

## Reconstructing the Wilderness: Finding Identity, Culture and Values in Filipino Children's Literature

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### Abstract

*In children's literature, more specifically in the Philippine setting, the symbolism of wilderness and the elements therein constitutively influence the intrinsic wildness of children. The literary wilderness becomes an exploratory platform where the stages of development that children undergo are better understood – from exploring childhood freedom to encountering a sense of self and culture. Coming from this, the research particularly focuses on the effect of the 'essential wildness' on children as facilitated by the images of the wilderness and its elements in Philippine children's literature. The notion of wilderness (or wildness) ultimately shifts the idea of losing one's self in danger to a sense of self-discovery and individuation. To concretize and show the effects of one's encounter with the natural world through environmental children's literature, this study presents an ecocritical reading of the best short stories of Severino Reyes in his Lola Basyang collection in order to grasp a conception of wilderness within the context and culture of the Filipino identity. This analysis will also attempt to redirect the general understanding of the concept of inner wildness, reconstructing it from an articulation of danger and peril towards a creative exploration of one's growth and sensibilities.*

From nursery rhymes to bedtime stories, literature constitutively influences and shapes young minds. Childhood serves as an exploratory platform wherein children experience the Outside (a world beyond their homes) and the Other (traditionally, people different from the family) through literature. As such, it plays a crucial role in the development of children, acting primarily as a pedagogical tool to help further children's social and cultural awareness and mentality. Children's literature provides "a unique window into the pervasive values and deeply-held beliefs of a culture" (Apol 90). This resonates particularly in the Philippines, a country which is intricately linked to the environment, where the literary texts produced are highly reflective of the nation's values and practiced traditions. One major idea that is often highlighted in Philippine literature, even in children's stories, is the importance of human interaction with the environment, wherein "humanity [as] a part of nature, interven[es] and participat[es] in an ecological system" (Walls 17). Philippine children's literature recognizes how important the environment is for the Filipino people and thus incorporates this in its running narrative of how "human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting and affected by it" (Glotfelty xix). This enlightens children of "the impact of the metaphors of nature presented to young readers and of how these metaphors are likely to shape ecological realities in the future" (Lenz 160). It "seeks to explicitly inform and direct children's understandings of and responses to the environment" (Apol 92). In essence, children's informed

perception of nature expresses a kind of ecological coming-of age, putting forth and practicing the right values and attitudes towards natural environments.

This study will focus on the influence of nature on humanity and vice versa, specifically through the existence of wilderness as a symbol for the unconscious and as a medium for the essential 'wildness' represented in children's literature. An examination of two of the best short stories of Severino Reyes from the *Mga Kwento ni Lola Basyang* collection (translated to *The Stories of Lola Basyang*), namely "Pandakotiyong" (2005) and "The Prince of Birds" (2005), can illustrate a general overview of how the wilderness (or 'wildness') and its elements affect the growth and awareness in children, in terms of their own maturity and their environmental sensibilities. Throughout the years, the conception of wilderness has been attached to danger and peril, wherein the idea of 'wildness' resonates. However, what many fail to notice is that this 'wildness' has the capacity to drive people towards creative exploration, into a kind of perceived openness towards the world. As David Almond articulates, "the need for wilderness [or wildness] is in all of us, especially in children. And growing up is to become civilized, but maybe to become really civilized we need to acknowledge and explore the wilderness that is inside us and not just the wilderness outside" (110). The focus of this research is particularly on the effect of the necessary 'wildness' on children as enabled by the symbol of wilderness in Philippine children's literature. The notion of wilderness (or wildness) as described and used in the short stories is ultimately reconfigured from being a site of estrangement and fear into a potential space for self-discovery and individuation.

This reading is presented with ecocriticism being generally defined as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xviii). Looking closely at this literary discipline, ecocriticism analyzes both how the environment is used to situate the text and its narrative as well as the cultural metaphors and mythic constructs that nature brings into literature and language. Negotiating the interrelationships between the human and non-human elements of the ecosphere, ecocriticism posits that "literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, and ideas interact" (xix).

Through time, environmental concepts and their elements utilized in literature dynamically expand in terminology and in meaning as the disciplinary boundaries of ecocriticism still try to find the right foothold in the field of literary ecology. As such, this paper initially attempts to trace how the wilderness is understood and employed as an environmental trope throughout the years. Traditionally, the wilderness literally represented untamed landscapes. This conception also figuratively highlighted the contrast between culture and nature. The term wilderness dates back to the agricultural revolution, some 10,000 years ago. It emerged then because "it is only with settled agriculture that a distinction is made between cultivated and uncultivated land, savage and settled, domesticated and wild animals" (5). The context of this emergence of wilderness may be connected to its old definitions. For example, "[i]n Hebrew, one definition of wilderness is unsown land, in ancient Greek it meant not cultivated and, in Latin, barren waste. In English, the expression may come from the old English term, *wildeoren*, referring to wild beasts" (5). In other derivations of the term, wilderness may also be associated with "the word Anglo-Saxon 'wildeoren', where 'deoren' or beasts existed beyond the boundaries of cultivation" (Garrard 60). Of all these, the principal state of wilderness that comes into view, as transformed continually according to its significance to human interaction, is the concept of 'wildness'.

With the implication that 'wildness' brings, chaos and danger become associated with wilderness. Wilderness, then, is deemed to be an uncharted space, "something to be feared, an area of waste and

desolation” (Short 6). This conception of wilderness turns it into a symbol of savagery, a space where evils lurk and dwell within the keep of dark woods.

When Elizabethans spoke of wilderness they meant not a barren waste, but a dense uncultivated wood, like Shakespeare’s Forest of Arden, ‘a desert inaccessible under the shade of melancholy boughs’. A mid-seventeenth century poetical dictionary suggests as appropriate epithets for a forest: ‘dreadful’, ‘gloomy’, ‘wild’, ‘desert’, ‘uncouth’, ‘melancholy’, ‘unpeopled’ and ‘beast-haunted’. (Thomas 194)

This notion of wilderness nurses the fear of wilderness primarily because people continue to associate a kind of sinister presence with this environmental setting. Accordingly, the wilderness may have acquired its reputation of being an untamed space from how it is consistently illustrated in traditional and contemporary literature. From folklore to modern-day narratives, the wilderness is constantly used as a space for dangerous adventures, filled with predatory beasts and dark creatures. Characters ordinarily find themselves lost within its shadowed forest, walking along unguarded dirt paths, surrounded not only by entangled trees but also by dwellings of wolves and bears, of trolls and giants. Wilderness, in its mystery and darkness, reinforces and embodies the wild: a concept that is relevant to the Filipino landscape as well.

Wilderness is infamously identified in literature because of its influence on individuals who have already been exposed to it. “As a symbol of the wild, the untamed, the wilderness [becomes] a symbolic representation of the id” (Short 9). The id is the part of the psyche where lawlessness resides, a realm where the principle of instinct and impulse dominates. It is the dark, unorganized area of a person’s character that people refuse to submit to, much like how people experience the metaphor of wilderness. Thus, “[t]he wilderness represents the uncivilized, the untamed” (9). Humans’ innate fear of the strange and the unknown prevents them from confronting the chaos and disorder of the id. As presented in literature and art, “the wilderness has been seen as a dark elemental force, an atavistic element, the Jungian shadow of the individual. Wilderness becomes an environmental metaphor for the dark side of the psyche” (9). This suggests that any contact with the wilderness requires setting culture aside and letting basic instinctual drives direct one’s character. It traps a person in confusion of his own unconscious and requires him/her to tread only on safe and familiar grounds, else the threat of being lost within the disorder arises. This fear keeps people from venturing into the unknown, into their unconscious and into their own wilderness, preventing them from fully appreciating the liberty and the diversity that ‘wildness’ brings.

But what does it really mean to be within the wilderness? How does one experience and appreciate the wild? These are perhaps the questions that helped Severino Reyes concretize and show the effects of humanity’s relationship with the natural world. He has effectively crystallized the context and culture of the Filipino identity within his signification of the wilderness in his narratives.

Severino Reyes (February 11, 1861 – September 15, 1942) was one of the acclaimed giants of the Tagalog arts and literature of the early 20th century. He was a Filipino writer, playwright, and director of plays. In writing his children’s stories, he used the pen name Lola Basyang, which carries overtones of an old grandmother who loves telling stories to her grandchildren. Through the voice of the storyteller Lola Basyang, he wove stories of fantasy and ordinary life into a children’s literature collection, reflective of Filipino human character (Gutierrez 165). Most, if not all, of the Lola Basyang stories were meant to teach moral lessons to children, including how the natural environment figures in the daily life of the Filipinos. Using nature as a backdrop for his modernized fairy tales and myths replete with adventures and mysteries, his employment of nature illustrates how his characters make decisions and interrelate with

other characters based on the influence of the Other (nature). This does not only exhibit the effect of nature's presence in his children's stories but it also emphasizes the play of humanity against the natural world.

This is apparent in his story "Pandakotyong", a tailor who is short but smart. Because he wants to prove that he is brave and strong, Pandakotyong challenges everyone, even confronting and challenging a giant. His victory against the monster earns him recognition from the townspeople and threats from the king of the giants. He successfully dodges an attempt on his life. He then hears about a princess and decides to pursue her. After trials set by the king, he wins not only her hand, but the kingdom as well, through the use of his wit and wisdom.

Despite the disadvantage of being short, he ventures into the unknown, bringing with him only his talents. Pandakotyong first meets a giant, a creature of the wilderness. The wilderness is the only place that can provide fantastical creatures with cover and space to spare; its darkness also enhances the supremacy of the giant. This provides it the confidence to claim the wilderness as its own territory. Pandakotyong impresses the giants upon their initial meeting, but the monsters eventually plot his murder because they fear that he will take over their domain. While the wilderness and its elements (giants) terrorize men, the wilderness, too, elicits fear from the people encountering it. But while the wilderness displays its dark side, it is also rendered vulnerable in the face of the Other, but this time, in the guise of the people that could potentially cause distress to the environment. The objectification that people subject the wilderness to highlights the difference between the Other and human civilization. This is congruent to the innate feeling of fear and aversion elicited from the presence of something supernatural or non-human, which in this case is the wilderness. The encompassing fear of the Other can be summed up in one word: bewildering (9). This circumstance, upon closer examination, presents a paradox wherein humans must decide which one should be considered as natural, based on the human experience. Is it from the laws of nature as specified by the wilderness or in human nature as civilization dictates? Initially, this puts humanity and nature at two opposite ends.

Pandakotyong, in continuing his journey to prove himself worthy of the princess's hand, comes across other elements of the wilderness like the wild tamaraw and the white bear. Similar to his encounter with the giants, his pursuit of the wild creatures demonstrates a struggle of power between humanity and nature. Instead of succumbing to the elements of the wilderness, Pandakotyong uses their wildness to restrain them. A very good example of his strategy is his fight with the wild tamaraw.

When the tamaraw saw Pandakotyong, it charged towards him. But because he was small and fast, Pandakotyong was able to hold on tight to the horns of the tamaraw. The animal tried to shake him off. But even though the tamaraw got so tired that its tongue stuck out, Pandakotyong kept his grip on it. The wild animal was defeated. (Bellen 10)

Instead of taking the offensive approach, he subdues his opponent by using the animal's strengths to his advantage. Pandakotyong wins the fight by meeting the Other face-to-face and by immersing himself in its capacities. The wilderness has given him an opportunity to discover hidden depths and unused talents. "[T]he wilderness experience becomes one of individual growth and development" (21). Instead of limiting a person within the boundaries of the unconscious, he is, instead, invited to enter the realm of 'wildness' and find in it a greater self-knowledge (21). "It [becomes] a place of freedom in which [people] can recover the true selves [they] have lost to the corrupting influences of [their] artificial lives" (Cronon 81). The wilderness provides a landscape of liberation from the strict dictates of human consciousness and cultural constructs, presenting a broader and open-minded approach towards the sense of Otherness

and the world. It enriches a human's capacity for growth and encourages self-dependence. Rather than escapism, the wilderness promotes experimentation and creative exploration of unknown spaces and periods of time. "In other words, the very mysteriousness of nature contributes to the independence, and presumably, the self-awareness of the observer" (Slovic 353).

Another *Lola Basyang* story that tackles the wilderness and its element is the tale of "The Prince of Birds", a love story about Princess Singsing and the Prince of Birds. Princess Singsing wants to marry her beloved Prince, who is a bird, but her father, the king, refuses to accept her request. In order to dissuade his daughter from this relationship, he sets up an impossible condition to challenge the prince. However, because the prince is resourceful and smart, he is able to accomplish the task quite easily. Despite the prince's successful efforts, the king still declines to fulfill his promise. The king also ignores the fact that the Prince of Birds can actually turn himself to a man at will but chooses to remain as a bird because he thinks that, unlike birds, men are without honor. In the end, in order to be with her prince, Princess Singsing turns into a bird herself and flies off with the prince to his kingdom.

Narrowing the analysis down to a more specific element of the wild, this story explores the significance of animals as reflections of the human unconscious. The concept of wildness in the wilderness also includes the creatures that dwell within it. In this narrative, the contrast of humanity and nature is palpable in the interaction of the Prince of Birds and the king. Aside from the apparent difference in forms of being, for one is a bird and the other a human, the culture that each of them represents is very diverse. When the king learns about the relationship of Princess Singsing with a bird, his action suddenly defies the nature of his humanity as a cultured man. This is evidenced by a very limited and restrictive perspective. Because he has not yet experienced the wilderness, he does not know how to relate with the Other. Conversely, when the Prince of Birds is presented, he surprisingly speaks and acts like a true gentleman. One can easily see the interplay of the wild and the cultured, as represented in different personalities. The true nature of supposedly civilized men who have little experience of wilderness is to either refuse or fear the encounter with the Other.

Another thing to consider is how the Prince of Birds makes the comment about choosing to remain in bird form because he finds men dishonorable. "The Prince of the Birds finally spoke, 'I truly wish to become a man again, if you let me marry the princess. But since men do not keep their promises I would rather be as I am now - a bird of honor'" (Bellen 15). This is a clear remark about the character of the king who did not keep his promise. The prince believes that even without culture and civilization, as long as there is honor, and values practiced in daily life, it is acceptable to be a creature of the wild.

Going beyond the physical animality of the Prince of Birds, the character's figurative significance as a major story element is revealed. The character of Princess Singsing may be examined using a psychoanalytic lens in relation to how the Prince of Birds is no longer seen just as an animal "but a symbol of human psychological processes – typically, 'primary process' or the Unconscious" (DeMello and Shapiro). This love story illustrates an attempt to better understand how one's engagement with the wilderness reflects and affects one's psyche. As such, the revelation of the unconscious allows for a more in-depth structuration of Princess Singsing's identity. Borrowing from Jacques Lacan's definition of the unconscious as the discourse of the Other (Cuéllar 181), the princess's relationship with the prince demonstrates her desire to confront her own repressed animality. In facing the Other, Princess Singsing as the subject taps into her conscious mind (humanity) and unconscious mind (animality), allowing herself to discover her own individuality through an understanding of these levels of awareness.

The story opens immediately with one important encounter of wildness – her attraction to the Prince of Birds (the Other) symbolizes an immersion into the wilderness and unlocks chances for self-discovery. This bond articulates a resistance to existing moral codes, which ultimately brings into question the boundaries of human-animal relationship. Yet, this experience allows her to break free from her quotidian life and explore the opportunities that dealing with her unconscious/the Other/the wilderness brings. This brings to the fore an impression that Lacan once noted: "in the unconscious, excluded from the system of the ego, the subject speaks" (58). Princess Singing's identity is realized not only through conscious language but through her unconscious thought as well. The totality of her character is seen in how she ascribes meaning to the wilderness that she is exposed to. One particular example of this is her affection for the Prince of Birds. What attracts her to the prince is the liberty that he freely enjoys, literally and figuratively through his natural flight as a creature of the air. The animals that live in the wild enjoy a certain lack of restraint within nature. This is in contrast to the fetters of civilization that Princess Singing is subject to within her chambers. The law of civilization therefore becomes the source of conflict in the story. It is this same law that keeps her from fully realizing who she is as an individual person. This restriction is concretized by the king's reaction when Princess Singing decided to introduce her beloved to him:

"My child, I believe it is time for you to marry," the king told Princess Singing one day.

"Then I would like you to meet my beloved," answered the princess.

The king was delighted. The princess took the king to the terrace of her room on which a bird with colorful feathers alighted.

"Here is my beloved, Father," said the princess, smiling.

The king looked about and saw nobody else but the bird.

"He is my beloved," said the princess, pointing at the bird. The king almost fainted. (Bellen 8-12)

Ultimately, upon opening herself and acknowledging the Other, Princess Singing is given the opportunity to fly away with the prince, away from the disorder and restrictions of civilization, away from the fear of the unconscious, and away from the dictates of tradition. This suggests that "when people get away from the complications of human culture, they are able to gain a spiritual connection with nature. [H]appiness is only attainable in nature" (Evernden 223).

Traditionally, the wilderness has been construed as chaotic and dangerous. Creatures of the wild lurk at every corner, ready to pounce and attack. It is thus perfectly natural to feel fear or repulsion whenever one is faced with the wilderness because it is ingrained within the human consciousness to take a step back when one is faced with the Other. However, these misconstructions of the wilderness, when rightly perceived and introduced, can be identified as a means to educate people about values, culture and identity.

Despite the misinterpretation of wilderness standing for pure abandon and chaos, one should still acknowledge the merits of being exposed to such environmental settings. Aside from empowering the individual unconscious and opening up opportunities to understand one's psyche better, the concept of wilderness also takes into account the preparation needed before engaging with the Other. It is already established that the Other is unavoidable and bewildering. Given this, the wilderness provides an appropriate setting wherein humanity can ease into the knowing of the Other. Upon experiencing the

unknown, a person will eventually come to a point wherein s/he becomes aware of her/himself within a natural system. Ultimately, s/he becomes individuated. This connection to nature, reviewed through the use of ecopsychology, reveals that while “the human mind is affected and shaped by the modern social world, its deep structure is inevitably adapted to, and informed by, the more-than-human natural environment in which it evolved” (Roszak 3).

Many interpretations and conceptions of nature, specifically that of the wilderness, beg credit. However, its misconstrued reputation precedes it. This is why it is important to introduce a reconstruction of the wilderness and the wildness concept to young minds in order to reorient the prevailing status of nature. It is in these efforts that the community conveys through children’s literature the “desire to shape the responses of young readers, to influence their respective audiences in their perceptions of ‘right behavior’ in the natural world and in encounters with the Others that populate those worlds” (Apol 111). Finally, through a reconceptualization of the wilderness, one can pursue a vision of guiding children, and ultimately people, into becoming better beings of a world largely determined by nature.

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