



Research Article

# MGA KWENTONG PAMBATANG RADIKAL (RADICAL CHILDREN'S STORIES): EXPLORING SOCIAL THEMES IN CONTEMPORARY CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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## ABSTRACT

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For thousands of generations, children's literature has been one of the most powerful tools in providing moral values to children. It employs a subtle technique commonly used to entertain children and at the same time, educate them about rights and wrongs. This kind of literature used human and animal characters usually with a touch of magic which was designed to give entertainment and feed lore to the kids. This study aimed to explore these Children's Literature to examine the issues of its content. The researcher also determined the reasons of the two authors in writing such stories and the perceptions of the parents regarding these kinds of children's stories. Therewith, the selected five (5) children's books were first summarized and analyzed. Meanwhile, in both interviews done with the authors and parents, the researcher used a Key Informant and Personal Interview. Ten (10) parents were selected through identifying the age of their child (aged seven (7) and below). The researcher identified the social issues embedded in the children's stories such as drug, liquor, cigarette, and gambling addiction and illness. Social issues such as this are atypical in children's literature and this research wanted to determine whether it could help in teaching children's literature.

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## INTRODUCTION

Moral values are an important aspect of humanity, and they mold the virtue of a person (Johnson, 2014). These traits are very important to children because, during their childhood, their brain absorbs a lot. This age is essential for parents to educate them so that they become right-minded individuals when they grow up. Parents are the first teachers of the children and they are good facilitators of teaching moral values to the child (Ambróziová, 2011). Literature is also used as an instrument for teaching moral values. Therefore, children's literature is one of the most effective ways of educating children about ethics (Bradbery, 2013).

Children's Literature is a kind of literary genre that is used as a tool that provides moral values to children (Bradbery, 2013). It usually uses human or animal characters to give education and prior knowledge that may positively influence the kids (Beach et al., 2009). This literature was designed for children to give entertainment and feed lore so that they might protect and preserve their naivety as a child (Pires, 2011). According to John Locke, the "human mind begins as a 'white paper', void of all characters, without any ideas" (Johnson, 2014). They are blameless and ignorant about their society. Hence, children's minds are not

yet fully developed and they are in the stage of understanding. Their innocence is very sensitive, and they may not be influenced by violence (Ambróziová, 2011). But, what if children's stories implicitly contain social issues not usually deemed suited for a child? Are there any good or bad effects on the young adult? How will parents react and accept this kind of theme?

In the past years, a rising trend in children's literature here in the Philippines has blossomed. Some renowned authors of children's literature are instilling topics that are not normally found in these kinds of genres. They used current social issues as a theme and were implicitly tackled to provide lessons regarding its occurrences in the country. These literary works are not just about a story that gives simple lessons about the character but also contain themes suited for adults i.e. political, environmental, and social issues (Locke, 2013). Lampara Books and Adarna House Publishing are one of the prominent publishers of children's literature here in the Philippines and are also responsible for publishing such short stories (Bradbery, 2012). They are well-known for their academic and educational purposes because of their renowned authors. Segundo Matias is one of the authors of Lampara books. More of his works are about vices, the environment, politics, and other issues.

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## METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative design which is exploratory research where the researchers explored the social themes in selected children's stories. It also explored the reasons of the authors for integrating social issues in children's literature and identified the parents' perceptions through different methods – Content Analysis, Key Informant Interview, and Personal Interview. In the content summary, the researchers used five (5) children's books that were published by the selected two (2) publishers of the stories. Moreover, four (4) children's books by Segundo Matias will be used in this study to provide the answers to the findings (Bradbery, 2012). These are: "*May Monster sa Katawan ni Kuya* (There's A Monster Inside My Brother's Body)", "*Ang Usok at si Daddy* (Smoke and Daddy)", "*May Genie ba sa Bote ng Daddy ni Rocky?* (Is there a Genie Inside the Bottle of Rocky's Daddy?)" and "*Paalam, Swimming Pool* (Goodbye, Swimming Pool)". On the other hand, one of the Children's Books of Adarna House Publishing was also used in this study entitled, "*Ang Pambihirang Buhok ni Raquel* (Raquel's Fantastic Hair)" by Luis P. Gatmaitan. Next is the Key Informant Interview where the researchers contacted the two authors of the selected books through email and gathered data by asking a series of questions that determine their reasons for integrating social themes in children's stories (Nourian Dehkordi, 2013). Lastly, an interview with the selected ten (10) parent-respondents who have a child aged seven (7) and below was done. Furthermore, in compliance with the research ethics protocol, the researchers asked for Informed Consent as evidence of the willingness of the respondents to be part of the study. The researchers compiled and collected all the data through coding and analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Content Analysis

1.1 ***May Monster si Kuya* (There's A Monster Inside My Brother's Body)** The main character of the story is a young girl (Beatrice) and a loving sibling to her big brother (Ryan), who is also a good and smart boy. They have a wealthy family and the siblings are brought up properly by their parents. His brother dreams of being a famous doctor. However, during the past few days, Beatrice noticed the big changes in his brother. Her curiosity peaked until one day, a big vehicle came and parked in front of their home. Five men in white uniform took her brother. Beatrice noticed that her Brother Ryan's hands were tied behind his back with the long sleeves of the white jacket he wore. She was frightened by her brother's appearance, and he changed physically. She tried to approach his brother but he did not recognize her. His brother turned into a monster. There is a monster inside her brother and he needs to go to the hospital so the monster will be removed. He met the monster when a friend gave drugs to him. One day, she visited her brother in the hospital and saw that he had healed little by little because the monster was still inside. The story introduces a topic, drug addiction, to an audience who are not familiar with the said issue. That is why the author presented a symbol of a monster to represent drug addiction and did not implicitly mention the sensitive issue, hence, metaphors were used (Semizu, 2013). The effects of taking drugs were also presented in the story. Though it did not end happily as most children's stories are formatted that way, it ended with the hope that the brother will soon be healed and the 'monster' will leave his brother's body (Semizu, 2013).

1.2. ***Ang Usok at si Daddy* (Smoke and Daddy)** The story starts when a young girl Eunice always wonders about his father. She never met her father because he passed away when she was still a baby. She always dared to ask her mommy about her daddy but her mommy always refused to answer her. But then, during her seventh birthday, she was taken aback when her mommy left all of a sudden in the middle of the celebration. She approached her grandmother and asked what had happened to her mother. Her grandmother answered her question by telling a story. She said that her daddy passed away because he was addicted to smoking cigarettes. His father used to be a writer and works on his own time hence, he smokes a lot in his spare time. He took it nonstop until he became sickly and died. This story aimed to give a lesson on the dangerous effects of cigarette addiction (Semizu, 2013). The title of the story "*Ang Usok at si Daddy*" (The Smoke and Daddy) – the smoke was used as a metonym for a cigarette. It was used as a concrete term to be associated with the effects of cigarettes. Eunice is used in the story to relay to the readers that cigarettes take the lives of the people you love.

1.3. ***May Genie ba sa Bote ng Daddy ni Rocky?* (Is there a Genie Inside the Bottle of Rocky's Daddy?)** The story is about Rocky who told his friend that he suspects his daddy is a genie for a friend. He says he sees a bottle in his mommy and daddy's room every morning. One morning, he crept into their room and tried to peep inside the bottle. When his mommy saw him, she forbade him to do it and said the genie hates children. Her mother told her about the genie. Her mother clarified that Rocky's Daddy is not looking at a genie inside the bottle but likes to drink a lot of liquor. Mikaela realized that there was no genie inside the bottle of Rocky's Father. A few days later, she wondered why she didn't get to play with Rocky at the playground anymore. She found out that Rocky's father was brought to the hospital because of the bottle. Rocky is also sad because his mother says if his daddy does not stop, they will be separated from each other. This story also encompasses liquor addiction or drinking liquor excessively. With the title itself, the author used the association of genies living in a bottle. Because a bottle is the focus of the story, it makes use of a genie to capture the interest of the target audience. In the end, it was found out that there is no genie in the bottle but his father is just addicted to liquor. The negative effects of liquor addiction were also reflected in the life of Rocky.

1.4. ***Paalam Swimming Pool* (Goodbye, Swimming Pool)** This story is about a young boy named Gabby who was caught by his father playing cards. Gabby said that his classmate gave the cards to him. He wondered why his daddy stopped him from playing cards when it was just simple cards. Gabby's Daddy explained the bad effects of playing cards. He told a story about his uncle. His uncle has a huge house with a swimming pool. He was able to build a large house, buy luxury cars, able to send his children to a private school. Then one day, a friend of his invited him to go to a casino, and despite the warnings of her Daddy about the dangerous effects of gambling, he continued. Until such time that his wealth which he accumulated through the years was slowly taken from him. He gambled and lost huge amounts of money until the bank took his house, his cars, and his properties including his swimming pool. That is the reason why they don't go there to swim anymore. And because of that deck of cards, they lost their wealth. In this story, cards were used as a metonym for gambling. The story of Gabby's

uncle was used as an example of the bad effects gambling will have on one's life. In this case, the symbol of wealth used was the swimming pool. Gabby's father used the swimming pool as a physical manifestation that his uncle is a successful man. However, because of gambling, he lost everything he worked hard for including his swimming pool.

- 1.5. **Ang Pambihirang Buhok ni Raquel (Raquel's Fantastic Hair)** This story is about the admiration of a young girl named Ana for her cousin Raquel. She admires her cousin a lot because she is very different from her cousins. She is kind and passionate, and most of all, she has wonderful hair of various colors: blue yellow, and red. One day, Anna asked her if she wanted to braid her hair, and she agreed. She started to wonder about the strand of Raquel's hair. And she thought that maybe it was because she had the best kind of hair. She asked about her hair, and Raquel said that under her hair lies a hidden kingdom, a rainbow, and small people. Raquel's cousin got engrossed in listening until she didn't notice that Raquel turned pale. Raquel's body fell flat on the floor, and Ana was so afraid. Ana glanced at Raquel's hair until her fantastic hair fell off! There's no kingdom, rainbow, or even small people hiding in her hair. Raquel is bald and her wonderful hair is a wig. Raquel's mother said that Raquel has Leukemia and she got bald because the medicine she is taking makes her hair fall off. The story is about the fantastic hair of Raquel. However, underneath her amazing hair lies the cruel reality of her sickness. Baldness is the physical manifestation of her critical illness, Leukemia. The usage of an enchanted wig to capture the attention of the readers leads to the realization that it is masking the illness of Raquel. She was first presented as a girl admired by her cousin Ana. She came to the point where she envied Raquel because she was pretty, kind, fair, and had amazing hair. However, towards the last, Ana realizes that the hair is not real and that Ana is indeed luckier, as Raquel said, because she is healthy.

## Authors' Reasons

### 2.1 Benefits

S.D. Matias, Jr. believed that this series of children's books was conceptualized to raise the awareness of children about the existence of such negative occurrences in their environment – vice and addiction to vices (Bradbery, 2012). Vice and the addiction to it is a presence in society that destroys the moral fiber in a person. As young as they are, he believed children can already process and will open their eyes to these kinds of issues. Moreover, he wrote stories with social issues not to bring negative effects to the children. According to him, their aim as an author is to educate children positively about these predicaments (Bradbery, 2012). This kind of story is beneficial to the children because it will enlighten them about the reality happening in their surroundings.

### 2.2 Inspiration

According to L.P. Gatmaitan, M.D. inspiration is his reason for writing a story with social issues. He got inspired when he was attending a seminar about health issues in children (Bradbery, 2012). He heard the story of a cancer survivor named Rachel who was battling leukemia before. She got bald because of her chemotherapy sessions, she was so let down and depressed. For her, the bigger issue was not her leukemia but the baldness brought about by chemotherapy. Her self-esteem was affected. He said, "I was struck by what she had shared. I thought of her hair, of her wigs, and I found it interesting. It was the impetus that caused me to write *Ang Pambihirang Buhok ni Raquel* (The Wonderful Hair of Raquel)" (Bradbery, 2012).

## 2.3 Discriminating Audience

L.P. Gatmaitan, M.D. believed that children are the most discriminating audience of all. He said, "In writing a story for children, the author is required to understand and consider their world, their milieu, their concerns, their thoughts, their likes and dislikes, their language, their issues, their psychology. They speak differently. They think differently. You have to adjust your choice of words (and the psychology, etc) depending on the chosen age group" (Bradbery, 2012). Hence, he felt that the best time to open their eyes to such issues is when they are younger because, during these times, they are very perceptive and at the same time, discriminating (Bradbery, 2012).

## Parents Perceptions

The different Perceptions of the ten (10) selected parents who have a child aged seven (7) and below were generally categorized as Positive Perception and Negative Perception regarding their acceptance of inculcating social issues in Children's stories. Some parents accept this kind of story but one (1) parent disagrees with it. All of them said that it was their first-time reading children's stories about social issues. Most of them agreed that this kind of story would supply knowledge to their children. They agreed that their children need these stories because they will open their eyes to these realities so that when they grow up, they will know what to do and what not to do.

They also commended the authors for using metaphors, metonyms, and allusions such as monster, genie, smoke, swimming pool, and wig in connecting with young kids. Because of this, the issues were easily processed by young minds (Semizu, 2013). Meanwhile, they feel that when their kids read these books they want to be physically present. They suggested parental guidance in story reading so questions and clarifications from them would be easily answered.

However, one parent disagreed with assimilating social issues in these stories due to the child's competency. Because of the complexity of the topic, she believed that children should still not be exposed to issues that are not suitable for them.

## CONCLUSION

Children's literature that has social issues embedded in them has great potential especially if it displays social transformation, when associated with the school curriculum. Displaying a role as an important element in children's education and building a connection between school and out-of-school contexts, children's literature can make a great contribution to the establishment of identity and comprehension of diversity. School frequently struggles with finding strategies to deal with these changes, and children's literature could be an avenue that reflects these changes.

The researchers found that inculcating Social Issues in Children's Literature is generally acceptable and useful to young readers. Literature displays an extremely relevant role in the transmission of principles. There are feelings and emotions predominantly present in these texts, which when educators articulate them to children with guidance, provide a crucial dimension in building identity. The authors wrote these stories intended for young kids because they know that during this age, children tend to be more perceptive and discriminating. Furthermore, parents generally perceived this kind of literature acceptable and if given a chance, they would allow their kids to read books with social issues.

Children's literature can be used as potential to help teachers build into their programs ways to challenge preconceived ideas, accept change and acknowledge uncertainty and work

cooperatively and in partnerships with others. As literature gives shape to all values that guide our way of viewing the world, the researchers believe that the early contact that children have with literature may be a great step to education towards diversity and to an integration of diversity in the building up of their identity. This kind of story for the children is a subtle technique of educating them. The stories used are comprised of several issues of the society and the two authors tend to give awareness to the young readers about such issues. They also considered the age bracket and children's attributes such as their milieu, beliefs, concerns, likes, and dislikes among others. These stories were written cautiously so the children would not get lost in the purpose of the story. Hence, the authors did not use explicit words that were not appropriate for them and eased them into the issue slowly by first making use of metonyms, allusions, and metaphors.

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