follower (often not even a partner nor a co-leader). Among the children, the son is often given a more privileged status than the daughter. Outside the family and within the community, this hierarchy also applies—the men make the important decisions while the women are merely instrumental in implementing these decisions.

Among the six stories included in this study, it is in "The Dream Weavers" that the gender hierarchy is most clearly seen. In the story, the wise men plan the destiny of their little village. It is understood that the elders who make the important decisions for the village consist only of men, and women like Imbangad have to "volunteer" to implement these elders' decisions. When Imbangad finally arrives at the dying village of Bugan, everyone warmly welcomes her. Though Imbangad is about to save the dying village and help it dream again through the blankets she will weave, credit and a hero's welcome are given instead to a male—to Aponitalau who finds Imbangad and brings her to the village. Imbangad leaves the village of her birth to serve as a weaver of dreams in another village. The story seems to show it is "natural" for women to make a great personal sacrifice, the way Imbangad makes a great personal sacrifice out of duty.

In "The Blanket," Lagring also makes a sacrifice out of love. Likewise, in her case, gender hierarchy operates in a seemingly no-choice situ-

ation for a woman. Lagring, as a young pregnant wife, does not want to go back to the mountains, but her husband who is also a doctor like her insists that their child grow up in the mountains. To such insistence, Lagring acquiesces; she explains to the young Gaia, "What could I do? I loved him, and so I followed" (35).

In "The Gem" there is an attempt to do away with gender hierarchy. It is said that the ability to read and write "had been handed down from genefation to generation to the sons of the Nazario family," but "Maestro Ninoy insisted that his daughter learn her letters as thoroughly as his son" (41). Here we see how the males through several generations were given a privileged status in the family by having them learn how to read and write. Paro, an eight-year old girl was considered "fortunate" to be likewise privileged. But it should be noted that she enjoys the privilege of learning to read and write only because the head of their family—her father, Maestro Ninoy—decides that she should do so.

Gender at the Interactional Level

Gender at the interactional level has to do with "doing gender." Gender is said to be not something that people have but something that they do. West and Zimmerman, as quoted by McQuillan and Pfeiffer, explain "doing gender" in terms of "accountability" in social interaction when it comes to gender: "Gender transgressions are not simple failures to fulfill a role; they are viewed as moral derelictions that are punishable" (26). According to Risman, gender theorists suggest that we "do gender" because, if we do not, we are judged immoral and incompetent as men and women.

This consequence of not doing gender is implied in some of the stories. For instance, in "The Dream Weavers," if Imbangad refuses to do gender and chooses not to "volunteer" and make a personal sacrifice (after the elders—the men—have decided that one of the weavers has to go with Aponitalau), it would not only cause her own village to lose face and miss the opportunity to help another village. It would likewise be on her conscience if the other village dies. In the same manner, in the story "The Blanket," if Lagring chooses not to do gender and not follow her husband, society might judge her as immoral because she would be, in effect, the

cause of their family's break-up. In these examples, the men take the lead and they "naturally" expect the women to follow. The women, in turn, simply do what is expected of them. These are concrete examples of how "people place one another in gender categories and interact on the assumption that others will conform to gender expectations" (Risman 2). Here we see that the pressure to do gender comes not from society nor from the individuals themselves but from other individuals. This is true not only when the people involved are of the opposite sex, i.e., females and males, but also when they are of the same sex, e.g., all females.

The six stories included in this study all portray relationships between females. The relationships are varied: mother-daughter, grandmother-granddaughter, best friends, teacher-pupil, etc. In these relationships, gender often operates at the interactional level, so that the females "do gender."

One manifestation of doing gender among the different characters in the stories is that of being "motherly." Being motherly is here defined as having an "other" orientation, a caring attitude. According to Miller (Boe 271), "women's sense of self becomes very much organized around being able to make and then maintain affiliation and relationships." Making and maintaining relationships is something that females do "naturally" in the stories. In "What Is Serendipity?" young Mica is portrayed as a thoughtful, loving, and sensitive girl who wishes to make her mother happy. (Her caring attitude even extends to her doll, Serendipity.) Mica's caring attitude, of course, is returned by her mother from whom Mica presumably learns to be caring in the first place. Surrey may well be referring to the kind of relationship that Mica and her mother share when he theorizes that

> out of the character of the mother-daughter relationship, the female child feels emotionally connected, understood, and recognized. The child models the behavior of the mother and her actions are reinforced. A mutual caring process evolves which strengthens the sense of connectedness by becoming highly

> responsive to the feeling states of each other. A daughter not only learns how to relate from an "other" orientation but also finds that this emphatic or caring response is rewarding, as there is mutuality in it, both mutual caring and mutual empowerment (Boe 272).

The mutual caring and the mutual empowerment that Surrey described are not limited to mother-daughter relationships, however. It is also found in the relationship between friends. For instance, in "Pure Magic," Ellen and Mirava are best friends who take care of each other. They provide each other not only companionship but emotional support as well. The friendship they share empowers them and helps them become "junior witches"—girls whose magic, i.e., imagination, helps them cope with problems and overcome difficulties in life. Such empowerment makes their friendship "pure magic," so that it is able, in effect, to save Mirava from a terrible illness. In the same story, however, the caring attitude (and also the empowerment) is shown not only by the two girls but also by the older females around them—by Lola Lagring, by Gracia, and by Mirava's mother. In times of crisis, like when Mirava falls terribly ill, females young and old form a support group to help each other cope with the situation. The males are noticeably absent during this time—there is no mention of males extending any help, not even Mirava's father.

The same female support group is seen in "The Blanket." Grandmother Lagring, for instance, acts as a mediator between her daughter Gaia, the weaver, and her granddaughter Gaia, the would-be doctor. There seems to be an unspoken understanding among the three females of how the "ritual"—the giving of support—is to be done by old Lagring to help the two Gaias finally understand each other. The ritual is effective, so that mother and daughter finally understand each other without directly speaking to each other. The young Gaia, therefore, is to leave the village knowing that her grandmother and her mother will always be there to support and encourage her, no matter what decisions she makes.

In "Pan de Sal Saves the Day," the young Pan de Sal likewise gets the moral support and the encouragement that she needs to overcome her lack of self-confidence and to believe in herself. Such support and encour-

agement are given to her not only by her mother but also by her teacher, Miss Flores.

The eight-year old Paro in "The Gem" seems to enjoy a situation different from the girl characters in the other stories. Aside from having the support of another female (Paro's mother), she also enjoys the support of her father who understands her more than her mother does. This is the reason why "Paro loved her mother dearly, but she adored her father."

Among the six stories included in this study, it is only "The Dream Weavers" that does not have a young girl as a character. But it also portrays a relationship between two females—Bugan and Imbangad. This relationship is unique among the relationships portrayed in the six stories because it does not involve a direct relationship: Bugan and Imbangad do not meet each other. What they have is a relationship of support and caring, nevertheless. Imbangad "loved Bugan's old hut and was proud of having been honored with Bugan's loom" (13). Imbangad shows how much she cares for Bugan and what the old woman stood for in the village by faithfully following her footsteps: weaving "blankets filled with the flowers, butterflies, and stars that the women loved" and gifting the "warriors and elders with blankets studded with deer, horses, snakes, and frogs to inspire them with strength and wisdom" (13). Moreover, Imbangad honors the memory of Bugan by teaching the other village women to weave.

Conclusion: The Paradox of Being Female

The stories included in this study celebrate what it means to be female in our society—that is, what it means to be grandmother, mother, daughter, friend, teacher, student, mentor, apprentice. In this celebration of femaleness we see how girls and women can be caring, intelligent, self-reliant, talented, faithful, competent, creative, imaginative, and self-sacrificing. We also see how female relationships become sites for mutual support, mutual love, and mutual empowerment. These relationships celebrate each female's uniqueness and the commonality of the girls and women: the traditionally female values of nurturing and homemaking. According to Risman, families must elevate these values "for it is this work, what women have always done, that turns isolated individuals into families and communities, brick and mortar into hearth and home, and gives meaning to our lives" (McQuillan and Pfeiffer 29).

The female characters in the stories have certainly done this—Bugan and Imbangad; Paro and her mother; Mica and her mother; old Luning and the two Gaias; Pan de Sal, her mother, and her teacher Miss Floures; Ellen and Mirava; Yaya Paz, Gracia, and Lola Lagring. They have all shown that to be female is to be a valuable member of the family and of the community. Yet, for them to keep this high status in our patriarchal society, they have to maintain their lower place in the gender hierarchy and let the males continue leading the way. This is the paradox of being female.

The same paradox is seen in the woman writer writing stories for children in a patriarchal society. In a way, the women writers play the role of Bugan in "The Dream Weavers" for they are also bearers of tradition. According to Geertz (in Watkins 183), their narratives "contribute to the formation and re-formation in our children of the cultural imagination, a network of patterns and templates through which we articulate our experience." As writers, these women claim their rightful place in society and they make valuable contribution to the development of Philippine literature. They likewise assert their right to be heard as they express their need to be understood. Somehow, they are able to accomplish all these through the stories that they write. But it is also through the same stories that they once again lose what they have gained because the stories reinforce the patriarchal values of society and therefore, in a way, make the male voice louder and clearer than the female voice. It is indeed ironic that though these women writers excel in writing stories for children (the Palanca first prize winners for children's stories in English are all women), they still cannot escape the fact that "the conventional literary system is very like the traditional family: adult male literature dominates, women's literature is secondary (and grudgingly recognized), while children's literature is not only at the bottom of the heap, but (worse) it is very much the province of women" (Hunt 2).

But then again, children's literature in the Philippines is still in the process of development. In that *process* hope is to be found. The voices heard from these stories for children are not static voices—they change in volume, in pitch, perhaps even in rhythm and style. In time, they should grow in awareness of female traditions in their stories without acquiescing to patriarchal pressures whether in the personal, institutional, or interactional level. When this happens, being female would no longer be a paradox but a metonym for self- fulfillment and sense of accomplishment.

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