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## Caught in the Middle: Narratives of family and class in Philippine short fiction

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### Abstract

Depictions of the Filipino middle-class family have been popular in Philippine short stories in English since the inception of the form, with families utilized as a milieu for exploring the conflicts and conditions arising from the material condition of class inequality and exploitation in the Philippines. This paper examines various perspectives on “family,” situating it within a Marxist and Philippine context, while utilizing the concept of the “middle class” as a framework for literary analysis. By looking at a selection of Philippine stories in English, the paper discusses how the fantasies of the middle-class regarding family and identity have been used not only to produce successful, well-crafted literary works, but also texts that reveal the contradictions in our country’s history and culture, as characters grapple with the dissonance between the paradigm of the ideal, traditional family and the lived experience of real, fractured families. As seen in these stories, Filipino families in fiction can provide a valuable vantage point for the consideration of social, cultural, and political issues pertaining to class identity and struggle.

During a postgraduate writing workshop, as we discussed a story about outsiders crashing an invitation-only party in a gated subdivision, our professor said: “All stories in the Philippines are about class, if you look closely enough.”

From a Marxist perspective, *everything* is about class. In the Philippine context—with its massive economic inequality; a still-largely agricultural economy, with its attendant semi-feudal and semi-colonial relations; and the persistence of some of the longest-running revolutionary and secessionist movements in the world—the presence of class discourse in literature, whether overt or implicit, is particularly stark. The “repeated colonization” (Pantoja-Hidalgo 300) that characterizes Philippine history is also often identified as a root cause of the class disparities in the country, and it is in this context that literature in general and fiction in particular can be said to have “both repressive and emancipatory potential” (San Juan 101). This is evident in the ways the country’s short fiction in English has limned Filipino families over the past century. In this framework, this paper seeks to articulate how the existing class discourse in the Philippine context can be enriched through an analysis of how significant works in our country’s literary canon have mined the real contexts and circumstances of middle-class Filipino families for conflict and themes, deconstructing how class is embedded in the enactment of the concept of family both in our literature and in our society.

### **Intersections of Family and Class in Philippine Short Fiction**

Many notable short stories in the Philippine literary canon primarily feature characters in their role as family members, and deal with class conflict and other social issues. There is no dearth of stories that fit these criteria, for the importance and significance of the family in Philippine society has made it a popular theme in our fiction. The stories discussed in this paper are selected from those that have won national awards, such as the Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for the short story in English, and those that have been included in fiction anthologies released by both commercial and academic publishers. These are not intended to be representative of the full scope and diversity of Philippine short

fiction throughout its history, but to show a trajectory in the depictions of the middle-class Filipino family in our stories.

The various iterations of what we recognize as “Filipino families” have been shaped by precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial history, as well as extant socioeconomic and cultural factors, which are always present in our stories, whether in the foreground or in the background of the plot. Depictions of family in our fiction over the past several decades are a rich opportunity for studying not only the evolution of “the Filipino family,” but the ways in which questions of class dominate our lives, even in the enactment of basic values such as “respect for elders” or “unconditional love for family members” which are often treated in popular culture as ideas that transcend material conditions or class considerations.

Consider the 1925 story “Dead Stars” by Paz Marquez Benitez, “universally regarded” for its “historical significance” as the first true Filipino short story in English (Grow 3), and the 1934 story “How My Brother Leon Brought Home a Wife” by Manuel Arguilla, “probably the most famous Filipino short story in English” (Cruz 82). Both are ostensibly stories about lovers, in keeping with the general thematic concerns of the literature of the period, heavily influenced by Western tales of romance and adventure. Yet they are also about families. In “Dead Stars,” Alfredo Salazar turns away from an attraction to a woman named Julia to marry his long-term fiancée, Esperanza. He is impatient with Esperanza’s “unvexed orthodoxy,” while she is hurt by his indifference, yet it is also clear that his family would not approve of Julia and would be shamed by him breaking a long engagement so close to the wedding. So the marriage pushes through. Years later, when a case brings Alfredo to Julia’s hometown, he visits her and realizes that he has become indifferent to her too, and that his cherished memory of their almost-affair was merely “the light of dead stars, long extinguished, yet seemingly still in their appointed places in the heavens.” In the build-up to Alfredo’s final encounter with Julia, Benitez writes:

He was not unhappy in his marriage. He felt no rebellion: only the calm of capitulation to what he recognized as irresistible forces of circumstance and of character. His life had

simply ordered itself; no more struggles, no more stirring up of emotions that got a man nowhere.

Benitez' reference to "irresistible forces of circumstance and character" clearly denotes those aspects, portrayed in the text, which have made Alfredo who he is: his family, his social standing, and his economic status. Indeed, the story opens with his sister and father speculating about the sheer length of Alfredo and Esperanza's engagement, wondering why at thirty Alfredo is defying class conventions of responsibility and courtship by remaining a bachelor.

Similarly, "How My Brother Leon Brought Home a Wife" is not just about Leon and Maria, the young couple in love, but about the expectations and duties of Leon's family in Nagrebcan, Ilocos. The first-person narrator of the story is Leon's younger brother Baldo, and readers feel his wonder at his new sister-in-law's beauty and strangeness. Baldo notes that "her nails were long, but they were not painted," and he observes her high-heeled shoes as she gets on the cart that will take them to the family house. Leon takes note of the fact that Baldo has been sent to fetch them with cart and carabao instead of a horse and calesa. Upon their arrival at home, they go to see their father, who is waiting upstairs with an aching leg—for he is a veteran of the revolution—and their father asks Baldo if Maria was afraid of Labang. He reports truthfully that she was not.

Arguilles' story is a deceptively simple portrayal of the culture and sensibilities of middle-class families in a rural area, far from the urbanized capital. Just like the Salazar family in "Dead Stars," Leon's family is expected to pass judgment upon his relationship and his chosen partner, in deference to a value system that privileges the family above the individual.

In Marxist theory, the conceptualization of the concept of family is fundamentally pragmatic, with Engels stating that "it was the first form of the family to be based, not on natural, but on economic conditions—on the victory of private property over primitive, natural communal property." He goes on to describe how the family unit became centered around a monogamous marriage, further arguing that the family as an institution is based on "the

subjugation of the one sex by the other” (Engels). Althusser further characterized the contemporary nuclear family as an ideological state apparatus which plays a crucial role in entrenching the status quo of class divisions and contradictions. He wrote that the family is one of the most powerful cultural and educational influences on children while they are “most vulnerable” and provides them with “the ideology which suits the role [a child] has to fulfill in class society” (20).

Like Althusser, Bourdieu discusses the way in which family operates as a site of reproduction, whether ideological or social. Bourdieu mentions “rites of institution” which constitute the family as “a united, integrated entity which is therefore stable, constant, indifferent to the fluctuations of individual feelings,” stating that “acts of creation (imposition of the family name, marriage, etc.) have their logical extension in the countless acts of reaffirmation and reinforcement that aim to produce... family feeling (conjugal love, paternal and maternal love, filial love, brotherly and sisterly love, etc.)” (22).

Bourdieu does not assert that such feelings are fake or insincere. Indeed, he emphasizes “the practical and symbolic work that transforms obligation to love into a loving disposition and tends to endow each member of the family with a ‘family feeling’ that generates devotion, generosity, and solidarity” (22). He noted that “social realities are social fictions,” and the “family” is used as a “classificatory concept” both descriptively and prescriptively (Bourdieu 20).

### **Perspectives on the middle-class family**

The short stories written in subsequent decades further demonstrate how the material conditions of middle-class families provides fertile ground for complex characters and a variety of conflicts. National Artist Francisco Arcellana wrote two of his most famous stories two decades apart, and both feature the same family. In “The Mats,” published in 1938, Mr. Angeles brings home a set of custom-woven mats for his wife and children, including those children (Josefina, Victoria, and Concepcion) who have already passed away. He demands, “Is it fair to forget them? Would

it be just to disregard them?" (Arcellana 77). Then in "The Flowers of May," published in 1951, readers learn that Josefina died as an infant and Concepcion was stillborn, but Victoria died at the age of sixteen after a long illness. The first-person narrator of the story is one of Mr. Angeles' seven children, and as he wanders into a church on May afternoon, he recalls another May in 1934, two months after Victoria died, when his sisters arrived home with flowers and accidentally provoked in their father an agony of sorrow:

"The flowers are gone. The flowers of May are gone. I saw that Victoria did not want to die. There was nothing I could do. There was nothing one could do," Father says helplessly.

His grief is terrible and deep. (Arcellana 161)

These classic stories are windows into some of the main concerns of Filipino families: rituals of love and marriage, and of death and grief; their attendant joys and tragedies managed as best as they can. They are also vivid examples of the heterogeneity of the middle class in terms of professions, practices, and culture, which are informed by the competing ideologies that dominate the Philippines as a semifeudal and semicolonial society. Benitez' philosophizing lawyer, Arcellana's traveling inspector, and Arguilles' provincial young boy are all distinct from each other, though they all belong to various subsectors of the Philippine middle class. And while these early classics are not explicitly about class conflict, to read them with a critical eye towards the material circumstances of their characters enriches our understanding of both their specific situation and the culture and history of the country as a whole. As Sison wrote in a series of essays on culture and art, "To know best the character of a society, it is necessary to make a class analysis " (2021).

Traditionally, the family is defined as "a social unit composed of interdependent members, usually related to one another by blood or consanguinity, and often occupying the same residential abode" (Torres 136). The core of the family is traditionally the parental couple, who by the acts of marriage and procreation institutionalize and expand their unit. This much is evident in many of the Philippines' early short stories. However, it must be

noted that several researchers caution against overgeneralizing “the Filipino family” as a concept, with Torres stating that “it is erroneous to assume that family structures, relationships, and norms are homogenous across the archipelago;” Medina further adds that “the *barrio* family is certainly different from the family in Forbes Park or in a Quezon City squatter area” (9).

In the 1960s, adding to the body of realist stories featuring families as central characters and filial relationships as their main thematic concern, Estrella Alfon released one of her best-known stories, “May.” The story is by a woman who recalls a May Day in her youth when a young man tries to serenade her. But her mother catches him and sends him away, leaving the narrator irate at her mother. In the peace before that argument, the narrator recalls the changes taking place in her life, her diction emphasizing all the ways that her identity is tied to that of her mother:

This particular May that I remember, I was getting to be quite a young woman, as Mother's friends would say. I was having the first serenades sung under my window that had the manol vine covering it. I was learning to hide away love letters that came to the house and which my mother matter-of-factly opened and read before she gave them to me. The grandmothers were constantly admonishing me that I knew nothing of the household arts, and if I was old enough to hide love letters and have boys serenading me so that I lost my sleep sighing over their songs, I was old enough to learn to cook and hang the curtains and do a little of the mending that was ruining both their old eyes. (Alfon 173)

The story then flashes forward several years, to when the narrator is a young adult. She learns that her mother is accusing her father of infidelity. Alfon adroitly handles the transition from anger to understanding in the narrator, who sides with her mother in the latter half of the story, recognizing the pain her father has caused her.

Stories of love are popular across all classes in the Philippines, yet the middle-class approach to love in real life is distinctly romanticized compared to other classes, where aspects such as wooing, weddings, and marriages can be more practical and transactional. Despite the failed serenade from her youth, both the

narrator and her mother have expectations of romance and loyalty from ideal partners in Alfon's "May," and the realization on the narrator's part that her mother has not gotten that is what facilitates the transition from the myopic perspective of her youth, when she used to see her mother as the embodiment of "the unjust, the tyrannical, the old." Such attitudes towards the grim realities faced by many families (in these two stories, infidelity and molestation) can be historically traced to the influence of ideologies such as Catholicism and Western liberalism. The conflicts in "May" arise from the clash between fantasies of purity and fidelity and the actual experiences of the families in these stories.

A key development in the advent of the contemporary Filipino short story was what Yabes described as a move from "love stories" in the early period of Philippine fiction, towards topics and concerns that were "wider in range" (xxi). Consider the 1974 story "Agua de Mayo," by Ruben Balane. This text, a winner of the *Focus* literary award, is one of the first major anthologized stories to deal in some way with immigration as growing concern among Filipino families. The main character, Rico, is a lawyer at the City Legal Office whose siblings have all gone abroad, and he looks back fondly on a month-long visit to his brother Ben in the United States, which was (in Ben's words) "all expenses paid, no sweat" (76). Later, it is Ben who visits the Philippines, after their father was indicted with graft and died of a heart attack while imprisoned ("Laxity was his fault," Rico assures himself, "not dishonesty"). Ben urges Rico to join him in the US, arguing, "We've been disgraced here, after what happened to Papa, we tried our best, [or] at least Papa did, to live good, decent, honest lives, and what did we get for all that? Bitterness and failure. A sullied name. Let's all find our place somewhere else and start again" (79).

After Ben leaves, Rico's wife Mani is diagnosed with a terminal illness. Rico does not inform his brother of her death. A letter comes, urging him again to move (with Mani) to the US, and Rico considers replying thus:

Someone has to stay, you know; who will light the tapers for Papa, for Mani (who has followed Papa), and most of all, my dear brother, for you, who have died the most complete death

of all. Let me keep vigil and light the tapers for the dead. Your brother, Rico. (Balane)

Rico decides not to send that, writing instead a blander and more cheerful letter declining Ben's invitation. And so Rico stays in his homeland, with the graves of his wife and father. He moves in with his Tia Pacita after Mani's death. The story ends with a conversation between the two of them—as it drizzles with the first rain of May, Tia Pacita muses on the superstition that the later the *agua de mayo*, the richer the harvest would be for the year, and Rico jokes that he will not consider moving abroad for they do not have the *agua de mayo out there*.

In Balane's story, the *agua de mayo* signifies the cultural and geographic rootedness of the Filipino family in Filipino soil; for Rico, who loved his wife and father, moving away would be tantamount to abandoning not only them but his own sense of self and of what is demanded by family. Rico, whose professional career has not been as successful as he'd once dreamed, is tantalized by the idea of trying his luck in the US, but the weight of his filial obligations exerts a stronger pull on him. "Agua de Mayo" thus enacts a paradox that would only be possible for middle class families, for it is his socioeconomic status that allows Rico to have a choice and experience this conflict fully; for many poorer families, going abroad to earn a sufficient wage to support the family is a necessity rather than an option.

In Medina's comprehensive sociological manual on the Filipino family, the author emphasizes the importance of utilizing structural, social, developmental, and gender-based frameworks in conjunction with each other in order to gain a more complete understanding of the Filipino family. Indeed, Medina's discussion of various aspects of the family, such as "conjugal power structure," the "role of parents in [the] socialization of children," and "respect for the elderly," among others, is undoubtedly a useful resource for the formation of any critical perspective on the Filipino family. While recognizing the many conflicts and problems that confront the Filipino family, such as poverty, violence, and separation, Medina also hopefully notes that "the government has enacted many laws to support and protect the family" and is working with "many social, religious and civic

organizations, as well as educational agencies... to discuss and analyze problems of the family and plan and develop programs to solve them" (287).

In the Philippines, however, the lived experience of family often deviates sharply from what is deemed desirable or permissible by institutions such as the government and the Church, and from what is commonly celebrated in mass media outputs such as commercials or blockbuster films, even as the versions of "family" they tout remain the ideal to which people aspire. This ideal embraces Filipino cultural traits in allowing for extended families, or families wherein one or more of its members live and work abroad. However, it usually minimizes or rejects "deviations" arising from gender, and the illegality of both abortion and divorce in the Philippines contradicts expanding notions of what can be construed as family in the rest of the world.

### **Narratives of family as class discourse**

The concept of the "middle class" has long been an important topic in research, for two reasons: first, because it is viewed as an indicator of the status of economic growth in the country; and second, because of the crucial part played by that sector in the country's historical and political development (Rivera 363). In an essay on the role of the middle class in Philippine society, Rivera mentions the difficulty of defining the term "middle class" to a common international standard. He suggests differentiating between a "gradational" approach (based predominantly on factors such as income, education, standard of living, etc.) and a "relational" approach, which "seeks[s] to situate classes in the overall context of understanding trajectories of social change... [and] classes are linked in social relations of production that are essentially antagonistic and exploitative" (363).

In both frameworks, "classes" are defined in a socioeconomic context as divisions of society. The gradational approach is a utilitarian and hierarchical term where a person is categorized as belonging to a certain class level based primarily on their financial status. In this sense, the term "middle class" denotes a specific income bracket, which varies in accordance with economic

factors. In contrast, the *relational* approach—which correlates closely with the Marxist conceptualization—“class” is a historical and political term, whereby one’s class is determined based on their role in the process of production. Essentially, there is a ruling class comprised of the comprador bourgeoisie and landlords, whose ownership of the means of production allow them to exploit the labor of the proletariat and peasant class. These material, economic conditions are the base for a cultural and political superstructure that maintains the dominance of the ruling class.

In this framework, the predominant class characteristic of this sector is the instability and variability of their status in a capitalist society: like the peasant and working class, the middle class are also oppressed, their intellectual labor utilized by the ruling class for their own benefit. But at the same time, the Filipino middle class often embraces, reinforces, and perpetrates the status quo of the ruling class, ensuring their own comfort and stability relative to the poorest sectors of society—a liberalism arising from our colonial heritage, which emphasizes “individualism, narrow family interest, ethnocentrism, religious sectarianism, chauvinism and a pro-imperialist sense of globalization” (Sison, 2021). Yet, just as any individual member of the middle class may be reactionary or reformist, they may be progressive and radical. Such contradiction arises from the competing value-systems to which many members of the middle class are exposed, for they are educated in contemporary concerns and modern cultural shifts and technological advances, while still bound to limitations imposed by obsolete or myopic belief systems.

Class identity is interiorized and exteriorized, enacted consciously and unconsciously at both the individual and collective level. The term is used in this paper, in discussing the middle-class families of Filipino stories, within the framework of hegemony and counter-hegemony. Williams elaborates upon the Gramscian concept of hegemony, noting that it includes ideology but goes beyond it, encapsulating “not only the conscious system of ideas and beliefs, but the whole lived social process as practically organized by specific and dominant meanings and values” (109), “a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living, [which] constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society” (110).

Thus, in the relations between dominant and subordinate classes, the latter must struggle to develop its own ideology against the hegemony of the ruling class, and the concepts of counter-hegemony and alternative hegemony must be articulated as this “lived hegemony” is constantly “renewed, recreated, defended and modified... [and] continually resisted, limited, altered, [and] challenged” (Williams 112). As such, middle-class characters (such as...) in literature are marked by ideological vacillation, caught between hegemonic or counter-hegemonic ideas.

Such conceptualizations of class are particularly enriching when reading stories from the 1980s, a period wherein literary production was set against the backdrop of People Power and the fall of the Marcos dictatorship. Many powerful works of short fiction exploring socially relevant themes were written in that time frame, including “The Flood in Tarlac” by Gregorio Brillantes, which won a first prize Palanca in 1987. In that work, the limited third-person narrative perspective belongs to Dr. Jose Caridad, a surgeon whose relationship with his landlord in-laws governs his attitude towards an ongoing land dispute involving his wife’s family in Tarlac. His brother-in-law is claiming that the land which local farmers have worked on for generations is actually his property, not theirs, and the farmers ask Dr. Caridad to intervene on their behalf. Of the doctor’s response, Brillantes writes: “Dr. Caridad no longer relished having anything to do with these things, not since the old man had turned perceptibly aloof...” (362).

And in that single line, an entire history has been rendered—instantly, readers can imagine the tenor of previous conversations and visualize the old *hacendero* becoming impatient with this outsider and all his misguided ideals. The barrier between them arises not only from age, but from the distance in their class perspectives. As a landlord in Tarlac, evidently patterned after the real-life landlords of the controversial Hacienda Luisita, Dr. Caridad’s brother-in-law is one of the wealthiest men in the country, while Dr. Caridad’s comfortable income level as a doctor delineates him squarely as a member of the upper middle-class. As such, he is sympathetic to the claims of the farmers that their land is being stolen from them, yet he has determinedly trained himself

to ignore their plight in the interest of remaining on amicable terms with his wife's family.

The flood in that story acts as both plot device and allegory, for in the end, Dr. Caridad's refusal to acknowledge the concerns of the dispossessed farmers leads to his family's death. Several farmers violently enter the house in a *banca* during the flood, killing his wife and children, and Dr. Caridad fights back and kills them. In the final line of the story he says, "They had no right... coming into my house that way... my house... absolutely no right..." And this characteristic, too—his fixation on "rights," his bedrock belief in the importance of institutionally granted privileges—exposes his character as middle-class, for after all neither his wealthy in-laws, intent on landgrabbing, nor the poverty-stricken farmers, trying to exact some form of justice, have shown themselves to be similarly limited by consideration of the law in their actions.

Brillantes' story is a nuanced portrayal of a man in a difficult situation: the doctor is flawed, acting in accordance with his own class character. He does not think of himself as a bad man. Unfortunately, from the perspective of the farmers he is a bad man; he has elected to be indifferent to issues that are matters of life and death to a large number of people, to maintain good relations with his wife's family.

No doubt many Filipino readers can relate to Dr. Caridad's ill-fated desire to keep the peace in his own family; the filial instinct to sweep perceived wrongdoings by family members under the rug; the struggle to accept the stark differences in values that divide them from beloved family members, a process hampered by the desire to avoid confrontation. These middle-class characters are marked by a "sense of the comfortable"—and accordingly, a natural inclination to preserve it—which is "suggestive of a confidence made possible only by a form of withdrawal from the entanglements with an active world. The unassailed consciousness reflecting on its own condition is self-justifying, investing itself with a privilege and mastery within its own circumscribed ground" (Montañez 56). Strong political themes in social realist literature are often criticized for lending itself to a mechanical, predictable, or propagandist tone, but Brillantes' story serves as an example of

how to tackle such loaded subjects while paying attention to what is perhaps the most common adage in creative writing pedagogy: show, don't tell.

Another of Brillantes' stories that should be highlighted is "Faith, Love, Time and Dr. Lazaro," published in 1960, which vividly renders one of the most common preoccupations of the petty bourgeoisie: pondering questions of god and eternal life. Dr. Lazaro, a country doctor, brings his son Ben with him to the barrio to treat the sick infant of a poor family. However, the baby cannot be cured, and Ben baptizes the infant before it dies. Dr. Lazaro has hoped that his son will follow in his footsteps and practice medicine, but the lay baptism shows him that Ben's vocation will probably diverge from his own. On the way home, father and son converse, and Brillantes writes:

God: Christ: the communion of saints: Dr. Lazaro found himself wondering again at the world of novenas and candles, where bread and wine became the flesh and blood of the Lord, and a woman bathed in light appeared before children, and mortal men spoke of eternal life, the vision of God, the body's resurrection at the end of time. It was like a country from which he was barred; no matter—the customs, the geography didn't appeal to him. But in the car suddenly, driving through the night, he was aware of an obscure disappointment, a subtle pressure around his heart, as though he had been deprived of a certain joy... (285)

In his historical analysis of the middle class in the Philippines, Rivera observed that the those belonging to that sector were heavily influenced by "conservative and radical schools of Christianity... and in particular in the Southern Philippines, Islamic fundamentalism and radicalism" (366). Yet the Filipino middle class is "not a homogenous entity;" those in the middle class are also shaped by non-class factors such as education, religion, and gender, among others (Rivera 363). Extant in the character of Dr. Lazaro is one of the great dilemmas of the intellectuals in the Filipino middle class. In a semi-feudal and semi-colonial society, what Marx described as the contradiction between idealism and materialism remains present, and faith is generally categorized as an idealist phenomenon, rooted not in concrete conditions but in

inconsistent abstraction. Those in the middle class have the education and cultural exposure to challenge the superstitions of the masses, yet they envy the certainty of faith, the promise of salvation after a lifetime of hardship. In contrast to the skepticism of Dr. Lazaro, his son Ben has a faith that arises from both principle and pragmatism. Like his father, he wants to help others; like his mother, a devout woman, he wants to do it through the rituals and values of Catholicism.

Meanwhile, Susan Lara's "The Reprieve," awarded a first-prize Palanca in 1984, begins with Leo's wife leaving in the middle of the night to take care of a patient. Leo, who is a doctor, is unable to join her as he is bedridden and recovering from a stroke. Their son Sandy takes charge while his wife is gone, and Lara writes:

"You need anything, Pa?"

"Just a glass of water," Leo said, giving his son an indulgent smile.

"I'll get it, don't get up."

"For God's sake, it's only a glass of water! Stop acting as though it's a monumental task only you can do!" Leo turned away as soon as he said it, but not quickly enough to miss the pain that dimmed the young boy's face. For a minute he concentrated needlessly on putting on his slippers. When he looked up again to say he was sorry, Sandy had gone back to his room, slamming his door with a vengeance. That's more like it, Leo thought. Now the boy's beginning to act his age again. (355)

Leo's preoccupation with children "acting their age" is not a sentiment that everyone can afford to live by; many poorer families often have children who must work and take on other adult responsibilities from a young age, in order to help alleviate conditions of poverty. This is another aspect of class that is explored in Philippine fiction: how the children of comfortable, relatively stable families grapple with their changing relationships to their parents. Like the other authors in this paper, Lara's style, her realist, intimate portrayals of family, is perfectly suited to the subject matter, and whether consciously or unconsciously, there is in the works of these authors an evident capacity for observation, an ability to write about the personal without masking or effacing the political.

## Fictionalizing the contemporary Filipino middle-class family

In the 1940s, Yabes asserted that “the Filipino short story in English is a definite cultural force in our national life” (xxxiv). Later critics and writers have echoed similar sentiments; as Hau observes of Philippine fiction in English, while “most of its practitioners belong to the middle classes... it seeks to speak not just of and for these classes, but for and to the Filipino ‘people’” (317).

Today’s writers “recognize no taboos, writing with ease about incest, prostitution, child abuse, abortion, euthanasia, gender, globalization” (Pantoja-Hidalgo 309). Dalisay further describes the modern Filipino short story in English as a “site of political engagement,” and says that many contemporary writers “have material aplenty,” usually issues such as “gender and sexuality, the environment, cultural identity, and individual freedom” (144). Such broadening and increased complexity in the scope of common understanding of social issues can also be seen in the concept of family. While institutional definitions remain narrow—the Philippine Constitution declares that “the Filipino family [is] the foundation of the nation” (Art. XV Sec. 1); the Family Code defines marriage as “a special contract of permanent union between a man and a woman” (Art.1); and there are legal penalties for adultery and concubinage—there has also been a slow but marked shift to alternative views. Torres described Filipino families in the 1990s as largely nuclear or extended in composition, and observed a downward trend in legal marriages, suggesting that “couples may have formed unions without the benefit of church or civil rites,” as well as a higher population of illegitimate births and lesser dependence on the part of children (on parents) and wives (on husbands) in terms of economic sustenance, as more women and youth entered the workforce (Torres). Modernization and industrialization have also led to a migration from rural to urban areas that “alters the family composition and has effects on income, aspirations, gender roles, and youth-dependency patterns” (Torres 135).

It is interesting to observe, in recent decades, how the landscape of thematic concerns has expanded. Stories about families were now also about many of the contemporary issues facing Filipinos

in a deteriorating and fragmented society, and the characters in such stories began acting in more modern ways. For instance, Lakambini Sitoy's "Touch," published in the Philippine Graphic in 1999, explicitly describes how a father beat his children:

When they were young he used to beat them, rapidly, one after the other, as they scrambled and slipped on the wooden floors... most of the year when their father was at sea the children could do as they pleased, but for the month or so that he was home they had no choice but to obey him. At the slightest mistake the house would resound with a peculiar rhythmic thwacking, like strips of meat being processed on the butcher's block.

It had been a good belt, fragrant and heavy, from "abroad," as so many of her father's things had been in those days. Wound about his hand, it had been a deadly weapon... The one sound that had survived the years without distortion was that of leather on flesh, like baseballs slamming into mitts in the children's park back of her apartment block.

The story begins with Dora, now a grown woman, returning home to care for her ailing father. He is bedridden, forcing her to clean up his urine and excrement from the bed, both father and daughter contemptuous and begrudging of each other. She knows that it was her father's earnings as a seaman (and a seaman, he always emphasized, was different from being an ignorant worker fleeing to some Middle Eastern country) which made it possible for her and her brother to live comfortable lives, yet she resents the misery he inflicted on his family for reasons she would never understand. In the end, watching a *mananambal* attempt to treat her father, she recognizes that she is incapable of letting go of her hatred for him.

Sitoy's story is a stark portrayal of how the brutal demands of capitalism can fracture the bonds between family members. Dora admits to "a sense of bitter regret" for never truly knowing her father, a man who spent years in "the dungeon of his vessel," while no one in his family bothered or dared to ask him how he felt. "After all," Sitoy writes, "he was a man. Men endured" (720). The constraints of filial hierarchy and gender roles in middle-class families further ensured that Dora and her father were doomed to be strangers to each other.

In December 2001, Dalisay's "Some Families, Very Large" was published in the *Philippine Star*. Aptly, the story is set on Christmas Eve, when nine-year old Sammy finds himself at a funeral parlor after a long day traipsing around the city with his father Felipe, a barker. His mother has gone, "very far down South to take care of her own dying father," so he and his father will be spending Christmas without her. On the day before Christmas, the father's self-proclaimed *dilihensya* and *abilidad* takes the pair from one stop to another across the city. Sammy is excited to help his father hustle money and favors from supposed distant relatives and former employers, unaware of the danger posed by a bodyguard waving a gun, unaware of the disdain everyone has for his father.

There is in this story a sense of how "family" works in the Philippines, for both good and bad. Near the end, as his father gambles away the money he wheedled from his targets, Sammy decides to sit and wait for him inside a funeral parlor, which is empty except for a white coffin (ostensibly containing the body of his "distant uncle"). Sammy eventually finds himself conversing with the Mrs. Navarette, the mother of the dead man:

"Where's your mother, by the way?"

Sammy fell silent, and he looked fervently in Felipe's direction, wanting to go home. The lady took his hand and her fingers felt like a bony animal perching on his. "Some families are large, very, very large," she said. "Some families are small – very, very small."

"My Papa says – " Sammy began, then paused, seized by a sudden doubt.

"Your Papa says?"

"My Papa says he knew your son. My Papa says they were cousins in Dipolog."

"Is that soooo?" the woman said, arching her eyebrows again.

"What did you say your name was, again?"

"Samuel Dinglasan, ma'am. Samuel Occeña Dinglasan."

"Dinglasan.... Weeell..... Like I said, some families are very large..."

Evidently, his father invented the filial connection, and just as evidently, Mrs. Navarette—alone at her son's wake and herself part of a very small family—is willing to overlook this for some company on Christmas Eve. She assures Sammy that he can call

her “Lola Connie” and tells him and Felipe, “Rest up a bit and tell me stories, that’s all I ask, tell me stories.” Of course, Felipe has lost all his money by now, and he stays so Mrs. Navarette will give him the fare for the ride home with Sammy in the morning. While this story may seem to be a condemnation of the urban poor, since Felipe is portrayed as an amateur con man and typical of his class, a closer reading reveals the diversity with which Dalisay has populated the world of the story, reflecting the different motives, circumstances, and dreams of those in the lower middle-class. Felipe has grasped that connections are paramount in Philippine society, and that whether you have a very large family or not, it’s better to pretend. The poignant final scene of the story features him with Sammy and his newly minted “Tita Connie,” closing their eyes and pretending that the cheap funeral snacks are “ham and cake and grapes and cheese,” unaware for a moment that the flickering lightbulb above them has finally gone out. In this story, as it is commonly is in practice, the idea of family is both elastic and sacred.

Meanwhile, Angelo Lacuesta’s “Siren,” published in *Likhaan* in 2012, opens with Anna following her mother, literally. She follows her through the house, through the garden, and into the maid’s quarters in the back yard. There she watches as her mother pries open the locked cabinet of their maid, Clara, to look through her things. She is looking for her pearls, which have gone missing. The mother is convinced that Clara took the pearls and hid them somewhere in the house, so she kicks her out to find them before Clara sells them to someone. “That’s their *modus operandi*,” she tells her husband.

Of course, it is Anna who stole the pearls. She fears for a moment that she might be caught and wonders how to explain herself. She needn’t have bothered—not only does the mother believe that she and her daughter and husband are automatically above suspicion, she believes that Clara, in contrast, is automatically under suspicion, guilty until proven innocent. Clara is both physically and figuratively small in the story. Her smallness is repeatedly referenced (“Clara was so small that when she sat on one of the chairs, her feet would not even touch the floor”; “They [her clothes] looked like little girl clothes”). Lacuesta also gives the

family a nouveau riche background. Because their socioeconomic status is relatively precarious—he writes that the family had just moved from a small apartment into this new house, presumably able to afford a live-in maid for the first time, and the mother proudly uses the term “investment” to describe her purchase of new pearls to her daughter—the mother guards and enacts her self-perception of bourgeoisie superiority fiercely, unwittingly reproducing it in her own daughter.

Such stories show how families function towards “the accumulation and transmission of economic, cultural and symbolic privileges,” and how “the family plays a decisive role in the maintenance of the social order [as] one of the key sites of the accumulation of capital in its different forms and its transmission between the generations” (Bourdieu 23). As seen in Lacuesta’s story—particularly, the dissonance between the daughter’s guilt and the mother’s absolute certainty that she is innocent—it is through the juxtaposition of “real” vs “ideal” that family emerges as a “fantasy-production,” not simply as an imaginary representation, but as “the symbolic-material practice that organizes what we take to be ‘reality’” (Tadiar 29). The sociopolitical role of the middle class in propping up the ideology of the dominant ruling class can be said to rely heavily on the fantasy of the ideal family—“family” is often perceived as something that is above and apart from the vagaries of blatant politics or vulgar ideologies, yet it is at this level, Zizek argues, that fantasy operates most effectively: “external ritual materializes ideology by internalization.” In the Filipino short story in English, the fantasies of the middle class regarding themselves (faith in liberal ideas such as freedom and self-determination), the upper class (dreams of upward social mobility), and the lower class (fear of downward social mobility) are evident in depictions of family. Moreover, there is an “inherent antagonism” (Zizek 698) in the impossibility of the ideal family—with a traditional structure, happy, economically stable—and the horror of the “real” family, the fractures in attempts to enact that ideal.

Notably, the contemporary stories cited here have as their main characters children (young and adult) who watch, resist, and align themselves with the various actions and beliefs of their parents. In

Anna's case, her mother shows her that the poorer socioeconomic classes are not to be treated as equals; for Dora, her father's abuse instills the sense that family is a trap and gives her a lifelong aversion towards forming a family of her own; for Sammy, the concept of "extended family" has been at once distorted and delineated by his father's transparent attempts to use nonexistent filial connections to extort favors from others. All these texts explore similar themes of fantasy construction and destruction in the ways the main characters navigate the roles, expectations, and privileges that arise from the families to which they belong.

## Conclusion

This paper explored the twin thematic concerns of class and family in our country's stories—in particular, how Filipino families in short fiction can provide a valuable vantage point for the consideration of social, cultural, and political issues pertaining to class identity and struggle. The first section of this paper looks at the initial intersections of family and class alongside the emergence of the Philippine short story in English as a distinct genre in the early 1900s, then the subsequent section looks at various perspectives on Filipino middle-class families through the lens of other stories over the next decades, showing how class persistently shapes character, conflict, and setting even as the notion of family changed and expanded over time.

Selected texts from the 1980s, a tumultuous period in our country's history, were used to show how narratives of family can be analyzed as a kind of class discourse, and the final section shows how the contemporary Filipino middle-class family remains a popular subject in our fiction, functioning as crucibles for questions of class identity and struggle. Reading these texts in this manner does not equate to a condemnation of middle-class families, but an elaboration of what they may reveal about society; as seen in our country's stories, while the family can be an interpellator for hegemonic views and reject any deviations from the ideal, sometimes the family is also a crucible for the formation of counter-hegemonic ideas.

In this context, the family unit operates as one of the core components of social institutions in capitalist society. Thus, analyzing the middle-class family in literature as a fictional elaboration of real sociopolitical issues must rely on Marxist understanding of class as one of the most fundamental divisions in society, with families and family members driven by the conditions and contradictions of their own class. The middle-class family has been a fruitful subject not only for the production of well-crafted literary works, but also the production of texts that reveal the contradictions in our country's history and culture, as characters grapple with the dissonance between the paradigm of the ideal, traditional family and the lived experience of real, fractured families.

As seen in the middle-class characters of these stories, conceptualizing "family" and "family feeling" as natural, autonomous, and uncontestable ideas is an act of privilege. Yet it is important to avoid being too deterministic or reductionist in this analytical framework, recognizing that the possibility of transforming or transcending class interests and limitations always exists, and is sometimes even realized. Neither class nor family are fixed portents of individual identity; as Bourdieu argues, "within a given family, not all members have the same capacity and propensity to conform to the dominant definition... the forces of fusion, especially the ethical dispositions that incline its members to identify the particular interests of individuals with the collective interests of the family, have to contain the forces of fission, i.e. the interests of the various members of the group, who may be more or less inclined to accept the common vision and more or less capable of imposing their 'selfish' point of view" (23).

In the fantasies of the ideal, value and success are framed in terms of filial duties; hegemonic ideals like patriarchy, heteronormativity, and classism are reproduced; capitalist norms such as transactionality, alienation, and exploitation are enacted; and the "family" itself is considered sacred, resistant to any kind of interrogation. In contrast, the real family is fractured, divergent, its members often strangers to one another, limited by the responsibilities and expectations associated with their filial roles. Conflict is rooted in the contradictions among characters whose

class-driven desires and motivations are formed, changed, and shattered, even as they unwittingly strengthen and challenge the very ideology which allows class struggles to ferment in the first place. Yet none of this is inevitable. None of this is inherent in the concept of “family.” These class conditions are constructed, and as can be seen in our country’s stories, the chief characteristic of such constructs is not permanence, but the possibility of change.

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