

TALES FROM THE FRINGE: THE REPRESENTATION OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN CONTEMPORARY PHILIPPINE CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Rhoda Myra Garces-Bacsal*

Jesus Federico Hernandez**

RESUMEN

Historias de los marginados: La representación de las discapacidades en la literatura filipina infantil contemporánea. Un total de sesenta y tres historias, los ganadores del premio literario en memoria de Carlos Palanca en las Filipinas desde 1991-2011, fueron leídas, revisadas y analizadas por temas narrativos. Nueve de las sesenta y tres historias abordan diversas formas de trastornos o discapacidades. Este documento tiene como objetivo compartir cómo son tratadas las personas con discapacidades en los relatos de la literatura infantil contemporánea en las Filipinas.

ABSTRACT

A total of sixty-three stories in all, recipients of the Carlos Palanca Memorial Award for Literature in the Philippines from 1991-2011, were read, reviewed, and analyzed for narrative themes. Nine out of sixty-three stories dealt with various forms of disorders or disabilities. This paper aims to share how disabled individuals are portrayed in contemporary stories in Philippine children's literature.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Discapacidad/alteraciones en la literatura infantil, retrato de las discapacidades, libros ganadores, literatura infantil filipina, Premio literario en memoria de Carlos Palanca para niños.

KEY WORDS

Disability/disorder in children's literature, portrayal of disabilities, award-winning books, Philippine Children's Literature, Carlos Palanca Memorial Award for Children.

* Profesora ayudante en el National Institute of Education, en la Universidad Tecnológica de Singapur. (N. de la ed.). El apellido Garcés, pese a ser español, no se acentúa en el país de origen de la autora.

** Asistente de profesor y con anterioridad Coordinador del Departamento de Lingüística en la Universidad de Filipinas en Diliman, Ciudad Quezon. (N. de la ed.). El autor es filipino y en su país, tanto su nombre como su apellido no se acentúan, por esa razón se ha dejado así.

INTRODUCTION



he Carlos Palanca Memorial Award in the Philippines is perceived to be among, if not the most prestigious award-giving body in the country. Established in 1950, it only started providing recognition to outstanding children's stories in 1989. The objective of the Award is to develop a repository of the "Philippines' literary gems from our gifted writers and to assist in its eventual dissemination to our people." Most of the stories that have received recognition are published in bilingual format (written in both English and Filipino).

In this paper, the researchers read and analyzed 63 award-winning stories from 1991-2011. Rather than look into pre-determined themes, the researchers utilized the grounded theory approach, allowing the themes and recurring patterns to surface in an iterative process (Creswell, 2008). While there were quite a number of narrative themes revealed from the stories (Hernandez, 2013; Garcés-Bacsal, 2013), this paper would focus on portrayal of disabilities which has been lumped under the Social Issues subtheme in the original analysis.

There are quite a number of studies that looked into how learning disabilities in children's and adolescent literature are portrayed (Prater, 2003) and how disabilities are explored in Hans Christian Andersen's tales (Yenika-Agbaw, 2011). It was Dyches, Prater & Johnson (2006), though, who investigated how disabilities are portrayed in award-winning stories as they looked at Caldecott Honor and Medalist picture books from 1938-2005. In this research, it was shown that only 4% (or eleven stories in all) of the award-winning books in that 67 year period included a character with disability. The researchers noted that there were inaccurate portrayals of disabilities such as the disability being temporary (as seen in *Rapunzel's* temporary blindness for example) and that young readers may have difficulty resonating with the characters with disabilities as most are not realistic stories with animals as characters (as seen in *Seven Blind Mice*) or are depicted in folk tales with magical elements (an example given was *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*).

The researchers also noted that having a character in a story with disability is hardly sufficient:

Teachers must consider the literary and artistic quality of these books, since a character with a disability housed in a poorly written story or portrayed with inaccurate illustrations has limited potential to impact readers emotionally and intellectually. (p. 2)

This is also one of the reasons why the authors in this study chose to analyze award-winning stories from the Philippines.

Out of the 63 stories, there were only nine award-winning stories (14.3%) that dealt specifically with disabilities or disorders. Two out of the nine stories introduce children to Alzheimer's disorder as seen in *May mga lihim kami ni Inkgong* ("The Secrets that Grandfather and I share") and *Hayan na si Lolo Sinto* ("Grandfather Sinto") which portrays the 'village idiot,' an old man who is forgetful and homeless.

Seven out of the nine stories depict children's disorders such as **autism** in *Sapagkat ang Special children ay bahagi rin ng Lipunan at Mundo* ("Special Children are also Part of Society and the World"), **enuresis or bedwetting** in *Dagat sa Kama ni Troy* (The Ocean in Troy's Bed), **dyslexia** in *Xilef*, **attention deficit hyperactivity disorder** in *Hilong Talilong* ("Dizzy Izzy"), and **physical disability** in *Dalawang Lumang Saklay* (Two Old Crutches) and *Sandosenang Sapatos* ("A Dozen Pair of Shoes"), and **visual impairment** in *Parada ng mga Alingawngaw* ("A Parade of Echoes").

This paper would highlight only two out of these nine stories for a deeper and more incisive analysis on how the use of language influence the portrayals and perceptions of the children protagonists in the stories and their disabilities. These stories were purposively selected as they illustrate how children navigate their social world, both home environment and the school, despite of their disabilities. Both books have likewise been published in picture book format.

THE TALE OF TWO DISABILITIES

Stories for children about children living with and confronting the challenges brought about by disabilities form a small part of the entire inventory of the recipients of the Palanca Memorial Award for children's literature in the Philippines. Two of the

distinguished stories to have received such honor will be the focus the current study: *Sandosenang Sapatos* (A Dozen Pair of Shoes) and *Xilef*.

Sandosenang Sapatos, written by Luis P. Gatmaitan and illustrated by Beth Parrocha-Doctolero, is a sentimental tale of a child named Susie who was born without feet told from the point-of-view of Susie's elder sister, Karina. Daughters of a talented and loving shoemaker, this rather straightforward and seemingly tragic story of irony narrates the challenges confronted by, the mechanism for coping, the rationalizations and realizations of living with disability and caring for a person with disability. The story starts out with an exaltation of the father's ability in the design and production of shoes. He is also characterized as a loving father who makes shoes for his daughter, the narrator, for different occasions making her the envy of her classmates. The conception of another child, another daughter, a would-be ballet dancer, as the father wishes her to be, creates excitement and a general feeling of delight in the family, until the second daughter was born without feet. The love between the members of the family counters and overcomes the hardships, not to mention the covert disdain expressed in gossip and the overt contempt as expressed in outright derisions volleyed against the family. Despite or perhaps because of the mockery and disdain, Susie and Karina were able to develop a strong relationship and a sound sense of their abilities and of their selves. According to the narrator, the lack of feet did not hinder the sisters from playing; there are a lot of games that do not require the use of one's feet. Also, the lack of feet led them to explore the talents and skills that they possess and are able to perform; Karina found out that she is skilful in drawing and Susie is proficient in writing stories. Despite her lack of feet, Susie dreams of shoes in great detail, especially around the time of her birthday. The story ends with the death of the shoemaker-father when Susie was twelve and Karina discovers the twelve pairs of shoes in boxes in his father's work room; the shoes dreamt by Susie in great detail.

According to the introduction written by the author, who happens to be a medical doctor, the inspiration of the book was a patient born without feet. He notes that there are kids that are physically whole but emotionally disabled and there

are those that are physically disabled but emotionally whole. This is what the story tries to explicate: the emotional wholeness despite physical disability.

Apart from winning the Palanca Award, the second story, *Xilef*, written by Augie Rivera and also illustrated by Beth Parrocha-Doctolero, was also recognized as an Outstanding Book for Young People with Disabilities by the International Board of Books for Young People in 2003. The story is told from the point of view of the main character, a boy who seems to be oddly named, Xilef. Xilef is a boy with a fertile imagination and a passion for astronomy and everything extra-terrestrial. His mind transforms ordinary objects like an eraser to laser sword and letters written on the board to asteroids. This gets Xilef in all sorts of binds especially in school. His imagination however is more than just creativity waiting to be birthed, as the story unfolds, one finds out that whenever Xilef opens his book and tries to read or is called upon by the teacher to read in class, the letters on the book start to move:

Nang buklatin ko ko ang libro, parang biglang gumalaw ang mga titik. May lumipad, nagpalutang-lutang, bumulusok, at kumampay-kampay sa paligid ng mga pahina ng libro.

As I opened the book, the letters started moving. They flew, hovered, darted, and glided around the pages of the book. (Translations provided in the book).

His teacher notices his difficulty in reading and suggests to his doting and supportive parents who never fail to reassure him, that Xilef needs to be seen by a specialist and the assistance of a trained tutor to cope with his difficulty in studying. This additional help came in the person of Maya, Xilef's tutor who taught him techniques in dealing with letters that fly off the pages of the book. Eventually, with the help of Maya, Xilef was able to read the book his mother reads to him at night. Xilef of course is a metathesized or an anagram of the character's real name, Felix.

These two award-winning stories, *Sandosenang Sapatos* and *Xilef*, the former deals with a physical disability, and the latter a neurological one, will be the focus of this paper.

PORTRAYING THE IDEAL

According to the National Statistics Office of the Republic of the Philippines, based on the 2010 Census of Population and Housing, the recorded percent of persons with disabilities is 1.57 percent of the 92.1 million household population in the country. Males accounted for 50.9 percent while females comprised 49.1 percent. The report also stated that disability was highest among persons 5 – 19 years, the age bracket when children are supposed to be in schools. Not enough schools are capable of supporting and providing instruction to this staggering number, for example, the premier state university of the country does not have enough faculty members who are proficient in sign language or sign interpreters that can provide support for deaf students, or a Braille machine that can convert books, reading materials and hand-outs to formats that are accessible to blind students. This astounding statistical data suggests that a vast number of persons with disability from the youth sector do not get the necessary support from the institutions of government, like, the school system. This is further complicated by the fact that the poverty incidence is estimated at 27.9 percent during the first part of 2012 as reported by the National Statistical Coordination Board. This may mean that persons with disability living below the poverty level may not have access to means provided outside public institutions, e.g. tutors and materials specially designed for persons with disability. Unfortunately, the data from the National Statistics Office does not provide a breakdown or a classification of the different disabilities in their census. Therefore, the two stories in focus may be atypical of the experiences of the 27.9 percent.

In *Sandoseng Sapatos*, the father typified the protective provider and Karina, the elder sister and narrator of the story, exemplified the accepting and compassionate elder sister and best friend of Susie, the girl born without feet. She narrates:

Lumaki kami ni Susie na malapit ang loob sa isa't-isa. Hindi naging hadlang ang kawalan niya ng paa para makapaglaro kami. Marami namang laro na di nangangailangan ng paa... Ako ang tagapagtanggol niya kapag may nanunukso sa kanya. Ako ang tagatulak ng wheelchair niya. Ako ang ate na alalay.

Susie and I were really close as we grew up. It never mattered to me that she had no feet. That never stopped us from playing together. We found a lot of games that didn't need the use of feet, anyway... I took it upon myself to be her defender from all teasers. Her wheelchair pusher. Her ate (elder sister) assistant. (Translations provided in the book).

In *Xilef*, the support for a dyslexic child, Felix, came from various members of the community: the teacher who noticed and informed his parents of his difficulty in reading; the parents who not only provided love and reassurance but also took Felix to various specialists for diagnosis and help; and Miss Maya, the patient, pleasant and gracious tutor/friend of Felix described in the book as *hindi napapagod* (tireless) and *laging nakangiti* (always has a smile) who taught Felix techniques in dealing with the difficulties in reading.

In both stories, support was mainly provided by the family, complemented by assistance from schools, specialists and a private tutor in the case of the dyslexic character, *Xilef*. Both stories clearly showed the importance of familial support. It is apparent that the love, acceptance and reassurances of family are paramount in the everyday life of the person with disability, especially in the building of a healthy self-conceptualization.

However, this "literary" portrayal of disability and the needs surrounding and support required in the everyday life of the person with disability, may not necessarily be a reflection of what happens in most households. Nonetheless, the stories provide models in practice and more importantly possibilities to the readers of these books who they themselves may be living with disability or are potential caregivers of persons with disability.

STIGMATIZATION

People who are different or who do not conform to the ideals and demands of society are oftentimes marked. Stigma seems to be present in all societies. This etymologically Greek word refers to the mark or tattoos carved on the skin of unwanted elements of society, like criminals or the "untouchables", or slaves. The current usage and process of attachment of this mark in current

Philippine society is not done through the scarring of the flesh but is perhaps more observed in the various linguistic expressions and pejorative labels lobbed at and attached to people who appear or behave differently from what the majority of the members of society expects or values.

In both stories, the overt deformity of Susie, being born without feet and the atypical behavior of Felix coupled with his difficulty in reading, were traits that were perceived as abnormal; these characteristics distinguished them from other members of the society which then led to these characters being stigmatized or being marked as different.

In the story *Sandosenang Sapatos*, a stranger who mockingly points his finger at Susie makes a derisive comment saying, “*tingnan nyo o, puwedeng pangkarnabal ‘yung bata!*” (Hey, look! That kid will make a good freak show at the carnival!), intimating that Susie belongs in a carnival for people to gawk at and ridicule. In *Xilef*, Felix’s extra-terrestrial imagination of laser sabers and asteroids earned the ire of his teacher and the taunts of his classmates; he was often teased as “being from a different planet”. While not overtly different, Felix is conscious of his difficulties that every time the teacher would call on someone to read in front of class, Felix would hide. His frustration also grew from his recognition that he is experiencing trouble in reading. This is even made worse by the overt contempt and taunts made by his classmates calling him *bobo* (stupid), *tanga* (dumb), and *taga ibang planeta* (from a different world).

Stigmatization also often extends to other members of the family, particularly, the parents as other members of society theorize on the causes of the deformity or the deviation from what is perceived to be the norm. The covert disdain expressed in gossip in the following lines from *Sandosenang Sapatos* exemplifies this vilification:

Nakarinig kami ng kung anu-anong tsismis dahil sa kapansanan ng kapatid ko. Siguro raw ay binalak na ipalaglag ni Nanay ang kapatid ko kaya kulang-kulang ang parte ng katawan. Nilusaw raw ng mga mapinsalang gamot ang kanyang mga paa, isinumpa raw ng mga diwata ng sapatos si Tatay dahil mahal na itong sumingil sa mga pasadyang sapatos.

The rumors began to spread. Because my sister was sort of deformed, people were saying a lot of nasty things. Some said maybe my mother tried to get rid of her that's why her body parts were incomplete. Or my mother might have taken some harmful pills and those pills melted my sister's feet. Or the shoe spirits cursed my father because he raised the price for his shoes. (Translations provided in the book).

The attachment of stigma often affects the behavior of the stigmatized. Felix, tired of being bullied and aggravated by his difficulties, got into a fight with his classmates. Sometimes however the effects of stigmatization go beyond the momentary frustration. In some cases, the stigmatized starts to act in a way that is expected from them by people who labeled them different. The labels are also sometimes internalized and result in a crisis of identity and self-worth.

RECOGNITION OF THE DIFFERENCE

Despite the stigma attached to, the demands, and the requirements of persons with disability, their care-givers, and significant others, the characters in our story, Susie and Felix, came out emotionally whole despite their differences. The recognition and acceptance of their limitations, facilitated by the unconditional support and love of their families, lead to the development of a healthy self-concept.

The statement of Susie's father, "*mahal na mahal ka namin ng Nanay mo... mas mahalaga sa amin na lumaki kang mabuting tao... at buo ang tiwala sa sarili.*" (your Nanay and I love you very much...what's important to us is that you grow up to be a good person, believing in yourself), defines the aspirations of Susie's parents – that what is important is not the physical completeness but the wholeness of the being, the spirit, mind, and essence. Felix' parents also showed faith and encouragement by telling him and his teacher that Felix is very smart and not to mention, diligent, despite his learning disability. His mother also patiently reads to him and guides him to read independently every night.

Both stories also acknowledge and even celebrate the differences and diversity in every person's abilities. Susie's sister, Karina, points out that both her and Susie are good with their hands, that their talents are similar in that they do not necessarily need feet. This shows that despite Karina having feet, her talents are comparable to Susie's; that despite their physical differences, they both have skills to share: Karina draws and Susie writes.

The celebration of differences and the acceptance of one's weaknesses and capabilities were likewise evident in the exchanges between Maya and Felix, particularly when Maya said:

Talaga raw may mga batang tulad ko na kakaiba – na may kakaiba ring paraan kung paano natututo ng iba't ibang bagay, tulad ng pagbabasa. Kailangan ko lang tuklasin ang pinakaangkop na paraan para sa akin para matuto akong magbasa.

There are kids like me who are different – who have a different way of learning how to do things, like reading. I just have to discover the best way for me to learn how to read. (Translations provided in the book)

And with this statement Felix realized that all his classmates were a little different – that Dexter does not know how to ride a bike and that Max is terrible at computer games and that Tangke never learned to whistle.

In the end, after going through the journey with Susie and Felix, one realizes that the recognition of one's capabilities, the owning of one's shortcomings, and the acceptance of differences is not only empowering to persons with disabilities but also equally empowering to each and every one of us.

WORKS CITED

- Creswell, J. W. *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. New Jersey: Pearson Education International, 2008.
- Dyches, T.T., Prater, M.A., & Jenson, J. Portrayal of disabilities in Caldecott books. *TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus*, 2(5) Article 2. Accessed (s/f) from <http://escholarship.bc.edu/education/tecplus/vol2/iss5/art2>
- Garces-Bacsal, R.M. "Finding magic stories for children in the Philippines from 1991-2011". R.M. Garces-Bacsal and J.F. Hernandez, *Beyond folktales, legends and myths: A rediscovery of children's literature in Asia*. Singapore, AFCC Publications, 2013, pp. 90-100.
- Hernandez J.F. "The magic of words any journey through meaning" R.M. Garces-Bacsal and J.F. Hernandez, *Beyond folktales, legends and myths: A rediscovery of children's literature in Asia*. Singapore, AFCC Publications, 2013, pp. 101-108.
- Prater, M. A. Learning disabilities in children's and adolescent literature: how are characters portrayed? *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 26(1), 2003, S.P.I., pp. 47-62.
- Yenika-Agbaw, V. Reading disability in children's literature: Hans Christian Andersen's tales. *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, 5(1), 2011, S.P.I., pp. 91-107.
- <http://www.census.gov.ph/content/persons-disability-philippines-results-2010-census> (retrieved August 29, 2013)
- http://www.nscb.gov.ph/pressreleases/2013/PR-201304-NS1-04_poverty.asp