

MIX AND MATCH  
A Thematic Analysis of the Depictions of  
Alternative Family Arrangements in Philippine  
Children's Picturebooks

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We are determined by our families, and our families determine ourselves. While we can choose our friends, we cannot choose the family we are born into. However, Alstrom reminds us that "[t]he definition of family cannot be a fixed one, for families are fluid; they vary considerably in their make-up and in their traditions, and they are always culturally specific" (7) and as such, the way they are organized in real life and how they are represented in fiction should also be reflective of these interests.

This paper's concerns are threefold: first, it seeks to describe alternative representations of families in selected children's books from the Philippines; in particular, the representation of the nuclear family in these children's books. Second, it seeks to explain why it is necessary to portray diverse family representations in these books by providing real-world contexts, particularly in the Philippines. Finally, this paper seeks to find the place of these children's books in the wider spectrum of Philippine children's literature.

### **Defining the Concept of Childhood**

Any discussion on children's literature must, necessarily, discuss the concept of the child and of childhood. To discuss them is to provide a categorical definition of these terms, which is a perennial struggle to those studying children's literature. Our familiarity with the childhood experience is a specific kind of familiarity: our own childhood and our own experiences of being a child. With the benefit of hindsight, we have the capacity to look back and say, "This was what I did when I was a child." However, the shifting boundaries between adulthood and childhood is one that manifests itself in the study of children's literature.

As Peter Hunt acknowledges in his introduction to *Understanding Children's Literature*, "[i]f the word 'literature' presents obvious problems, the word 'children' proves to be equally slippery" (3). This is echoed by Lucy Pearson, who says that "[t]he changing perception of children and childhood has particular relevance to the evolving nature of children's literature... the most important context for a history of children's literature is a history of the child" (9). However, it is clear that "[e]ver since there were children, there has been children's literature" (Lerer, 1).

Problematizing childhood in the field of those studying children's literature is partially a result of the complexities regarding and around the state of childhood, particularly right after World War II. Socio-cultural and material forces allowed most countries to carve out time for children to have leisure time and learn in state-sponsored educational institutes. As Ellis notes, in the United Kingdom alone, "[b]etween 1945 and 1964 the school population rose from 5 to over 7 million, of which 71% were in primary schools" (182, 1963). This completed the

cultural movement towards individual learning and systems of formal education, which manifested as early as the Renaissance and continued on during the Reformation. Manual labor was slowly replaced by automated machinery during the Industrial Revolution, which “resulted in a movement of industry... [and t]he concentration of working people in the new industrial towns in the early 19th century made it imperative that... they [children] must receive some form of education” (Ellis, 1).

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the establishment of the United Nations was an important step in codifying the state of childhood along national and international lines. The United Nations established UNICEF in December 1946 in order to assist children displaced after World War II. By 1953, it became a permanent office within the United Nations. The organization drafted its Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 and was ratified by its member-states in 1990. According to UNICEF, “193 State parties have ratified the Convention, making it the most widely ratified human rights agreement in the world” (UNICEF). The experience of childhood as a culturally-specific state of being has now been globally accepted by a majority of nations.

As a member-state of the United Nations, the Philippines’ legal definition and policies regarding childhood fall within the currently accepted definition of youth, which, according to UNESCO, “defines ‘youth’, as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years, without prejudice to other definitions by Member States.” Locally, the establishment of the National Youth Commission, based on the Conventions of the Rights of the Child, in 1994 through Republic Act 8044 codified the legal definition of childhood in the country. The period of youth is defined as “the critical period in a person’s growth and development from the onset of adolescence towards the peak of mature, self-reliant and responsible adulthood comprising the

considerable sector of the population from the age of fifteen (15) to thirty (30) years” (Section 2, Republic Act 8044).

However, it is important to remind ourselves that

[w]ala naman talagang unibersal na konsepto ng pagkabata. Mas tiyak sabihing mayroong namamayaning (dominant) konsepto ng pagkabata. Ang mga bata sa Pilipinas ay ibang-iba sa mga bata sa Estados Unidos o sa Pransiya. At sa kasamaang palad, ang pagkabatang Europeo at Amerikano ang namamayani sa mga pag-aaral ukol sa pagkabata kung kaya ang nabanggit ang nagiging pandaigdigang modelo. (Evasco, 110)

If such a definition of childhood is necessarily constructed through a series of legal, physiological, and cultural determiners, then childhood is also, to a certain extent, performed. The performance of childhood is not just established in terms of biological and psychological developments, but also the cultural expectations society has of a child. Seth Lerer points out that even in early Greek and Roman societies, “the life of children centered on performance. The two poles of early learning were memorization and recitation” (17). In the Philippines, the child’s performance is centered on obedience and silence: “Pinalalaki ang mga batang Filipino bilang tagasunod sa mga patakaran ng nakatatanda; hindi rin hinahayaan ang mga bata bilang nag-iisip na indibidwal... sinasanay rin ng nakatatanda ang mga batang Filipino na supilin at isantabi ang kanilang saloobin” (Evasco, 111). To be a child is to perform your childhood in relation to the world one lives in and its surrounding cultural attitudes and beliefs.

## **Children's Books in the Philippines**

These attitudes determine the type and kind of literature that is produced towards children. Children's literature can be seen as a product of acculturation or "transmitting cultural values and 'civilizing' children" (Zipes, qtd. in Reynolds, 2). A visit to any local bookstore will yield a snapshot of the Philippine mindset towards childhood: an abundance of textbook readers for pre-elementary and elementary readers, a mixture of children's books from local publishers such as Adarna House, Tahanan Books, Lampara Books, and Hiyas, and classical stories from the Bible. These locally published children's books are either contemporary award-winning stories (either from the Palancas or the PBBY-Salanga/Alcala Prizes), myths and legends of the Philippines, or books labeled as "stories with moral lessons." International children's books are separated and are usually books that are based on popular children's movies, cartoon TV shows, or considered part of the canonical classics of children's literature. Most of the books are in English, or have been translated into Filipino, or are labeled "Books in 2 Languages," where both the English and Filipino texts compete for space on the page, along with the illustrations. It is uncommon to see children's books in mainstream bookstores that are written in languages other than English and Filipino.

The history of the creation and production of children's books in the Philippines has been clearly detailed in the books *Bumasa at Lumaya* 1 and 2, which are both essential sourcebooks for anyone studying children's literature in the Philippines. Based on Elena Paterno's essay, "A History of Children's Literature in the Philippines," and its updated counterpart, "Ang Panitikang Pambata sa Filipinas: 2000-2013" by Eugene Y.

Evasco, children's literature in the Philippines seems to have carefully conformed to the predominant cultural expectations of childhood during those times. For instance, during the Spanish colonization period, the only local reading material available for children came in the form of either prayer books as well as the *caton* or syllabary, which was used as an instructional aid in parochial schools (Paterno, 10). Many of the books we now consider as classics of children's literature had to be imported from Europe, which meant that only those from the higher economic classes, the *ilustrado* children, probably had access to them.

The growth of children's literature in the Philippines began in earnest during the American colonial period, when Severino Reyes' "Mga Kwento ni Lola Basyang" was popularized through *Liwayway* magazine beginning in 1925. Similarly, Camilo Osias and Fernando Amorsolo's *The Philippine Readers Series*, which was adapted from the Americans' *Baldwin Readers*, which had been brought to Philippine shores by American teachers, became the primary teaching material in schools. Although truncated by the Second World War, Philippine children's literature was revived through the efforts of educators, writers, and illustrators throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Stalwarts of children's literature include Ceres O. Alabado, Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio, and Virgilio S. Almario, all of whom contributed towards the growth of children's literature through either production of their own literary material, publication of literary works written by other writers for children, and distribution of children's stories throughout the country.

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century drew to an end, there was increasing interest in children's literature, particularly as an ideological tool. This "particular ideology... reproduces the relational domination of the child by the adult and, by extension, the

unconscious, shared mind of a culture" (Zornado, xvi), and reinforces the performance of childhood in the Philippines. For instance, the establishment of Philacor's *The Young People's Library* and New Day Publishers' books for children in the 1970s emphasized "the importance of books and stories that played up Filipino values and traditions" (Paterno, 14). The establishment of the Philippine Board on Books for Young People (PBBY) in 1983, the support of institutes such as the UP (then Center, now Institute) of Creative Writing and the Cultural Center of the Philippines in crafting and publishing children's stories, and the acknowledgment of the Carlos Palanca Memorial Award for Literature in 1989 by establishing the genre as separate from its other awards clearly paved the way towards the inclusion of children's stories in Philippine literature and, therefore, Philippine cultural ideologies.

This has become even more evident as we entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Evasco points out that nothing has changed in terms of the market production of children's literature in the country. "Lantad sa produksiyon ang panggagaya ng mga anyo, tema, at maging ang sukat ng mga aklat pambata" (10), and even the stories themselves seem to repeat the same themes. Roland Tolentino, in his essay "Ang Pinag-aagawang Bata sa Panitikang Pambata: Folklore, Media, at Diskurso ng Bata" observes that:

[a]ng produksyon ng "wholesome" na kalidad at porma ng panitikang pambata – librong ibinebenta, kalakip ang masining na ilustrasyon, salin sa Ingles o Filipino, at pagkakaroon ng leksyong matututuhan at "how to teach" na segment sa huling bahagi ng libro – ay simptomatiko sa konsumeristang panghihimok tungo sa gawi at pagmamarka ng gitnang uring panuntunan ng buhay (1).

Because of this, children's books in the Philippines that have subversive themes or those that move away from this kind of cookie-cutter production value are few and far in between, and rarely acknowledged, let alone distributed nationwide.

### **Subversions and Censorship in Children's Books**

And yet, children's literature seems to be the perfect place for subversion and alternative representations of cultural ideologies. The recognition of subversive elements in children's stories can usually be traced back to the classic fairy-tale, when "the first movement of subversion began at the very moment when the literary fairy tale ironically started to find acceptance in the well-kept nurseries, schools, and libraries of nineteenth-century Europe and America and when publishers sought to make their profit by pushing them on the thriving market for children consumers" (Zipes, 108). In fact, "[t]hrough the fairy tales were not intended for children, it is important to realize that, on the other hand, the fairy tales were not intended for adults alone... these stories were for everyone" (Zornado, 83).

This tradition carried on: from Edward Lear's humorous limericks, to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*; from Shel Silverstein's subversion of childhood experiences in *Where the Sidewalk Ends* and *A Light in the Attic* to Maurice Sendak's trippy dream sequences in *In the Night Kitchen*. In fact, Thacker and Webb notes that even "[Jean Jacques] Rousseau recognised that children were subversive readers and likely to read against the pedagogic intention" (16). Reynolds observes that "children's literature provides a curious and paradoxical cultural space... orthodox and radical, didactic and subversive" (3).



Furthermore, dominant ideologies, imparted through stories which sought to codify normative behaviors in European society, were questioned as well, particularly through “texts which seek to resist or challenge this controlling process” (Thacker and Webb, 55) such as *Peter Pan* and *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*.

Of course, with subversion comes censorship, and perhaps children’s literature has had more than its fair share of censored literary texts. As Karin Lesnik-Oberstein says, “Changes and shifts in the views on ‘suitable books’ may lead to editing, censorship, abridgement, or the forgetting of (children’s) books” (119). Reynolds recognizes that “[o]ne of the oldest and most active debates among those involved in bringing children and books together concerns what kind of material it is appropriate for children to read” (88). In fact, censorship is so pervasive in children’s literature that it has become an unconscious act in itself. A study of the Children’s Choice Project as early as the 1980s noted that “the consensus sets the ‘natural’ boundaries for appropriate social thought and action. No one appears to be the censor in this matter because everyone has censored his own thoughts” (Shannon, 105).

According to the American Library Association, the Office for Intellectual Freedom received over 5,000 challenges from 2000 to 2009. Nine hundred and eighty-nine challenges were labeled “unsuited for the age group” – an obvious attempt at policing children’s books by age restrictions (ALA). According to the latest statistics compiled by the ALA, by 2014, half of the books on the Top 10 Most Frequently Challenged Books list were for young readers, including the picturebooks *And Tango Makes Three* by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell and *It’s Perfectly Normal* by Robie Harris. Censoring children’s books are seen to be part of that tension between prevailing hegemonic discourses

on the proper and acceptable performances of childhood based on the cultural norm and the rather radical notion that children are actually thinking and reasoning individuals who are currently in the processes of discovering and learning about the world.

This question of appropriateness has long been debated in children's literature. As scholar Jill May points out, "since all children's texts were published for an imagined child, they could be considered cultural signs of adult political standards and socialization practices" (82). Maria Nikolajeva also emphasizes that "[c]hildren's authors can either endorse or subvert the fictionality of their texts... [and] brings us back to the question of the adult author's responsibility, one of the many aspects in which children's literature disputably differs from the mainstream" (45). As such, children's stories are indicative of their specific presents – they function as a tool to educate a child in cultural and social norms that are seen to be the "best" as far as an adult is concerned.

### **Representations in Children's Picturebooks**

However, one can argue that children are also now growing up in an increasingly polarized and globalized world that requires a more nuanced depiction in popular culture. Market forces, the commercialization of childhood, and massive shifts in social hierarchies, pedagogical tools, and cultural values can no longer be addressed by simply creating children's literature that is considered to be wholesome. Children are being born and growing up in new realities, and this should be acknowledged and depicted in their literature.

These realities must and need to be presented to children who are growing up in these circumstances in a way that is both understandable and explicable to them. This is why children's literature is in a unique position to offer a way of navigating the difficulties of reconciling tradition with experience in the form of the picturebook.

The picturebook is perhaps the most commonly associated form for children's literature. It is assumed that having pictures accompany texts makes it "easier" for the child reader to understand the narrative and engage with the story of the book. However, as many children's literature scholars have pointed out, "'reading' pictures is a complex process: at its most basic level, the child reading a picturebook must recognize a two-dimensional arrangement of lines and shapes as a depiction of a three-dimensional space" (Pearson, 144).

Perry Nodelman points out in his essay, "Decoding the Images: Illustrations and Picturebooks," picturebooks are valuable texts because they "communicate only within a network of conventions and assumptions, about visual and verbal representations and about the real objects they represent" (qtd. in Hunt, 131). Therefore, "illustrations and texts [thus] form a dialogue which offers more than one possible interpretation. Many books with pictures utilize illustrations as part of the narrative this way" (Pearson, 147).

This interaction between words and images have long been the province of the child reader, particularly when the picturebook was popularized in the Victorian era, when children were gifted with illuminated manuscripts of their favorite nursery stories and poems during the holiday season. This shows us that children's stories usually had to appeal to two main audiences: the child reader, and the adult creator and purchaser, the "dual audience" that Maria Nikolajeva has

observed in her own studies of children's literature. This convention has translated to the contemporary picturebook, which is usually read as both words and pictures, and is also curated by adults who purchase books for children. We can note that because of this dual form, and dual audience,

children's fiction, at its best, takes its audience into consideration and adjusts the form and content of fiction to the cognitive and emotional level of its implied readers. Moreover, successful children's fiction challenges its audience cognitively and affectively, stimulating attention, imagination, memory, inference-making, empathy and all other elements of mental processes (Nikolajeva, 227).

As Jill May further points out, "Children's literature is complex because it contains two reading audiences who are at least partially aware of each other" (83). As such, children's stories needed to entertain the child, but also be found as "appropriate" for the child by an adult gatekeeper – a parent, guardian, or teacher.

This is an ironic consideration to take, if the picturebook can be seen as a subversive space for a child reader. However, one must then begin to question how the picturebook represents the world for the child. Rebecca Lukens cautions the writer of stories for children that "in poor fiction... such fictional solutions [to problems] can be not only simplistic and sentimental, but also lack reality and justice" (13).

Nikolajeva further emphasizes the ability of the writer to create ethical conflict in stories, saying that "[f]iction typically focuses on turning points in protagonists' lives, when they are given a choice or have a choice made for them. Whenever a choice is made in fiction, there is an opportunity for the reader to evaluate the choice in terms of right or wrong, which requires

considerable cognitive and affective effort" (180). The fictional worlds that a child encounters in their readings can and will mirror their experiences in the world they live in.

### **Real Families in the Philippines**

In particular, the world that a child inhabits can be quite small and controlled. Their first step into society is usually within a family unit, a space which is treated as sacred and impenetrable in the Philippines. "The family... is the normal state of life, and family life is important in all aspects of civilization," says Jerry E. Pournelle in his essay "The Future of the Family" (490).

The reality of the Filipino family is rooted in the insistence of the tradition that a nuclear family must be a "unit composed of father, mother and own children living together" (NCSB) while an extended family is a "group consisting of a biological family as a nucleus, together with the kin in the direct or indirect line of one member or members of the nucleus, or group consisting of several family nuclei" (NCSB). This definition emphasizes both the biological relationships between members of the family, as well as the metaphorical importance of the family as the center (the "nucleus" or the "nuclear") of this particular social arrangement. "[N]akaugat ang [kabataan sa] kanilang mga pamumuhay at pag-unlad sa pamilya," notes Evasco (109).

This is reinforced in both the Constitution of the Philippines and the Family Code, both of them privileging marriage, which is defined as a legal and/or religion union between a man and a woman as the center of a family unit – the mother and the father – who will then produce a child.

According to the National Statistics Office's 2009 Family Income and Expenditure Survey Final Results, there are 18.45 million families in the Philippines – in other words, that fall under the base definition of the National Statistical Coordination Board (PRFIES). This definition excludes cohabitation, both of the homosexual and heterosexual varieties, single-parent households, and married couples without children.

However, this narrow definition excludes of the realities of many children – those who live in single-parent households, for instance, or those who live with friends of their parents, or with their peer groups, i.e. a boarding house or dormitory – who may have a different definition of family.

Despite the very limited definition of the Philippine government as to what a family is, there have been some studies of family arrangements in the country. In 1965, Pilar A. Gonzales wrote in the *Philippine Sociological Review* her observations, which provides a vivid rendering of the Filipino family during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. She notes that

at present, certain trends show that many Filipino families are becoming more urban in their choice of locale... [w]hile the pragmatic way of life has become more attractive to an increasing number of families, the Christian way of life is losing its former popularity. New conditions have cropped up which threaten the stability of the [Filipino] family. Three factors... contribute... to the disintegration of the Filipino family: the decline of the role of religion, the radical departure of the Filipino woman from the traditional type, and the de-emphasis of family functions (16-17).

Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this kind of thinking still prevails. For instance, Justice Amparo Cabotaje-Tang was recently on record to declare that “she would strike down same-sex

marriage as unconstitutional; traditional family is ‘a father, mother, child’” (Quisimundo).

Psychologist Maria Caridad Tarroja argues that it is, perhaps, time to redefine the Filipino family in order to be more aligned with present-day norms. According to a 2009 study by Garo-Santiago, Resurreccion, and Tan-Mansukhani, “the Filipino youth defined family not only in terms of structure... but rather in terms of... living arrangements, emotional and financial support, and close friendships. [They] valued connection, intimacy, care, and support” (qtd. in Tarroja, 183). There is the tacit understanding that not all families need to be biological related, or even complete – at least as far as the Philippines defines it. As Cruz, Laguna, and Raymundo concluded, “the Filipino family is characterized more often now than before in terms of absentee parenting and unstable marital unions” (qtd. in Tarroja, 183).

The depiction of the family is important in children’s literature: it introduces the child reader to the inherent values within the society they were born in, it emphasizes the normality and legitimization of these social arrangements, and allows them to confront the similarities and differences between the family in the story and the family they belong to. How they relate and understand the family contributes to their understanding of other societal hierarchies that they are or will be experiencing. “Tanging sa espero ng pamilya-paaralan-civil society ang bisa ng panitikang pambata,” observes Tolentino (5). The focus on familial relationships is important because it directly correlates to familiar childhood experiences – of which there is no longer a singular, stereotypical template of father, mother, and child.

Jean M. Zwack points out that “the stereotype of the nuclear family as presented in most children’s literature and reinforced by classroom teachers is becoming less relevant to the

real-life situation of many pupils in both rural and urban classrooms" (389). Cullinan also points out that "children today are dealing with social and personal problems at a younger age than ever before" and that the realism in children's literature is not the positioning of reality versus fantasy, but rather the "impact that a particular book has on a child" (417). In other words, for a child reader, it does not matter whether the book takes place in the world we know, or in an imagined world, but rather, what matters is that they can see themselves in that particular narrative.

Singapore-based children's book scholar Myra Garcés-Bacsal has observed this as well, saying that "Filipino stories for children have moved beyond folktale and myths – as the narratives struggle to find their own place and voice in the world with this constant discovery and reinvention of one's self, authenticity, and one's truths are articulated and celebrated" (101). She notes that the thematic concerns of contemporary picturebooks in the Philippines are the valuation of cultural roots and heritage, awareness of social issues, family relationships, and self-empowerment. This was further reflected in the increase in realistic stories for children in the Philippines and the sharp decrease of fantastical stories in the last ten years (96-97).

Therefore, an examination of the depiction and interpretation of alternative families in Philippine children's picturebooks opens up a subversive space for the discussion of different families that exist within the Philippine society – families that may not fall within the parameters of the legal and social definitions of the nation but, nevertheless, serve the same function.

As such, the books chosen for this essay are by no means an exhaustive bibliography of representations of alternative



family arrangements in Philippine picturebooks and the subversive spaces they open up for discourse. The chosen picturebooks are also limited to nuclear families – the core of the very definition of the word “family.” And while they do not represent the spectrum of all that a family *can* be, perhaps they can be representative of the contemporary Filipino family that, aside from the heteronormative and traditional family arrangements, is being increasingly challenged by economic, social, and cultural forces.

The three books I will be analyzing in this essay represent three distinct categories: single-parent households, same-sex parent households, and adoptive parent households. All of them discuss particular issues that are not part of the dominant ideological discourses of childhood in the Philippines: abandonment, child abuse, the prison system, parental separation, death.

The books were published within a ten-year period of 2004 and 2014, with five of the titles having won either a Palanca Award or a PBBY-Salanga Award. With the exception of *Ang Ikaklit sa Aming Hardin* by Bernadette Neri, all books are available in major bookstores. All of the books have been published in Metro Manila, though not all of the authors are based there. All of the books focus on the relationship between the child and their parents, though their relationships may not fall under the traditional definition of a Filipino family.

### **Adoptive Families: The Little Girl in the Box**

Perhaps the one that depicts the alternative family most familiarly is *The Little Girl in the Box*, which examines the role of the child in their search for an adoptive family. Written by

Felinda V. Bagas and illustrated by Aldy C. Aguirre, the book was published in 2013 and follows the adventures of the titular girl in a box. Written in a lyrical, almost-fairytale-like cadence, the story begins with a nameless little girl who is found in a box by nuns. In the beginning, she can fit in the box snugly but as she grows older, she realizes that she has to contort herself and find new positions to continue residing in her box.

The nuns, who allow her to stay in the box, sends her off to several adventures. And so, the box morphs into different things: a car, a boat, a house. In the first one, she fosters with a single man with a large house and a fancy garden. However, the girl is not allowed to touch anything or to make noise, and so she returns to her box and sets off on another adventure. She lives in the mountains and near the ocean, but neither of these families suit her. Finally, just as she is bursting out of her box, she ventures outside its confines and meets a man and woman who takes care of her and nurtures her, and she realizes that “it brought [her] to the house that became her real home” (Bagas, n.p.).

The picturebook uses the metaphor of the box to talk about the state of adoption and adoptive families in the Philippines, with the child character using the box as familiar location and also a mode of travel as she moves from one place to another. Ironically, at least in terms of the Philippine government, the most traditional out of these non-traditional familial set-ups – the adoptive family – is the one that receives the most state support. According to the Department of Social Work and Development, “from 2009 to 2015, a total of 4,860 children have been issued a certification declaring them legally available for adoption, with 2,533 children still waiting to be adopted” (DSWD). Legal adoption in the Philippines can be done by married couples or individuals, both of whom are assessed by

the DSWD financially, emotionally, and psychologically. Adoption processes usually take from six months to a year.

However, despite these systems in place, legal adoptions are still problematic in the Philippines. Negative media stereotypes usually portray adoptive children as “lesser” or as abused/neglected children (Esmaque). This is problematic as it influences decisions made by childless couples or individuals wishing to have children but are not necessarily married. Once again, these two sets of households are not classified as a family until – or unless – the child has been adopted through legal channels.

The portrayal of the abandoned child or parentless child has become as a distorted reflection of family systems in the Philippines, in which the child in *The Little Girl in the Box* is shown as searching for the perfect family structure in which she fits in. The adopted child is seen as a disruptive force in the otherwise traditional familial bloodline. But as Tarroja notes, “In the studies done by Tarroja (2007), Borja (1996) and Delos Reyes (2002) on adoptive families, adjustment of adopted children did not depend so much on their being adopted but more so on the acceptance and support of the adoptive families” (187).

The use of the picturebook medium in portraying the story of the little girl in the box allows the reader to disassociate adoption with the stereotypical melodramatic narrative that accompanies it. The use of the box as a metaphor for both permanence and movement allows the reader to explore the experience of adoption as both playful and poetic. The paintings by Aguirre give the story a magical, ethereal appearance. Accompanied by the spare, rhythmic prose of Bagas, the story transforms itself with each turn of the page, and provides the child a sense of agency as the little girl moves from one foster

home to another – always by choice – until she finds the one that fits.

In terms of her choice of parents, there is also a multitude of options: the first foster house is that of a single man with no other child, the second foster house that of a single woman with many children. The third foster house was simply described as a village on the mountain, without any parental figures present. The final house is rendered more vividly than the others, where “[t]he ceiling was white like the clouds / The walls were blue like the sea” (Bagas, n.p.). Here, the heteronormative representation of the family asserts itself, in that “[s]oon the little girl came to call them Mama and Papa. / She loved them both for real. /And so, the little girl stayed with them” (Bagas, n.p.). As such, the text seems to say that a single person, or even a village, cannot take care of a child – it must be a mother *and* a father.

### **Same-Sex Parents: *Ang Ikaklit sa Aming Hardin***

The independently published *Ang Ikaklit sa Aming Hardin* by Bernadette Neri, and illustrated by CJ de Silva, seems to challenge this heteronormative notion. Published in 2012, the story won first prize in the 2006 Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards, in the category for Short Story for Children in Filipino.

The book tells the story of Ikaklit, named after the Bontok word for “sunflower,” and her experience as the child of two mothers. She lives an idyllic existence, tending to her garden at home and excited about going to school for the first time. However, when she arrives at school, she observes:

So that’s how our school looks like. The walls are filled with colorful pictures. Painted on walls are big flowers and trees and children playing. There is also a picture of a home with a mother,

father, and child who seem very happy. I looked for another drawing of a home that featured two mothers and their child. I did not see one (Neri, 11).

Ikaklit is teased by her classmates for not having a father, and she asks her mothers, "Where is my father?" when she returns home. Her mothers respond by saying, "A family is like a garden. Who planted the seeds is not important. It also doesn't matter whether a man or a woman takes care of them. What's vital is how well the garden is tended" (Neri, 16).

Furthermore, Ikaklit discovers that she has classmates who were also dealing with difficult familial arrangements: Mikoy is teased because "he has siblings from a woman who isn't his mother" (22) while Tintin is an adopted child. Sheryl is an orphan and has no knowledge of who her parents were, while Pati came from a single-parent household, raised solely by her mother. And although they were mocked by their classmates, the text says that they were all happy and contented with their family arrangements.

At the end of the story, Ikaklit invites these classmates of hers to their home, where her mothers entertain them in their garden and show them the buds beginning to bloom. This metaphor signals to both the readers and the characters in the text that despite the non-traditional family arrangements depicted in the story, the children of these families will still be able to grow and bloom as healthy individuals in these environments. The realistic depictions of both the children and the parents, with their features clearly illustrated on the page, shows the importance of these characters as individuals instead of stereotypes.

Furthermore, by using two mothers as parental figures, Neri removes the need for using Filipino stereotypes in her

story. Usually, the role of the mother in the family has always been that of the caretaker and the nurturer. In fact, Tarroja observes that “Filipino mothers are expected to take charge of raising their children. Her nurturing role starts soon after the baby's birth” (183) and that motherhood is often seen as the pinnacle of a Filipino woman’s achievement.

This assumption regarding motherhood is unusually depicted in *Ikaklit* where the title character has two mothers, implying that she has twice the nurturing and support than a heteronormative two-parent household. These “changing marital forms include... gay and lesbian couples” is becoming an increasingly viable family structure in the Philippines, where the importance of emotional attachment is prized over physical togetherness (Tarroja, 189).

The depiction of a healthy and normalized homosexual union in a children’s picturebook extends that normality in the experience of the child reader. This is in line with a number of other alternative children’s books in the United States and the United Kingdom that also depict families with same-sex parents. Of course, these books are also regularly challenged.

In fact, *And Tango Makes Three*, a children’s picturebook that depicted two male penguins hatching and rearing a baby penguin together at the New York Zoo, became the center of a controversy in Singapore in 2014, when the National Library Board of Singapore removed *Tango* and another children’s book, *White Swan Express: A Story About Adoption* by Jean Davies Okimoto, Elaine M. Aoki, and Meilo So, because of its depiction of adoptive lesbian mothers (Straits Times). Singapore has previously pulped another children’s book, *Who’s in My Family?* by Robie H. Harris and Nadine Bernard Westcott, for its portrayal of diverse families, including mixed-race and homosexual parents.

However, because of the decision to destroy copies of *Tango* and *White Swan*, there has been a backlash against the National Library Board and Information Minister Yaacob Ibrahim, including movements to boycott NLB-related events like the Singapore Literary Prize. In the end, the books were moved to the adult section of the library, where parents can borrow them for their children (The Guardian). This can be seen as a changing attitude towards homosexual unions, which is illegal in conservative Singapore, and the social constraints imposed upon same-sex couples who wish to have a child.

Though attitudes may be changing, systems are stagnating. Because homosexual unions are not yet legally recognized in the Philippines, there is little state protection for children in same-sex households. According to a 2014 report by the UNDP-USAID, titled "Being LGBT in Asia: The Philippines Country Report," homosexual families in the Philippines lack government support:

Without the right to marry, LGBT Filipinos are treated unequally in a whole host of ways in comparison to heterosexual married couples. There remain "no clear rights for either spouse in same-sex and transgender-heterosexual partnerships regarding hospital and prison visitations, making medical and burial decisions, transfer of joint properties, custody of children, insurance benefits, and other privileges accorded to married and unmarried opposite-sex couples." (UNDP-USAID, qtd. from R-Rights and PLCHW, 2011)

In 1998, Senators Marcelo B. Fernan and Miriam Defensor-Santiago submitted at least four bills that barred recognition of legal marriages between same-sex or transgender individuals. In 2006, three more bills that refuted same-sex marriage was filed in front of the Senate, including an amendment in the Philippine

Family Code that prohibits recognition of “forbidden marriages” that are otherwise recognized outside the country. In February 2016, incumbent Senator Manny Pacquiao was quoted, in an TV interview, that those who engaged in same-sex activities were worse than animals (TV News 5). Though he later recanted and apologized for his comparison (NPR.com), he nevertheless vocalized an all-too-common belief regarding homosexual behavior in the Philippines.

Even as the United States recognized same-sex marriage as a human right and Catholic-majority Ireland recognized and legalized same-sex marriage in 2015, the Philippines does not condone nor accept same-sex relationships, denying these couples and their children the protection, privileges, and responsibilities that come with marriage. Despite these legal and social restrictions, there are still opportunities for same-sex parents to grow and cultivate a family of their own.

### **Single-Parent Families: Mothers, Fathers, and Children**

The Solo Parent’s Welfare Act is one of the opportunities by which households that do not fall under the legal definition of the family as set out in the Family Code of the Philippines are able to establish familial relationships (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2004). According to the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines, almost 14 million Filipinos are considered single parents under the Solo Parent Act of 2012. This may partly explain the number of children’s books that depict single parenthood.

In terms of portraying the role of the parents equally, *Mama’s House, Papa’s House* is perhaps the most successful example. Written by Jean Lee Patindol, and illustrated by Mark



Salvatus, the book was first published in 2004 and is currently in its eighth edition. It had previously won the PBBY-Salanga Grand Prize, one of the highest honors for local children's literature. Written from the point of view of a child (presumably female), as part of a set of siblings, it details how they are shuttled from their mama's house from Mondays to Thursdays, to their papa's house from Fridays to Saturdays. The child differentiates how her life in her mother's house is different from life in her father's house – from the house rules to the food they eat and the games they play. The narrative does not privilege either parent's lifestyle, but instead allows each household to stand on its own.

However, because of all the movement, the child becomes confused and tires of the arrangement. She keeps on forgetting where she leaves her clothes or her toys or her homework. Finally, the child asks the question: "Why can't my parents live together?"

Both parents use metaphors in order to explain the situation of separation, using child-friendly language and examples. For instance, the father replies: "Do you think planes and trains can travel together?" to which the corresponding illustration shows the distance between planes traveling in the sky and trains traveling on the ground. Similarly, the mother replies: "Why don't we mix some colors together?" and proceeds to show that some colors, when mixed together, produce ugly results (Patindol, n.p.).

Both metaphors show the incompatibility of people. Neither parent blames the other for the separation; it is the status quo. Both words and illustrations provide a way for the child to understand that sometimes, people simply do not get along anymore, and that being together is either unrealistic or ugly, and therefore being apart is better for everyone involved.

The book ends on the child's birthday, when her mother and father put aside their differences to stay in one space and celebrate her birthday. However, as soon as the celebration is done, her parents return to their separate homes, and the book ends as it began: with a description of their two houses and a return to the status quo.

The entire narrative does not provide a moralistic conclusion to the situation but rather, offers it to the child reader to interpret in their own way. Interestingly, an acquaintance recently exclaimed that because of this book, she was now never quite sure what she was going to get when she buys a children's book by a Philippine author – certainly, she wasn't prepared to talk about divorce (I suppose she meant formal separation) to her five-year-old daughter.

This anecdote exemplifies the necessity of writing about parental separation in the form of a children's picturebook. The author herself writes, at the back of the book: "Some weeks after my husband and I separated, my five-year-old son... asked me, 'Mama, what is a broken home?' Apparently, the neighbors, after learning of the changes in our household, asked my guileless son how he felt now that he was a child of a broken home. How adults can be so irresponsibly cruel!" (Patindol, n.p.)

The terminology itself is telling: a separated family unit is broken, irreparable. And while there are provisions in terms of definitions of marital status in the Philippines, it is also telling that this is the only country in which divorce is not a legal option. Instead, there is the process of annulment, in which a marriage is invalidated by declaring that it did not happen in the first place.

According to the Office of the Solicitor General (OSG), "The number of marriage annulment cases in the Philippines has risen by 40 percent in the last decade with at least 22 cases filed

every day... the number of annulment cases had risen from 4,520 in 2001 to 8,282 in 2010." Furthermore, these annulment cases usually involve children. "The data from the OSG showed that 82 percent of those who filed these cases had children and out of that number, 59 percent had at least one or two children, 22 percent had three to four children and one percent had five to six children" (Tubeza).

However, because of the emphasis Philippine society places on the traditional family unit, to discuss or mention separation or annulment is to discuss it in negative terms: blaming either (or both) members of the couple, or an external source that could have influenced the separation of the couple. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Filipino families are expected to stay together for the sake of the children, never mind that, for various reasons, the couple can no longer stay together.

Furthermore, the role of the father in the story displays the complicated role of fatherhood in most children's stories. As Ann Alstrom observes in her historical overview of the family, fatherhood was a complex position, one where "the father was both the head of the family who invested time and love in his children, and the authoritarian figure who stood distanced from the emotional needs of family" (17), which results in a paradoxical relationship with their children.

In fact, as early as 1989, Tan's study of the four types of fatherhood in the Philippines concludes that "that the ideal father, given the emerging issues of global and modern age, was someone who was involved with his children but at the same time not too controlling" (qtd. in Tarroja, 181). This can be read in both texts: the father figure is both present and absent in the lives of their children. This may also be attributed to the worldwide view of fatherhood as a position predicated on wealth, where the value of the father is determined by his ability

to provide financial support of the family. Compared to the absence of a mother figure, the absence of a father figure in solo parenting activities, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, highlights this paradox. In fact, according to the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse in the United States, only 17% of custodial single parents are men, and in the Philippines, fathers are also largely absent in the lives of women, with over 37% of babies born in 2008 to unmarried mothers (Inquirer.net).

Single mothers, on the other hand, are more vulnerable as solo parents. According to the Philippine Daily Inquirer,

[S]ingle mothers often find themselves desperate for resources to support the young children often left in their custody, according to provisions in the Family Code.

Shorn of emotional support because of the absence of a life partner, these women find themselves besieged by the burdens of solo parenting and the rigid expectations in the workplace. As well, the stigma of doing it alone because of a dysfunctional marriage in this very Catholic country restrains many single mothers from speaking up to avoid calling attention to themselves. (Inquirer.net)

The concept of motherhood is particularly important in the Filipino family, with parallels being drawn between the mother figure and the Virgin Mary, a particularly potent symbol in a predominantly Catholic country. As such, the position of the single mother is more fraught than that of the single father. The moral upbringing of the child is usually on the shoulders of the mother more than the father, and the cliché concept of the mother as the “*ilaw ng tahanan*” makes the mother responsible not just for the physical rearing of the child but also complicit in their emotional and spiritual growth.

Yet the mother can also be easily vilified in children's fiction, and this paradox is observed by Elizabeth Thiel, who notes that "neither good nor monstrous mother can exist in isolation" (73) and that the spectrum of motherhood exists "in the opposition between the Virgin Mother and Eve" (73). It is this kind of contestation between fathers and mothers that *Mama's House, Papa's House* largely avoids, thanks to its use of language and visual metaphors to provide equal representation of both parents. It provides an alternative way of considering the concept of a "broken family" – that it is not broken, but simply that two things might not be able to "mix" or "travel" together all the time. This allows a space for the child to either reflect on their own family structures or to become more aware of the variety of familial structures in society.

### **Different Families, Still the Same**

As we can see, these books focus on the different relationships between children and parents and depict the various ways that children can negotiate or subvert their connections with their nuclear families. In *The Little Girl in the Box*, we can see how the process of adoption allows children to form new bonds with their non-biological parents and how a caring environment forms their personalities. The nurturing capabilities and opportunities of same-sex parents are highlighted in *Ang Ikaklit sa Aming Hardin*. And in *Mama's House, Papa's House*, the narrative lets children negotiate and understand the boundaries between separated parents, without blaming either party for the dissolution of their marriage.

The children in these stories reflect the growing realities of alternative family arrangements in the Philippines, which in

turn, is being re-molded by ongoing globalization and modernization. These stories present to us another way of considering family systems and structures in the Philippines through children's picture books. As May points out, "These books contain reflections of the child within an adult world, and they can subvert adult autonomy" (86) as well as resist adult interpretations of society.

This is despite the fact that "adults have expressed concern over children's books that depict actions or topics" that may be considered too heavy for a child reader, such as poverty, neglect, and abuse" (Almario, qtd. in Abao, 26). By choosing to depict the nuclear family in these alternative forms, this lends credence to the idea that both children and adults are finding it increasingly necessary to find their own familial experiences depicted in children's fiction, thereby validating them.

These subversions would not have been possible without the form of the picturebook. As all three books have shown, the relationships between text and image do not simply mirror or echo each other, but can also create contrapuntal moments that resist a single interpretation of the story and, therefore, resist being used for simplistic purposes, such as educating children to view alternative families as "strange" or "unnatural." In fact, we can argue that by depicting these stories about families through the eyes of its child protagonists, they provide multiple ways of experiencing multiple families.

Through these texts, we can see that picture books may be "seemingly simple" but they contain complexly interwoven visual and textual imagery that evokes different responses from children and adults (May, 95). The gaps between text and illustration, a specific feature of the picturebook, allows the reader to negotiate their own reality within the pages of the story (Lewis). These stories are not meant as indictment and

exclusion but as spaces for discussion and inclusion – an increasingly difficult task to manage in an increasingly divisive world.

These books allow children and adults to navigate the personal space of their own familial arrangements as well as the public spaces of family support and regulatory practices from corporate and government structures. By starting from the nucleus, the family, and questioning and re-interpreting them in our stories, we can establish an ongoing dialogue between storytellers, society, and the child. The family – both in fiction and in real life – is constantly changing, and to insist that there is only a singular representation of the nuclear family is to do a disservice to the children who have benefitted from growing up in alternative family systems.

We cannot go back to the past. Instead, we must learn to re-define the present and address the possible futures of the Filipino family, and allow Filipino children to see themselves reflected in the many, many ways that people can relate to, connect with, and establish a family with one another.

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