



Beyond the Genitals: Book Reviews of “*Ako ay May Titi*” and “*Ako ay May Kiki*”

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ABSTRACT

This review critically examines two Filipino children’s books, “*Ako ay May Titi*” [I Have a Penis] and “*Ako ay May Kiki*” [I Have a Vagina], through feminist and queer theory lenses. It aims to analyze how these books approach gender representation by critiquing their reinforcement of gender stereotypes and binary views. While the books aim to educate children about genital hygiene and body awareness, they inadvertently reinforce problematic gender stereotypes and binary views. The analysis reveals three main areas of concern: the perpetuation of stereotypical caregiving roles, the use of gendered color stereotypes, and the limitation of gender identity to anatomy. Despite their progressive attempt to break taboos surrounding genital terminology, the books fall short in representing diverse family structures and non-binary identities. The review acknowledges the books’ significance in promoting correct anatomical terms but argues that they miss opportunities to present more inclusive perspectives on gender and caregiving. Recommendations include incorporating diverse family representations, adopting gender-neutral color schemes, and presenting a more nuanced understanding of gender identity.

KEYWORDS:

children’s literature, diversity, feminism, queer

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ABSTRAK (FILIPINO)

Kritikal na tinatalakay ng rebyung ito ang dalawang Filipinong aklat pambata na “Ako ay May Titi” at “Ako ay May Kiki” gamit ang mga teoryang feminismo at queer. Layunin nitong suriin ang representasyon ng kasarian sa pamamagitan ng pagbibigay-puna sa pagpapanatili ng mga estereotipo at binaryong pananaw. Bagama’t layunin ng mga aklat na turuan ang mga bata tungkol sa kalinisan ng ari at kamalayan sa katawan, hindi sinasadyang pinalalakas ng mga ito ang mga mapanirang estereotipo at limitadong pananaw tungkol sa kasarian. Nagbubunyag ang pagsusuri ng tatlong pangunahing isyu: ang pagpapanatili ng mga nakasanayang gampanin sa pag-aaruga, ang paggamit ng mga kulay na nauugnay sa kasarian, at ang paglilimita ng pagkakakilanlan ng kasarian batay sa anatomiya. Sa kabila ng progresibong layunin ng mga aklat na labanan ang hiya at kabastusan sa paggamit ng mga pantawag sa ari, hindi nila lubos na naisasama ang representasyon ng iba’t ibang uri ng pamilya at mga di-binaryong pagkakakilanlan. Kinikilala ng pagsusuri ang kahalagahan ng mga aklat sa pagpapalaganap ng tamang mga termino ukol sa anatomiya, ngunit iginigiit din nito na napalampas nila ang pagkakataong magpakita ng mas inklusibong pananaw sa kasarian at pag-aaruga. Dahil dito, inirerekomenda ang pagsasama ng iba’t ibang representasyon ng pamilya, paggamit ng mga neutral na kulay, at pagpapakita ng mas malalim na pag-unawa sa pagkakakilanlan ng kasarian.

MGA SUSING SALITA:

panitikang pambata, dibersidad, feminismo, queer

Citation and Price

Gojo Cruz, G. R. (2019). *Ako ay May Titi* (B. Parrocha, Illus.). Lampara Publishing House, Inc. [Php 199.00]

Oris, G. (2020). *Ako ay May Kiki* (B. Parrocha, Illus.). Lampara Publishing House, Inc. [Php 199.00]

Summary

The children's books "*Ako ay May Titi*" [I Have a Penis] and "*Ako ay May Kiki*" [I Have a Vagina] target readers aged five and older. The books are narrated from the first-person perspectives of a boy and a girl, respectively, and may be used to teach genital hygiene and body awareness.

In "*Ako ay May Titi*," a boy narrates their experiences and lessons learned from their mother. The boy recounts how the mother rubs the penis area with soap, washes it with water, and wipes it with a clean towel to emphasize the significance of ensuring that it is always clean. The story also includes simple descriptions regarding the natural changes and bodily processes related to the penis. It also emphasizes the mother's teachings that this body part is essential and is a biological determinant of being a boy.

Meanwhile, *Ako ay May Kiki* has a similar storyline. It focuses on a girl's understanding of their vagina and highlights the essence of vaginal hygiene, proper clothing choices, and the need for privacy. The story also notes that only the daughter and the mother should see, touch, and care for it. In the last part of this book, some guidelines for parents and guardians can be found. The pieces of advice underscore the importance of using correct genital terms and offer strategies for teaching children how to take care of and protect their bodies.

Significance

Both books are progressive as they attempt to break the taboo surrounding the usage of genital terms like *titi*, *patutoy*, *bayag*, penis, *kiki*, *puki*, *puke*, *puday*, and vagina. This is significant in teaching young children the correct terms as part of learning their rights and responsibilities towards their bodies.

Additionally, the books are essential in promoting and teaching genital hygiene among children through age-appropriate stories alongside introducing sexual anatomy. This fosters healthy attitudes toward their sex organs and is further strengthened by the sense of personal agency implied in the stories where children must learn to protect their private parts from others. This also encourages open communication with parents and guardians about bodies, consent, and abuse.

In teaching and learning, both books provide opportunities to integrate health education and gender sensitivity into early childhood curricula. Teachers can use them as springboards for discussions on anatomy, self-care, and respect for diversity while addressing potential stereotypes since this review emphasizes the importance of critically examining the underlying messages of children's books to ensure they align with inclusive and progressive teaching practices that support holistic development. Thus, the significance of this book review lies in its contribution to fostering critical discussions around the content and implications of children's literature, particularly in the Filipino context.

In all, both books are significant for their goals of promoting the use of correct terminologies, educating young children about their body parts, and protecting their bodies. At the same time, the

reviews given in this article may serve as avenues to raise awareness about things to include further and deepen the discussions should these books be used in the classrooms.

Review Lenses

The liberal feminist and queer theory readings led to the critiques of the two children's books. Liberal feminism promotes gender equality in the public sphere, such as workplaces, schools, and politics, through legal approaches. It also believes that "gender inequality in marriage and family impedes feminist progress outside the home. [It] supports marriage as an equal partnership, with men matching women in responsibilities for domestic tasks and childcare" (Lindsey, 2021, p. 22).

Meanwhile, the reviewer also used queer theory, which challenges the normalizing binaries that structure people's conception of gender and sexuality and debunks heteronormativity which promotes heterosexuality as the norm (Regan & Meyer, 2021). With this, queer theory challenges traditional family dynamics (composed of a male husband and a female wife) and the assumption that gender and sex determine one's caregiving abilities or responsibilities.

The reviewer used the combination of these two theories to offer a more comprehensive analysis. By using liberal feminism, the reviewer was able to expose the patriarchal ideologies embedded in the books. On the other hand, queer theory helped in expanding the review beyond the male-female binary to offer a more fluid and inclusive understanding of gender and sexuality. With the combination of the two theories, the critique became more intersectional, addressing both the rigid gender roles and the broader need for inclusive representation of diverse identities and family structures.

Critique and Recommendation:

To avoid confusion, it is essential to note that the singular pronouns "they/them/their" were used in the following critiques.

The Stereotypical Roles

One of the most glaring issues in both "*Ako ay May Titi*" and "*Ako ay May Kiki*" is the depiction of caregiving, particularly in the context of bodily hygiene. In "*Ako ay May Kiki*," the mother is solely responsible for cleaning the female child's vagina, while in "*Ako ay May Titi*," the mother is shown bathing and washing the boy. This portrayal reinforces traditional gender roles, implying that caregiving—especially intimate care—is a woman's responsibility.

This issue is further highlighted in "*Ako ay May Kiki*," where the female child and the mother are depicted role-playing as nurses. By associating caregiving with both domestic tasks and traditionally feminized professions like nursing, the book perpetuates gendered career expectations. From a feminist perspective, this depiction reflects patriarchal norms that confine women to the domestic sphere. In fact, a content analysis of 10 Philippine Grade 1 textbooks revealed that females

were frequently represented in stereotypical roles such as rearing children, cooking, washing clothes, and purchasing goods (Java & Parcon, 2016). Such portrayals may marginalize fathers by assuming they are not equally capable of caregiving, reinforcing the idea that caregiving is an inherent female duty. This representation also reflects a broader societal trend that relegates women's contributions to the private sphere, perpetuating gendered divisions of labor.

The exclusion of fathers in caregiving roles is particularly problematic, as it ignores the reality that many fathers in single-parent and two-parent households play an active role in childcare. Modern family dynamics increasingly feature fathers taking on caregiving responsibilities, including intimate tasks traditionally associated with mothers. Yet, in *"Ako ay May Titi,"* the father (*Tatay*) is mentioned only in the context of buying the potty, reinforcing the stereotype of fathers as providers rather than as nurturers. While this depiction may reflect traditional Filipino values, it risks perpetuating outdated norms that fail to acknowledge the evolving roles of fathers in caregiving. By representing fathers as active participants in childcare, children's literature could better reflect shifting societal dynamics and help dismantle rigid gender stereotypes.

Furthermore, these portrayals overlook families led by single mothers, extended family members, or alternative caregivers. It perpetuates a 'normative' family structure that fails to reflect the complexity and diversity of contemporary caregiving dynamics. The exclusion is also especially problematic for solo male parents and househusbands who are responsible for all aspects of caregiving, including intimate tasks like bathing. By failing to represent these families, the books marginalize them and reinforce a narrow, traditional view of family roles.

From a queer theory perspective, this binary division of caregiving roles is equally troubling. By presenting caregiving as a gendered activity, the books reinforce a heteronormative family structure that leaves little room for LGBTQIA+ families, where caregiving roles are often shared fluidly. In the Philippines, there is no specific number of families composed of LGBTQIA+ parents, but the existence of numerous studies (Bacus et al., 2024; Biana & Domingo, 2021; Fernandez et al., 2023; Isidro et al., 2024; Ocampo et al., 2021) talking about this proves that this kind of family structure exists in the country. In this light, children's literature could benefit greatly from more inclusive representations, showing fathers, same-sex parents, and non-binary caregivers taking on nurturing roles. This would help normalize diverse family structures and promote gender equality and inclusivity.

Although some might argue that the father (*Tatay*) in *"Ako ay May Titi"* could be female since there is no explicit depiction of gender, the book still reinforces heteronormative expectations of family dynamics. There is still a father figure (*Tatay*) who serves as a provider, trying to imitate the traditional mother/wife-father/husband relationship. The concept that only the mother can handle the female child's body further imposes strict gender roles, leaving out not only single fathers but also non-binary or transgender parents who do not fit the usual mother-father categories.

Gendered Color Stereotypes

Both books reinforce the use of gendered color stereotypes. *“Ako ay May Titi”* is shown primarily in blue, while *“Ako ay May Kiki”* uses pink as the dominant color. The choice of colors immediately invokes traditional gender roles, where blue is linked to boys and pink to girls. These color associations are created by society and are often accepted without question. This is also often seen in sex reveals (more popularly known as gender reveals) of babies. The use of these colors in the books, even if subtle, visually supports the idea of only two genders, which can restrict children’s ability to express themselves and understand gender from a young age.

From a feminist lens, this use of color is a subtle but significant way of reinforcing gender binaries. Pink and blue are among the most commonly recognized symbols of gender differentiation in Western culture (Jonauskaitė et al., 2021), and their continued use in children’s books perpetuates the idea that boys and girls are fundamentally different in ways that go beyond anatomy. This color association socializes children to view specific colors, behaviors, and interests as inherently male or female, limiting their self-expression and reinforcing gendered expectations from an early age. A more progressive approach would be to depict both boys and girls engaging with various colors, allowing them to explore their interests and identities without being constrained by these traditional associations. By introducing more neutral or mixed color palettes, the books would help challenge the deeply ingrained notion that certain colors “belong” to a particular gender.

On the other hand, a queer theory perspective would critique this binary use of color as an exclusionary practice that leaves no room for gender fluidity or non-binary identities. This reduction of gender representation to the blue-pink color scheme is a manifestation of the narrow understanding of gender. It closes the doors of opportunity for children to explore and experience the fluidity of gender identities. To improve the books, as previously shared, it is recommended that a diverse range of colors be used. This is also a step toward inclusivity, welcoming children of all identities.

Limiting Gender Identity to Anatomy

The way both *“Ako ay May Titi”* and *“Ako ay May Kiki”* focused too much on body parts made it seem like being a boy or a girl is only about anatomy. If a story is framed this way, it may be difficult for children to understand that gender is more than physical traits. In addition, the books miss the chance to show that gender is more complex and can be different for each person, although it must be acknowledged that the books may help teach body parts and hygiene. However, as reiterated in many parts of this review, by linking gender identity closely with sex, the books unintentionally oversimplify and misrepresent gender.

To prove this, the sentences “I have a penis because I am a boy” in *“Ako ay May Titi”* and “I was born a girl, and that’s why I have a vagina” in *“Ako ay May Kiki”* may imply that to be a boy or girl, they should have a *titi* (penis) or a *kiki* (vagina). The differentiations are purely anatomical. While these explanations might be simple for young readers, they cause issues when looked at from feminist and queer theories.

This reduction of gender identity to anatomy reflects biological essentialism that is increasingly being challenged in both feminist and queer discourses. Biological essentialism assumes that behaviors and interests are biologically determined, ignoring how gender is socially constructed and fluid (Chandler & Munday, 2011). By presenting gender in such a rigid way, the books fail to account for the experiences of transgender and non-binary individuals, as well as the diversity of gender expressions that exist beyond the male/female binary. Gender-inclusive materials are important in starting discussions on gender, diversity, and social justice (Elorza, 2023); however, the books fail to lend themselves to these opportunities. A more inclusive approach would recognize that while anatomy is a part of identity, gender is a multifaceted and evolving concept. Children's literature should reflect this complexity, creating space for all children to see themselves represented.

Other Commentaries

In *"Ako ay May Kiki,"* the book effectively teaches young girls about the importance of protecting their vaginas. It includes the statement,

“Nobody’s allowed to see it. Nobody’s allowed to touch it! The only people allowed to look after it are Mama and me!”

This message focuses on the importance of personal body control, but it also talks about the mother being responsible for taking care of the daughter's private parts. It does not mention other people who might also help, like fathers, grandparents, guardians, or doctors. This limited view might make children think only certain people can touch or care for a child's body, which could cause misunderstandings in real life. To fix this, the book should include examples of different people, like househusbands, grandparents, or medical doctors taking care of children. This would better match the kinds of families present in the Philippines.

On the other hand, the book is praiseworthy for including a guide for parents and caregivers at the end. This guide offers useful tips on taking care of children, such as the important reminder that children might need to show their private parts to a doctor for a check-up. It also gives helpful advice on teaching children to stay away from anyone who tries to harm them by showing or touching their private parts. These guidelines are essential for teaching children about consent, and adding them to the story would help children understand these key lessons better. However, these messages should be shared in a way that is suitable for their age, gentle, and manageable for young readers to handle.

In short, the book serves as a valuable tool for teaching children about bodily autonomy and consent, particularly in the Philippine context, where research shows significant gaps in early sexuality education. Studies report that Filipino teens primarily obtain information about love and sexuality from friends, and communication with parents on these topics is limited, leaving them with unanswered questions and misconceptions about sexual health (De Irala et al., 2009). Additionally, there is a high prevalence of violence against Filipino children, may it be physical, psychological, or sexual. In a recent report, many boys have experienced unwanted touching, forced attempted sex, and physical assault. Despite this concern, there is low disclosure and reporting (Ramiro et al.,

2022). More so, sex education policies tend to focus more on biological aspects and overlook the affective domains, such as differentiating between love, desire, and attraction or managing emotions and sexual drives (De Irala et al., 2009). These concerns imply that there is still a lack of awareness among Filipino children regarding bodily autonomy, consent, and sexuality. Being more open to discussing these concepts with friends rather than parents, guardians, or legal professionals shows their hesitancy. It reflects a broader societal challenge in the Philippines, where discussions about these topics are often considered taboo.

Meanwhile, the reviewer appreciates both books for their attempts to remove the negative connotations surrounding the terms *titi* and *kiki*. The reviewer also praises the illustrations for their vibrant colors and cartoonish style, which can easily capture children's attention and depict the human body in a recognizable and age-appropriate way. These qualities make the stories accessible and comprehensible for young readers. However, it is notable that the *titi* was visually presented in five instances in *"Ako ay May Titi,"* while the *kiki* was shown only once in *"Ako ay May Kiki."* This imbalance raises questions about the representation of gender, as the disparity might reinforce biases that normalize the visibility of male anatomy while keeping female anatomy underrepresented. This can limit the books' potential to promote gender equality.

This disparity in visual representation might also influence how readers relate to the stories. For instance, the reviewer finds *"Ako ay May Titi"* somewhat relatable, particularly in its descriptions of body processes associated with the penis, such as the ticklish sensation when peeing and the way it grows stiff and big. These experiences are easily understandable for most males. However, certain aspects, like the father buying the potty, do not resonate with the reviewer's memories. When the reviewer was a child, he remembers that his mother typically went to the grocery store and purchased necessities, though he later learned that some money came from his father. Additionally, the reviewer notes a disconnect in the bathing experience, as his father and aunt sometimes bathed him while his mother was busy working.

Similarly, he recalls how his mother instructed his three sisters to always sit correctly—a cultural reminder echoed in the book *"Ako ay May Kiki"* when the girl says she should keep her knees together when she sits, especially when she wears a skirt or a dress. Interestingly, the reviewer notes that his mother also extended this rule to wearing pants, emphasizing modesty regardless of clothing. This belief, still present in the reviewer's context, highlights how the book resonates with longstanding cultural norms. The reviewer also commends the illustration where the girl plays ball with a male child, as it invokes his experiences of playing with girls during childhood and maintaining a predominantly female friend group as an adult.

While these reflections stem from the reviewer's personal experiences, they highlight how readers' interpretations can vary based on cultural and social contexts. This variability underscores the importance of considering the authors' and illustrator's backgrounds. The award-winning author Gojo Cruz has produced several books and has been teaching arts, literature, and creative writing. At the same time, Oris has published several children's books and is a Palanca and a National Children's Book awardee. They may be considered professional writers, as reflected by their extensive writing

experience and the number of books they have produced. In addition, Parrocha is also an awarded children's book illustrator recognized both locally and internationally. Their combined expertise in writing and illustration is evident in the quality of the books, which are thoughtfully crafted to engage young readers. However, the stories' interpretations and impact may vary depending on individual readers' cultural, social, and personal experiences. This highlights the importance of considering diverse perspectives when evaluating children's literature, as what resonates with one audience may differ from another. Despite this, the authors' and illustrator's credentials lend credibility to the books, making them valuable additions to children's literature in the Philippines.

Lastly, both books may be rated three out of five. While they help promote body awareness and break taboos, they could be significantly improved by addressing the points raised in this review, particularly in fostering diversity and inclusion. This rating also reflects the reviewer's advocacy for diversity and inclusion, which may differ from the cultural and social beliefs of some parents, guardians, or teachers. The price of Php 199.00 each also influenced the rating—while relatively affordable and accessible for middle-class families, it may be less accessible for lower-income households. Considering the books' educational value, more affordable editions could help reach a wider audience.

Conclusion

"Ako ay May Titi" and *"Ako ay May Kiki"* play an essential role in teaching children about their bodies. However, it is also crucial for children's books to emphasize the concepts of bodily autonomy and consent. Teaching children about their right to control their bodies fosters an early understanding of personal boundaries and respect for others' boundaries. When children learn that they have the right to decide who can touch them and that they should always seek permission to touch others, it lays the foundation for developing positive sexuality as they grow.

Incorporating discussions of bodily autonomy and consent would also contribute to more inclusive and comprehensive lessons about self-awareness, empowerment, and respectful relationships. These concepts encourage children to develop a healthy sense of ownership over their bodies, reinforcing that their body is theirs to protect and care for, regardless of gender. By linking bodily autonomy to gender diversity, such books could promote a more holistic understanding of the body and its role in forming positive, respectful relationships, supporting children's growth into adults who respect their own and others' identities, boundaries, and consent.

The books could also be improved by showing a more diverse representation of gender and family roles that better match the different types of families today. This primary suggestion is challenging and may not be well received, especially in places like the Philippines, where conventional roles are deeply ingrained. Though a great majority already believes that gays and lesbians are trustworthy and have contributed to social progress, there are still some people who disagree (Social Weather Stations, 2023); thus, it is safe to assume that some parents and teachers may likewise be

uncomfortable with these changes. However, taking small steps over time, such as subtly including different family types in pictures or using inclusive language without altering the main message, can help ease these challenges and raise children's awareness of gender equality.

Lastly, if not adequately trained, writers and illustrators may find it challenging to present non-traditional family structures and more flexible gender identities in a way children can easily understand. To solve this, they can get advice from child psychologists and experts in gender studies to make sure the changes are clear and simple. Presenting these ideas through familiar, everyday scenarios can help children feel comfortable without confusing them. If these issues are adequately addressed, children's books can become valuable resources for teaching children not only about body parts but also about inclusivity and personal freedom in ways that reflect and respect the diversity of people.

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Statements and Declarations

Declaration of Generative AI in Scientific Writing

During the preparation of this work, the author used Grammarly, ChatGPT, and Claude to check grammar, ensure readability, and receive comments for the improvement of the drafts. After using these tools, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the publication's content.

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Bionote

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