

Gender Relations in the Contemporary Retelling of the Tales of Grandmother *Basyang*: Going Beyond Gender Stereotypes and Gender Roles

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Children's picture books are considered by educators, parents, and other care givers to be an invaluable tool for developing children's language skills (Dickinson, et al., 2012). Children's picture books, unlike textbooks, can be acquired and read by children even when they are very young. So, even when children are not yet in school, they can get exposed to picture books and get started early with developing their language and communications skills.

However, language development is not the only function of children's picture books. It may be one of the goals of the writers, but consciously or unconsciously, the makers of these books contribute more than that to the young readers of the books. John Stephens (1992), a scholar in ideological critique of children's literature, states that children's books have an impulse to intervene in the lives of children. This can be considered as part of the didactic characteristic of children's books, but scholars like Stephens look at it as some sort of attempt to socialize children. Stephens explains:

“The use of story as an agent of socialization is a conscious and deliberate process. In practice it ranges from the didactic extremes of ‘bibliotherapy’, books which purport to help children confront and deal with specific problems in their lives, to books with no obvious intent to be exemplary. Every book has an implicit ideology, nevertheless, usually in the form of assumed social structures and habits of thought.”

(Stephens,1992, p.9)

This places children's books, then, in a very important place in ideological and cultural acquisition. And as such, children's picture books increasingly were used not only to entertain children but also to teach them good moral behaviors and practices.

1. 1 Feminism's Role in the Development of Children's Literature: Start of the Academic Interest in Children's Literature

During the 1970s, at the height of the Second Wave of Feminism, a study done by Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada, & Ross (1972) became one of pioneer studies on gender representation in children's literature. In this classic study entitled *Sex-Role Socialization in Picture Books for Pre-School Children*, the researchers looked at Caldecott Award winning books from 1967 to 1972.

Caldecott Award is a recognition given by the Association of Library Service to Children, a division of American Library Association to "the artist of the most distinguished American Picture Book for Children published in the United States" (American Library Association, 2022). The award-winning books were chosen for they are deemed the very best and of high quality. However, after tabulations of the number of male and female characters in the title, central roles, and illustrations, the authors found out that women are greatly underrepresented in these award-winning books. The researchers called this phenomenon "the invisible female" (Weitzman, et al., 1972, p. 1128). Even when female characters can be found in the books, they often play insignificant roles, remaining both inconspicuous and nameless (Weitzman, et al., 1972). The study also found that in books where women do appear, their characterization reinforces traditional sex-role stereotypes: boys are active while girls are passive; boys lead and rescue others while girls follow and serve others. This study also concluded that girls and women depicted in the chosen Caldecott Award winning books are dull, and received attention and praise for their attractiveness, while boys are admired for their achievements and cleverness.

After this first look at gender representation bias in children's books, several more studies looking at women portrayal in children's literature followed. Some looked at other format of children's picture books like children's coloring books (Fitzpatrick and McPherson, 2010), while others looked at the material culture used in picture books representing gender roles (Crabb and Bielawski,1994). These studies found out that picture books and coloring books studied contain

men and women with gender stereotypical roles and traits: women being passive, gentle, mostly doing indoor activities, and are often in possession of household items like kitchen utensils; men being active, mostly outdoor, and in possession of productive items like machines, industrial tools, etc.

Other studies followed the same methodology of Weitzman et. al, which is tabulating the number of women in the title, in the stories, and in the illustration. (McCabe., Fairchild, E., Grauerholz, L., Pescosolido, B. A., & Tope, D., 2011; Hamilton, M. C., Anderson, D., Broaddus, M., & Young, K., 2006; Williams Jr, J. A., Vernon, J., Williams, M. C., & Malecha, K., 1987). McCabe, Fairchild, Grauerholz, Pescosolido and Tope (2011)'s study found from their comprehensive look at picture books from the 1930s-2000s that there are disparities in gender representation and the pattern in representation shifts with the gender politics of certain times. For example, the picture books after the 1970s show lesser gender disparity compared to the books in the 50s and 60s. Hamilton, Anderson, Broaddus, and Young (2006), on the other hand, found out that modern picture books (1990s-2000s) continue to "provide nightly reinforcement that boys and men are more interesting and more important than are girls and women". Williams J.A., Williams M.C., and Malecha (1987) share the same findings in their study of picture books for pre-school children. In their research, Williams and others suggested that the girls and women depicted in the picture books are a dull and stereotyped lot.

As more studies looking at gender representation in literary text continue to expose biases and gender inequality in texts, contemporary writers tend to be more careful in their depiction of men and women. Writers for children's books are mindful of balancing the visibility of all genders in their stories, as well as their roles and attributes.

1. 2 Limitations of Fairy Tales and other Traditional Literature

The inclination to be mindful of the gender representations in children's literature, like picture books, are more easily implemented in contemporary stories that are set in a more modern time. This trend can be difficult to apply in stories that are more traditional. Traditional literature includes folktales, fairytales, myths, legends, and fables. These stories tend to be more time bound and must have some specific elements. The characters mostly include royalties, settings in feudal or medieval times, and practices including chivalry and other

patriarchal beliefs.

Traditional picture books or picture books of fairytales are therefore sites thought of to contain general gender biases because of their traditional origin. Studies like that of Fisher and Silber (2000) which look particularly on women portrayal in this sub-genre of children's literature demonstrate this claim. This research found that women in fairytales, even with lead characters, tend to be compliant, patient, and with beautiful outward appearances. As for those female characters who are self-serving, rebelling against societies' rules, and willful, fairytales usually portray them as evil, or witches and they usually meet their demise at the end of the story.

Perhaps because of this pattern in many fairytales and folktales, contemporary writers are now retelling some popular traditional fairytales and giving them an updated touch by rewriting the female characters to become more empowered and have more agency. However, not all of them are able to do so effectively because as Kuykendal and Sturm (2007) argue, they merely use role reversal, with the sole intention of disrupting the binary gender construction. The result is a fractured fairytale, instead of a feminist fairytale. A fractured fairy tale or folktale is a story that has been modified in such a way that it gives unexpected characterization, plot development, or contrary point of view (Kinsella, n.d.). This role reversal can be considered to reinforce gender stereotypes more as they assign the "weaker" traits associated with one gender to the other. The intention might be to give a different perspective, but it can also be instilling in the readers that some traits are "negative", instead of accepting them as part of being human. Examples of this "negative" traits are being soft-spoken or gentle, being associated with women. When role-reversal is done and they are assigned to men who are "saved" by stronger women, this only reinforces the gender stereotypes that being soft, or gentle is inferior to being strong or aggressive.

These pitfalls and limitations of traditional children's literature can be conquered. Some writers use the fantasy or magic element of traditional literature to reconfigure the representation of genders and show more contemporary gender roles and attributes. But others go beyond these and focus more on balanced power relations among genders. This change in perspective in representing gender in literary texts can be connected to what Connell (1987) says about gender identity formation. She says that gender

identity formation is more complex than just having the external factors like looks, attributes, and roles affecting the personality or identity of people. She reasons that thinking this way fails to recognize both the complexities of the person and the dimension of social power. In place of this thinking, Connell suggests to “treat gender formation as the effect of an encounter with power and necessity rather than normative prescription” (Connell, 2013, p.191). This study aligns with this thinking and as such will focus on gender relations among story characters and how power is manifested in them.

1. 3 The Research Subject: The Retelling Series of *The Tales of Grandmother Basyang*

Three retellings taken from the series of *The Tales of Grandmother Basyang* have been chosen by this study to show and illuminate the effective use of gender relations in fairy tales and folk tales. The three retellings were chosen because of a common theme among them, marriage between parties of different power positions. However, before the three retellings have been picked out, the whole series of *The Tales of Grandmother Basyang* had been selected because the series of *Grandmother Basyang* has a long historical background that makes it a major part of the Philippine Children’s Literature.

The series or *Mga Kuwento ni Lola Basyang* originally written by Severino Reyes are made up of 400 traditional Filipino stories inspired by folktales around the world. Traditional Filipino literature is a literary genre, that’s just like the western traditional literary counterpart, started in the oral traditions (Traditional Literature, 2015). The series of *Grandmother Basyang* are considered to fall under the traditional Filipino tales’ category despite being influenced by the Western literature because they feature fictional characters found in traditional Filipino myths, fables, trickster tales, folktales, and tall tales.

The three retellings in this study are part of the 400 original stories written as part of a weekly magazine section of *Liwayway Magazine* in 1925. *Liwayway Magazine* is the first all-Tagalog magazine in the Philippines and is the cornerstone of a chain for vernacular weekly periodicals in the country (Lent, 1953). *Liwayway Magazine* mostly printed fiction and in this magazine, the series of *The Tales of Grandmother Basyang* started to be shared to the reading public. And since around the period of 1920s, weekly magazines are getting more popular in the Philippines, *The Tales of Grandmother Basyang* started to be known

among the Filipino readers.

Despite the strong presence of *The Tales of Grandmother Basyang* in the Philippine popular culture in its early day, there was a short time that they had been forgotten because of American pop culture influx in the Philippines (like Disney movies and American literary books). The stories found their way back again in the consciousness of the Filipino people in the 1940s after the World War II, in comic form. Then, the stories had been made into movies, to radio dramatization, to television shows, to musicals and ballet performances, and to its most recent resurrection, in picture books.¹ The resilience and continued relevance of this series make *Grandmother Basyang* a household name and the stories are considered cultural legacy. Parents, educators, and care givers often use these stories to read to children, even at a young age.

Popular culture also makes references to *Grandmother Basyang* and helps sustain interest of the younger generation in this series of stories. This strong presence in the Philippine society makes it an interesting site for exploration of gender representation and gender relations.

It should be noted that even though the subject of this study are the contemporary retellings, the original stories are not included because the focus is not how the tales have been revised or retold, but the gender relations among the story characters. Another reason is that the original stories that came in the 1920s are already out of print and are not in picture book form. The contemporary retellings are the selected subjects because they are the ones that are accessible to the Filipino children, both in the physical and textual/visual sense.

1. 4 Purpose of the Study

This study hopes to show that traditional literature like the retellings of *The Tales of Grandmother Basyang*, originally thought as sites of biased gender stereotypes and gender roles, have the potential to become a place of empowered representation of women through balanced gender relations.

This study hopes to achieve this by giving a background and context of the topic in Chapter 1. Chapter 2 lays out the existing studies on *The Tales of Grandmother*, gives a brief description of the Method of Analysis, and explains the use of theory of gender relations and power continuum as analytical framework and tool in discussing and analyzing the gender representations in

the picture books. Chapter 3 shows the retelling summaries and analysis. Finally, Chapter 4, the conclusion, gives a summing up of the study.

Chapter 2: Tools of Analysis

2.1 Review of Literature

Although the series is a key figure in the Philippine Children's literature, not so many studies have been done on the series. And of those that are published, only few touched on the gender aspect of the series.

One of the few studies was done by Katrina Gutierrez (2009). The history of the Philippine literature is very much connected to our colonial past and the stories of Lola Basyang are often thought to have post-colonial literary attributes. In Gutierrez' study, she refutes the label of post-colonial text on the series and calls them glocalised text instead. Glocalisation is a literary movement that appropriates the global literature and localize them, taking the foreign element and giving them local flavor. Gutierrez focuses on examination of glocal manifestation in the retellings and *The Tales of Grandmother Basyang* by Christine Bellen. She suggests that the glocalisation process done in the retellings contributes to the continued reconfiguration of Filipino identity. In her discussion of how this happens, she touches on women characters of the series and how they show non-stereotypical gender attributes, like warrior-like, independent, and strong-willed. This glocalised women representation, Gutierrez claims, contribute to the identity building of the Filipino children.

Another study that touches on the gender aspect of the series is that of Garces-Bacsal, Tupas, and Hernandez (2016). This study, just like that of Gutierrez, does not really focus on gender representation in the retellings of *The Tales of Grandmother Basyang*, but discusses it in part as it explores the main claim of the authors. The study puts forward that idea that the retellings of the series of Lola Basyang are subversive and decolonizing as the characters and plots show symbolic disruptions of the established system of the colonial heritage of the Philippines. One of the disruptions given are the stronger representation of women as independent, headstrong, as opposed to the colonial concept of Filipino women as meek and weak.

Both studies discuss the progressive representation of women in the retellings but talk heavily on the images of women in the stories. They took the divergent

image of strong women in some stories from the series and relate them to subversion to the normative image of feminine modest women of western fairytales. Both studies applaud the retellings for breaking away from the stereotypical ways and roles of women. These two studies did not inquire on the relationships between and among the characters. However, as Connell (1987) points out, breaking apart from the gender roles that have been prescribed by the society is not enough. What might be needed in liberating the women in their oppressive situation calls for more than being presented with a range of roles that women and men can have. What might be needed might be more than role reversal or showing that men and women can do most things in the same way or capacity. Liberating women in their oppressive situation calls for more than that. It calls for the examination of their relations, for this is where power lies, and where power is involved, oppression comes as well. In this study, the focus will be exactly that, the discussion and analysis of the gender relations between the characters in the retelling of *The Tales of Grandmother Basyang*.

2. 2 Method of Analysis

To find out the gender relations among the characters in the picture books retellings selected for this study, critical content or text analysis is used. Studies involving literary texts often use the method of literary analysis which focuses on what the authors do such as character development, symbolism, narrative patterns, etc. (Galda, Ash, and Cullinan, 2000). This study departs from that and focuses on critical content analysis. Critical content analysis focuses on what the text is about, considering content from a particular theoretical perspective such as gender (Beach, et. al, 2009). This critical content analysis is carried out in the study by putting the summaries and analysis next to each other to make comparisons, references, and discussion easier to understand.

Also, in the analysis and discussion of the retellings, both the texts(words) and the illustrations will be used but only the term texts will be used for the purpose of consistency.

2. 3 Analytical Framework

The retellings of *The Tales of Grandmother Basyang* are discussed and analyzed in this study using the guidance of the Theory of Gender Relations and a power positioning tool called the Power Continuum.

A. Theory of Gender Relations

In the realm of feminist scholarship, the idea that there is a connection between gender and power is not something unfamiliar (Oldersma & Davis, 1991). This is because of the pervasiveness of gender inequality and women subordination in the life of many, if not all, people. One of the early feminists who explored this connection is Kate Millet who introduced the notion of sexual politics and the idea that relations between sexes could be defined as a political issue (Millet, 1969). Going along this shift on focus on the relations among genders is another feminist thinker, Nancy Chodorow. She argues that gender is a theoretical construct rather than a natural order. As such, the locus of sexual asymmetries could be shifted from nature to social relations, in which gender relations a big part of (Oldersma & Davis, 1991). Another sociologist who argues in the same vein is the feminist sociologist Raewyn Connell who thinks that the inadequate conceptualization of gender tenders gender relations as a more viable site in explaining gender inequality. She also thinks that gender formation and gender identity are more than the internalization of norms and societal prescriptions because these norms and social prescriptions vary and thinking that individuals just passively take in these norms and prescriptions undermine the agency of the individual (Connell, 1987).

Following the thinking of these feminist thinkers, gender relations is being used as the analytical framework of this study because it assumes that if gender relations in the society is a site to focus on to explore and analyze inequality, it can also be used to explore, discuss, and analyze gender inequality in children's literature. This study uses the theory of gender relations to discuss and analyze the gender representation in the contemporary retellings of the stories of *Lola Basyang* because a balanced gender relations or the relations of power among story characters could also mean a more equitable gender representation.

Literature is made up of gendered characters in relations to one another. In these relationships, gender identity can be gleaned by the young readers. The fictional relations may be too simplistic or far from the real structure of the gendered society the children of today are part of. However, as simplistic as children's literature's relations are, they still mirror struggles and conflicts, and just like real struggles and conflicts in real life, there is no standard outcome.

The outcomes can change due to the conditions that give rise to them. So, there can be many different outcomes. From these outcomes, more empowered and balanced gender identities can be derived. The potential of shaking up the existing gender order in which women (and other marginalized genders) are oppressed can be realized.

B. Power Continuum

As mentioned above, when dealing with relations, power is always involved. And discussion of power should be more than the discussion of the dominating and oppressed only. Power relations is not limited to this power dichotomy. For this reason, this study will use the tool of Power Continuum, an analytical tool adapted from Critical Multicultural Analysis of Botelho and Rudman (2009). This power positioning tool helps locate how power is exercised, circulated, negotiated, and reconstructed in a story (Botelho and Rudman, 2009).

Power Continuum has different power positions because it assumes that power between and among genders are fluid and changing in different parts of the story. These different points or positions are “Domination”, “Collusion”, “Resistance”, and “Agency” (Botelho and Rudman, 2009). When examining the retellings, the words and actions of the characters will be looked at according to these positions. This will help make the relations of the characters more visible for interpretation.

The first position in the continuum is that of “Domination”. It is the exercise of power over social circumstances. This position’s attributes include dehumanization, victimization, imposition from external sources, and unequal power based on race, class, and gender. Sometimes, the domination occurs de facto because of existing social constructs and systems. Sometimes, it is interpersonal and used to manipulate the behavior of the particular individuals. It is always dehumanizing: unequal voice, participation, decision-making, and access (Ibid, p.118).

The second position is “Collusion”. This position differs from domination, mostly in the characteristic of internalized oppression or domination. Collusion may be conscious or unconscious. Colluders remain silent even when they have knowledge of wrongdoing. Towards the end of the continuum of collusion, colluders become conscious of their power to take action, while conspiring with

dominant ideologies to gain power and gain agency. Domination and collusion can be conscious and/or unconscious. Resistance and agency must be conscious. (Ibid, p.119).

The third position is “Resistance”. Resistance is active questioning; it is the quintessential power construct of poststructuralism (Ibid, 119). It is the power position that questions why the Domination is happening. Like a typical poststructuralist, a resister would interrogate how the Dominator came to be in his power position and who/what allowed him/her to be there. It is not haphazard nor purely reactive. “It is an unwillingness to be universalized and essentialized. It is by definition oppositional to imposition and coercive power. It is speculative. It challenges discourses” (Ibid, 119). Bronwyn Davies claims resistance as the “shaking up” by new discourses (Davies, 2000).

The last position is “Agency”. Agency is initiation and power. Agency ideally resides with all classes, genders, and ethnicities. Agency is all-inclusive and complex. An agent can be an agent as well as another subject position. Being able to read multiple discourses is part of agency, as well as holding contradictory discourses (Botelho and Rudman, 2009, p.119). Botelho and Rudman quote and agree with Bronwyn Davies (2000) that “agency is never freedom from discursive constitution or constructedness of self but the capacity to recognize the constitution and to resist, subvert, and change the discourses themselves through which one is being constituted” (Davies, 2000, p.67).

Chapter 3: Retelling Summaries and Analysis

The three retellings chosen for this study are *The Maiden Who Defeated the King*, *The Prince of the Birds*, and *The Prince with Long Nose*. These three *Grandmother Basyang* retellings have been chosen from the twenty picture books in the contemporary series because of the similarities in the main conflict of the story: marriages/finding love. Marriages and finding love are staple of fairytales and other traditional stories, but these three retellings are picked out because of the way the female characters relate to other characters of other genders in addressing this issue. These different relations will be discussed and analyze in this section.

3. 1 *The Lady Who Defeated the King*

(Summary)

In the Kingdom of Tondo, there was a lady named Sharay who was famous for her beauty. She was every man's dream girl, including the son of the Datu Abdul. Sharay also liked the Prince but Sharay was a daughter of a slave, and the law of their land prohibited the marriage of two people from different classes.

The Prince told his father that he loved Sharay not just for her beauty but also for her kindness and intelligence. However, Datu Abdul still refused to let them be together and devised a plan to break up the two by testing Sharay's intelligence.

He came up with many tests for Sharay, telling her that if she would pass those impossible tests, he would let her marry his son. The king gave her three impossible tasks, but Sharay was able to outsmart the king in each of those tasks. In the end, he allowed Sharay to marry his son, the prince, for he knew that she would be able to help his son rule the kingdom someday with her intelligence.

(Analysis)

Sharay, the female lead in this story, is a great example of a female character in the "Resistance" position in the power Continuum. Sharay knew her position in society, a child of a slave, but she was also cognizant of her potentials and capabilities. She was aware of how famous she was in kingdom because of her beauty, but she also knew that she had good judgement and reasoning. This showed when she confidently accepted the difficult quizzical tasks given to her by the King/Datu. She actively used what she had in her disposal, her wit and logic, to resist the impositions of society that one should only marry within her own class (she was a known beauty in the kingdom and could marry anyone except for the Datu's son). In the end, she proved that she was more than what her beauty reputation and social position was, and was able to break down the normative rule of marrying within one's class only.

The Prince, just like Sharay, was also resisting the existing social imposition that he only get to marry women of royal lineage. He was against it, and he made his resistance known to his father and to Sharay. However, unlike Sharay, he wasn't the one who was directly being challenged so his resisting gestures were not as 'grand' as Sharay. His resistance was not showcased as something

that used superb thinking. Contrary to that, he was shown as someone who was lovestruck and constantly dreaming of being with Sharay. Nevertheless, he didn't take the refusal of his father sitting down and that still put him in the "Resistance" position. In the end, he and Sharay were able to have their way of being together.

The Datu/King, on the other hand, was an archetypal figure of a character in "Domination" position. He was opposed to the wish of his son and Sharay to get married, so he used power over them. He gave Sharay tasks that he knew would be impossible to be accomplished. Fortunately, Sharay knew ways to counter the impossibility of those tasks. In the end, he lost to Sharay so he conceded and allowed them to be together, admitting that Sharay would help his son in governing the kingdom in the future. This adjustment of the King/Datu moved him to the "Agency" position, where he was willing to share power with Sharay and his son, the Prince, to rule over the Kingdom.

In this story, the main dominating power was represented by the King. When the King yielded to Sharay, this was a big gesture and showed that Sharay's (and the Prince's) resistance triumphed. In this way, this retelling demonstrates that femininity, wit, and persistence to defy an unfair law can triumph and win over restrictions by the society. This retelling demonstrates that even a dominated-over character can rise up, resist, and eventually gain Agency, and this movement can be achieved even with while having female stereotypical traits of softness and beauty.

3. 2 *The Prince with Long Nose*

(Summary)

There was once a King who was in love with a beautiful princess. He wanted to marry her, but the princess kept refusing him, saying that she wasn't ready to marry anybody yet. The King consulted a wise hermit as to how he could convince the princess to marry him. The hermit told him that the princess was actually under the spell of a giant disguised as the princess' pet cat. The only way to break the spell and free the princess to marry her true love was to step on the cat's tail until it loses its power. The King did exactly what the hermit told him to do. He stepped on the cat's tail for as long as he could even when the cat was clawing and fighting him. The cat turned into a giant and cursed the King and the princess. He cursed the couple to have a child with a long

nose, just like a cat's tail.

After the King and the princess got married, they had a child. The child had a long nose as the evil giant predicted. The King and the Queen felt bad for him and to protect him, they only hired people with long and strange-looking noses. The prince grew up then thinking that most people looked like him, except for his own parents with short noses. However, one day, he was able to escape the watchful eyes of his guards and was able to go out of the palace. There he saw how most people looked. He also saw a beautiful princess who was taking a stroll. Sadly, the common people who finally got to see how he looked like made fun of him. The beautiful princess heard the mean words said to him and invited the prince to walk with her.

The King and the Queen heard about this kind gesture of the princess and decided to pay the princess' family a visit to personally thank her. However, in their kingdom, the Prince with a Long Nose was also made fun of. The Princess took pity of him and touched his nose, and with this magic touch of the princess, the long nose came off. The curse of the evil giant was lifted by the touch of the princess.

(Analysis)

Most of the characters in this story are dominated over at different points in the story, whether the characters were direct holders of power or not (most of the characters are royalties so they had power over the subjects of their land). However, most of them resisted their way out of the domination, some resorting to the use of authoritarian power or magical power.

One of the characters in the story who was dominated over despite being a holder of power himself was the King. In the beginning of the story, the King wanted to marry the then Princess but couldn't because of an evil spell on her. He was dominated over by this evil spell, but he found a way to resist this. He used magic to defeat the evil giant who had the Princess under spell and action showed that he moved from being dominated over to the "Resistance" position to "Agency" position when he was able to finally break the spell, free the Princess from the enchantment, and marry the Princess. In the middle of the story, the King, joined by the Queen, once again were dominated over by the 'curse' of the evil giant of having a son with a long nose. The King and the Queen showed some resistance to the power of the evil spell by making some changes around their son (like changing the portraits of their family members

into people with long noses) but their actions to ‘resist’ the power of the curse and the judgement of people were not enough to liberate their son. They were more like quick fixes.

The removal of all the painted pictures of their family, the hiring of palace workers with strange looking noses, and the limitation to go out for the prince all just shielded the Prince with Long Nose to realize how different he was, instead of making him realize that being different was okay. Their way of resisting is not as empowering as the actions of another character in the story who was in the “Resistance” position: the Princess of the other Kingdom. The Princess of the other kingdom resisted using more “active” gestures, such as telling off the people who were making fun of the prince’s appearance. She also invited him to walk with her to save him from the jeering and judging eyes of his kingdom on one time that the Prince got out of the palace and was exposed to the people of his kingdom. Another big gesture from the Princess of the other kingdom was her touch. She didn’t fear the ‘backlash’ that her touch might give her, considering that the prince’s nose was the one part of his body that was strange. When the Prince with Long Nose was made fun again when he visited the kingdom of the Princess, the Princess made a big gesture of physically touching his nose to show everybody that his nose is not strange. As a result, the spell was broken.

In this story, the readers can see that there is a balance in the display of ‘saving’ and ‘being saved’ relationship. Both genders in this story were ‘dominated over’ by magical elements. The first one was the beautiful princess who was under the spell of the evil giant, and the prince with long nose who was cursed by the same evil giant. However, we can see that this retelling didn’t make use of the typical “men save women” route only. Instead, it showed that both men and women could save each other. Women could save men, just like how the Princess broke the spell of the long nose of the Prince. Men could also save women, just like how the King broke the enchantment of the beautiful princess in the beginning of the story.

3.3 *The Prince of Birds*

(Summary)

In the kingdom of Tongkian, there lived a princess named Singsing who was known for her kindness and love for the common people. She liked to walk and

mingle with them. She was well-loved and everybody wished for her to have a great partner in life.

One day, the King, told her that it was time for her to get married. Princess Singsing told her father that she would like to marry her lover. The King didn't know anybody who had a romantic relationship with the princess, so he was happily surprised to know that she already had a lover. However, when Princess Singsing finally introduced her lover, her father was shocked because the princess' lover was a bird! Although he was the Prince of the Birds, the King still couldn't believe that his daughter was in love with a bird.

Princess Singsing told the King that her beloved bird could turn into a human being if he wanted to. Sadly, the King still disapproved and refused to let Princess Singsing marry him. At this same time, the Kingdom of Tongkian was besieged with many problems. Princess Singsing and the Prince of the Birds helped the King solve those problems, hoping to change the King's mind about their marriage. The King initially agreed but he changed his mind after the problems were solved. Because of this, the Prince of Birds got disappointed and declared to the King that he initially planned to turn himself into a man had the King allowed their marriage. However, since the King kept going back to his words, he would rather stay as bird who honors his words than become a man like the King who goes back to his words. After hearing this statement, Princess Singsing decided to stay with the Prince of Birds forever, than stay in the Palace. And with her declaration, Princess Singsing magically turned into a beautiful colorful bird and flew away with the Prince of the Birds.

(Analysis)

This story started with most main characters in the "Agency" position. Princess Singsing was free and could do many things and didn't experience any impositions from his king father or other people. This was clearly shown in the ways she interacted with the people of their kingdom. She could walk among the common people with no chaperone. She chatted with them and was not prevented from mingling with them despite her being a lady of the palace. However, in the middle of the story, this freedom didn't last. When Princess Singsing introduced her lover to her father, the King, was very shocked and angry. He was shocked because the lover of her beloved daughter was a bird! He was the Prince of the Birds but was a bird, nevertheless. He was angry because her daughter, Princess Singsing, chose a bird for a lover when she

could have chosen anybody from the kingdom. As a result, Princess Singsing moved to “Resistance” position from “Agency” position. Being in the “Resistance” position, Princess Singsing didn’t let the domination of her father stop her from being with her lover. She resisted and actively sought ways to convince her father to be with her lover. She actively bargained with her father, with the help of the crisis that besought the kingdom, like marauding evil giants.

These actions of the princess fully demonstrate how Rudman and Botelho (2009) described resistance. Princess Singsing resisted power by actively questioning the oppressive decision of the King and by showing unwillingness to be like other princesses who marry their own kind.

Sadly, she couldn’t fully convince the King. So, as a final act of defiance and resistance, she chose to become a bird herself and flew away with the Prince of the Birds. This final act of Princess Singsing freed her and moved her back to “Agency” position. Princess Singsing’s decision to give up being a princess and a human being so she could be with her lover put her back to the “Agency” position in the power continuum.

The King, on the other hand, started out in the “Agency” position just like Princess Singsing, but moved in the “Domination” position from the middle and stayed there until the end of the story. The King was initially just and was not a tyrant or a ruler. He was also a loving father who didn’t put limitations to Princess Singsing’s movements or decisions. However, this position changed in the middle of the story when Princess Singsing finally introduced to him her bird of a lover. He was shocked with the idea of having a bird for a prospective son-in-law and could not accept the absurdity of it. He was overwhelmed by this emotion and his feelings moved him from “Agency” position to the “Domination” position. He was so strongly opposed to the marriage of her daughter with a bird that he lost his trustworthiness and went back on his words of letting them get married if they helped in solving the problems affecting the kingdom. He refused to agree to the marriage even though the Prince of the Birds repeatedly helped save the kingdom from many problems that besought it.

It can be argued that the King’s actions were done out of his fatherly love and hope to have Princess Singsing a happy life. It could be seen as benevolent domination, and this came with his role both as a King of their kingdom and a father to the princess, but it was still power over them. He refused to allow

them to get married to the point of going back to his words. He used manipulation and lies to get his way, and these are usual strategies of people occupying the “Domination” position (Botelho and Rugman, 2009). In the end, this led to the loss of trust of his daughter and the Prince of Birds.

The Prince of Birds was a magical creature who had ability to change into human if he wished to. The readers didn’t get to see a detailed description of his character, but the fact that the princess fell in love with him could be used to infer that the princess saw in him some good qualities. This inference could be confirmed when he helped the King and the Princess to solve the problems that set upon the kingdom. Despite him being a bird, he had a good romantic relationship with Princess Singsing. This shows that during their relationship, he was in the “Agency” position. He felt no restrictions despite him being of different species from the princess. However, when the King refused to have his marriage with the princess, just like the princess, the Prince of Birds lost his agency as he could not freely do what he wished to do, that is to marry the princess. He quietly questioned the Kings decisions and actively sought ways to earn his approval by helping him protect the kingdom. This active pursuit of what he thinks was fair put him in the “Resistance” position in the power continuum. However, at the end, when the King continued go back on his words, he decided to seize back his agency and declared that he won’t turn himself into human anymore for humans don’t honor their words. This set him free and took his power back.

In this story, the gender relations among the characters relay that both women and men have a say in how they live their lives and can actively work to keep it if other people would prevent them from doing so. This story then shows an empowering kind of relationship, for both genders, and challenges the patriarchal ideology of fathers deciding what would be best for their children.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

In this study, the characters in the selected stories from the series are discussed and analyzed using the lens of gender relations and power. Gender relations is a rather new perspective of looking at women and men (and other genders too) in the children’s literature and representation in general. While women visibility and gender stereotyping in children’s literature are sites to

explore when searching for places of inequality in literature, visibility and stereotypical representations are not the only areas where gender inequality is being manifested. The way men and women relate and interact with each other in the stories like fairy tales, and the way power is acquired, contested, or lost, show a clear and effective picture of the presence of gender inequality.

Power holders, both in a dominating position or collaborative position (agency), can show continued prevalence or emerging contestation of patriarchy or male domination. Power, in a patriarchal society, is usually associated with men, so when women characters show agency and power in the picture book retellings, this is seen as an act of breaking down the oppressive domination of men in the narratives. This breaking down of the system is shown in the three selected retellings of *The Tales of Grandmother Basyang*. The women characters in the retellings show that they have agency in choosing to marry the person they want to be with, can hold on to this agency position despite problems, or move into agency from a dominated-over power position. Marriages in traditional literature usually are social practices that are structured with the power advantage of men (like princes and kings choosing and taking their wives). The three retellings in this study show that it doesn't have to be this way. Women characters can destabilize traditional contexts by showing behaviors that break restrictions. Women characters can initiate the physical contact and break the spell (*The Prince with Long Nose*); they can choose a lover of different species (*The Prince of Birds*); and they can outwit and out-talk a King who set up difficult tasks (*The Lady Who Defeated the King*).

The stereotypical representation of women in traditional literature of being subjected to societies and men's rules (like princesses would need to follow their fathers and women slaves would need to follow everybody) might have not been eliminated as the retellings need to keep its traditional contexts and character features. However, the retellings were able to go around the traditional female stereotypes and empower the women characters by creating plots that give women agency and ability to change their power positions in relation to the dominant gender in the stories. In this way, the three contemporary *Grandmother Basyang* retellings provide a course of action for traditional story writers to create usually disempowered genders (most often the women and other non-male genders) to have more power, control of their lives, and more equitable power relations with other genders.

In this study, I laid out the power positions of the different story characters to show how effectively written decisions and actions that balanced out power relation among genders can challenge gender inequality, gender roles, and stereotypes. The discussion and analysis I laid here is a template that can be applied to other traditional literary genres (like fables, tall tales, or myths) and can be used as a conversation starter with readers that can hopefully lead to a discursive analysis of the gender relations in literature and in life.

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Notes

- 1 *The Tales of Grandmother Basyang* has taken many different forms. Its first form, written by its original author Severino Reyes in 1925, was in a form of short stories serialized in a weekly magazine called *Liwayway*. In 1949, Pedrito Reyes, the son of Severino Reyes, revived the tales in comic book form and appeared in the early issues of *Tagalog Klasiks*. In 1958, *Sampaguita Pictures* used one story from the comic-form of *The Tales of Lola Basyang* and made them into a movie. A few decades after, in 1985, another movie was produced based on this series. This time, it was a trilogy and was produced by Regal Films. In 1997, a renowned poet and literary critic (Bienvenido Lumbera) sifted through the original manuscripts of Severino Reyes and chose 30 stories and rewrote them in a book anthology form. This book anthology placed the series of stories of Severino Reyes among the acclaimed Filipino literary pieces. In 2006, Anvil Publishing House asked Christine Bellen to make a picture book out of the stories Reyes. After that, PETA also sought the help of Christine Bellen to help produce a musical/stage play based on the picture book series. In 2007, GMA Television bought the rights to televise the story series. (Almario, et al., 1994).

Abstract

Gender Relations in the Contemporary Retelling of the *Tales of Grandmother Basyang*: Going Beyond Gender Stereotypes and Gender Roles

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Since the start of the Second Wave of Feminism in the 1970s, several studies examining the extent of women's presence and portrayal in children's literature have been conducted. These studies pointed out the imbalance in the representation of gender in children's literature, like picture books. However, increasing the visibility of female characters in children's literature and portraying less stereotypical attributes are not the only ways to better represent women. Another way, and perhaps the more effective way, especially in traditional stories like folktales and fairytales, is to have equal power relations with other genders in the narratives. This study hopes to bring gender relations into picture as an effective way to equally represent genders in literary texts. This study looks at three selected Filipino picture books from the series *The Tales of Grandmother Basyang* originally written by Severino Reyes and retold by Christine Bellen. The selected books showcase that gender relation is a stronger and a more viable way of representing women in children's literature, specifically in traditional narratives. The stories will be examined using the lens of gender relations and a discussion on why this approach to gender representation is stronger than just breaking down gender stereotypes and gender roles will be given. The discussion and analysis will be informed by the analytical framework of Theory of Gender Relations and the analytical tool of Power Continuum.