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FEMINIST VISUAL-LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF *AKO AY MAY KIKI*

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Abstract
This study employs feminist literary theory and a visual-linguistic analysis to examine the portrayal of femininity in the children's illustrated storybook *Ako ay May Kiki* by Glenda C. Oris. It analyzes how linguistic choices, based on Abram's (1999) typology of diction, and the use of color, guided by the principles of color psychology, contribute to the construction of female representation. Findings reveal that the storybook challenges stereotypes of women as passive through active verbs that depict the female protagonist as strong and assertive. The explicit use of anatomical terms such as "vagina" normalizes discussions of the female body by presenting it as natural and empowered. The minimal use of adjectives and reliance on concrete, everyday language frame femininity in practical terms. Visually, the deployment of warm, positive colors conveys body acceptance and empowerment, while neutral tones reflect inclusivity and authenticity. Furthermore, the use of green and blue—commonly associated with masculinity—subverts conventional gender coding and broadens the representation of femininity. By highlighting inclusive language and visual strategies, the study underscores how the text and illustrations facilitate body consciousness, gender sensitivity, and positive self-esteem among children.

Keywords: *Ako ay may Kiki*, children's literature, feminism, visual-linguistic analysis

Introduction

Children's literature plays a central role in shaping how young readers perceive identity, culture, and gender. Prior studies reveal that it often reinforces stereotypes, with male characters portrayed as strong, adventurous heroes, while female characters are depicted as nurturing and passive (Qiu & Yoke, 2024; Bhatia, 2023). Such recurring patterns risk normalizing restrictive gender roles and limiting children's understanding of identity.

Two critical elements shaping these portrayals are language and illustration. Linguistic choices in children's texts often assign positive, active traits to male characters and diminutive or domestic qualities to female characters (José et al., 2024; Qiu & Yoke, 2024). Similarly, illustrations reinforce gender norms through character portrayal, depicted activities, and color palettes—commonly assigning

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boys' adventurous roles and masculine colors and girls' domestic roles with feminine hues (Filipović, 2018; Yigit-Gencten et al., 2024). While such portrayals perpetuate stereotypes, research shows that counter-stereotypical and gender-expansive representations can foster inclusivity and challenge restrictive norms (Kneeskern & Reeder, 2020; Roberts et al., 2022).

Visual-linguistic analysis offers a critical lens to study how verbal and visual elements interact to construct meaning in picture books (Shi, 2023; Damayanti et al., 2021; Guijarro & Sanz, 2008). However, most existing research has focused on Western publications, leaving Philippine children's literature underexamined. Addressing this gap, the present study analyzes *Ako ay May Kiki* ("I Have a Vagina") by Glenda C. Oris, illustrated by Beth Parrocha. While designed to promote body awareness and hygiene, the book has been critiqued for reinforcing gender color stereotypes and limiting representations of diverse identities (Mendoza, 2024).

Grounded in feminist literary theory, this study employs a feminist visual-linguistic analysis to investigate: (1) how linguistic choices contribute to representations of female identity, and (2) how color choices in the illustrations reinforce or subvert gendered meanings. In doing so, it seeks to extend the discussion of how Philippine children's literature can shape body consciousness, gender sensitivity, and inclusivity among young readers.

Method

This study examines the representation of femininity in the children's illustrated storybook *Ako ay May Kiki* by employing a feminist visual-linguistic analysis. It specifically addresses two questions: (1) how the linguistic choices in the text construct femininity, and (2) how the color choices in the illustrations contribute to the visual representation of femininity.

For the linguistic analysis, the study draws from Abrams' (1999) typology of diction, which classifies language into four categories: concrete diction (words that describe tangible, specific objects or actions), abstract diction (words that express intangible ideas or conditions), denotation (the literal, explicit meaning of a word), and connotation (the associative or emotional meanings of words). These categories guided the examination of how language in the storybook constructs representations of female identity.

For the visual analysis, the study examined the colors used in the illustrations and interpreted them through the lens of color psychology (Cherry, 2024). Colors were categorized as positive, negative, or neutral based on their associations with femininity, gender identity, and body perception. Prior studies show that color usage can reinforce gender stereotypes in children's media (Usui et al., 2023). Thus, identifying and interpreting the colors in *Ako ay May Kiki* provided insight into how visual elements reinforce or challenge traditional gender representations.

This study is unobtrusive research, as it does not involve human participants or empirical data-gathering tools (DeCarlo, 2018). Instead, it relies on qualitative interpretation within the framework of feminist literary theory. Larkin (2022) noted that feminist approaches to children's literature promote inclusivity and allow exploration of identities beyond restrictive norms. The analysis followed these three steps.

1. **Textual Analysis:** Identify and categorize words, phrases, and expressions in the text according to Abrams' (1999) four types of diction.
2. **Visual Analysis:** Identify the color schemes used in the illustrations and interpret their symbolic and psychological associations using principles of color psychology.
3. **Integrative Interpretation:** Synthesize the linguistic and visual findings through the lens of feminist literary theory to evaluate how femininity is represented in the storybook.

Findings and Discussion

Diction used in Ako ay May Kiki

Table 1. Content Words used in *Ako ay May Kiki*

Content Words	Frequency
Nouns	26
Adjectives	4
Verbs	35
Adverbs	7
Total	72

Table 1 illustrates the types of content words used in the story *Ako ay May Kiki*. The most frequently used type of content words are verbs with 35 frequencies, whilst the least used are adjectives with 4 frequencies. The usage of content words, especially nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs, may have a significant impact on gender representation, shaping societal norms and expectations.

Ashrafova (2024) posits that linguistic structures often reflect societal biases that may influence the understanding of children about gender roles. Thus, children's book authors must be selective in their linguistic choices to better reflect their viewpoints regarding gender through their books. Ridha et al. (2024) concluded that action verbs are usually associated with men, reflecting their assertiveness; however, in *Ako ay May Kiki*, some verbs like "fight", "play", "jumping", "running", "climbing up", and "tumbling" are associated with the habits of the unnamed female protagonist. This instance illustrates how the storybook's linguistic choices may challenge the preconceived notions of gender and its expected roles; hence, arguing that gender is created through the actions performed.

Borrowing from Butler's (1990) idea of gender performativity, she argues that gender is not a fixed essence, but rather created and maintained through repeated acts and expressions. This idea is evident in *Ako ay May Kiki* as the text associates the unnamed female protagonist with some actions deemed only for male such as the verbs where it challenges the observations from the studies of Potter (2024) and Pownall and Heflick (2023) wherein both studies revealed that action-oriented, leadership and adventurous verbs are prevalently used for male characters resulting in their portrayal as active and adventurous.

Overall, the usage of verbs to associate actions and states of being with gender is being challenged by *Ako ay May Kiki*, which may result in influencing its target readers (i.e., children aged 5 and above) to see that females may also perform actions like males.

Furthermore, the least utilization of adjectives may affect the reading engagement of the target audience with the book. Davies et al. (2022) discussed that adjectives are instrumental for enriching vocabulary and developing conceptual understanding. However, Leonard et al. (2019) reported that numerous studies found that some lexical categories, like adjectives, may be learned with difficulty. Beyond accessibility, the minimal use of adjectives also contributes to the book's directness and precision in message delivery. By limiting descriptive embellishments, the narrative emphasizes clarity over stylistic flourish, which aligns with its didactic purpose of educating children about genital hygiene and body awareness. This straightforward style prevents distraction from the central message and ensures that the focus remains on correct terminology and practical actions rather than decorative language. Juxtaposing these findings may lead to an inference that the least utilization of adjectives is part of an authorial intent to make the book more accessible to its target demographics without providing reading difficulties.

As a result, it is worth noting that the prevalence of nouns in the story might be used as a linguistic choice to make the book straightforward. Using nouns may have an impact on shaping identity and self-worth, where gendered portrayals influence how children perceive their own roles (Tso, 2023). Since the book's purpose is to educate children about genital hygiene and body awareness (Mendoza, 2024), the book aims to inform rather than to entertain, which may explain why the narrative delimits the usage of adjectives but invests in using nouns to provide discussion about genital hygiene and body awareness.

Nouns are used to avoid using any euphemisms related to gender and genitalia, which is why nouns like "body" and "panty" are used. "Vagina" is explicitly used in the story four (4) times, making it the most frequently used noun. The absence of euphemisms in discussing body parts or anything related to them may provide clearer communication and understanding based on the findings of Cauchi et al. (2023). They also asserted that teaching the correct terminology, like using vagina instead of flower, is pivotal in educational settings to engage discussions about health and body awareness. Hence, delimiting the use of adjectives while emphasizing nouns not only supports accessibility but also strengthens the book's direct and unambiguous stance, preparing readers to engage in accurate health and gender-related communication.

Overall, in terms of the linguistic choice of the storybook through examining the different types of content words used, it is evident that verbs are frequently used to associate with the acts and expressions related to the unnamed female character. By doing so, there are instances where the text challenges verb-gender association. Moreover, the delimitation of adjectives and the popularity of using nouns made *Ako ay May Kiki* direct in conveying messages related to genital hygiene and body awareness, wherein euphemisms are avoided as an attempt to utilize correct terminologies as a practice for the target audience in identifying their body parts and informing them how to take care of them.

Table 2. Types of Diction in *Ako ay May Kiki*

Types of Diction	Frequency
Abstract	2
Concrete	13
Connotation	5
Denotation	52
Total	72

Table 2 presents the different types of diction (Abrams, 1999) used in *Ako ay May Kiki*. The most frequently used is denotation with 52 frequencies, whilst the least is abstract with only two (2) frequencies. Diction in children's storytelling influences various layers of language development, cognitive engagement, and emotional responses.

Identifying the types of diction evident in the story resulted in examining how word choice may impact femininity representation since it can engage children, making the narrative more relatable and stimulating (Faria et al., 2024), aid in comprehension (Hartnett et al., 2023), and enhance empathy and emotional intelligence (Faria et al., 2024). Overall, the different types of diction assist children in comprehending the story based on the suitable and appropriate words to put in the story (Rusyda, 2023), leading to the assertion that, as part of the linguistic choice of the children's book author, being cognizant of the diction may impact readability and reading comprehension of its target audience.

Denotation pertains to the literal, dictionary definition of words. It is devoid of any emotional or cultural undertones. As a result, using denotation may provide clear, objective meaning for precise communication (Salis et al., 2020). In *Ako ay May Kiki*, there are nouns and verbs categorized as denotation since they are used with their dictionary-based definitions. By doing so, it becomes clear that the linguistic choice of the author may assist in obtaining the purpose of the story, which is to inform the readers about genital hygiene and body awareness. As such, by having recurring denotations, it can assist the book to clearly inform the readers by being objective to represent the actual meaning of the words (Kravchenko, 2024; Maulani et al., 2024; Pakpahan, 2021).

On the other hand, abstract diction refers to the use of language involving words that represent ideas, qualities, or concepts. It makes the readers visualize concepts in unique ways and connect emotionally with the text (Velayutham & Raman, 2024). However, with a limited use of adjectives, abstract diction is the least used type of diction. This indicates that the story cannot provide opportunities for its readers to imagine the book, but rather allows them to absorb the information available to them. Hence, there is no evidence that *Ako ay May Kiki* may represent complex ideas because of this limitation (Hassan, 2022). However, this linguistic choice may be used by the author to solely focus on the primary objective of the book, which is to educate female readers about their vagina.

In addition, the sparse use of connotation—words that carry emotional or cultural associations—further reduces the book's potential for affective engagement. While this may limit opportunities for children to develop deeper emotional connections with the text, it ensures that the message remains straightforward, factual, and free from metaphorical ambiguity. This trade-off

reinforces the book's function as an educational tool rather than a source of imaginative storytelling.

Overall, diction plays an important role in shaping the relationship of the book to the target audience. Through this, *Ako ay May Kiki* can be seen as a communicator representing an attempt to educate the readers to utilize correct body terminology.

Colors used in Ako ay May Kiki

Table 3. Colors used in *Ako ay May Kiki*

Color	Interpretation
Black	Neutral
Blue	Negative
Brown	Neutral
Yellow	Positive
Orange	Positive
Green	Negative
White	Neutral
Red	Positive
Pink	Positive

Table 3 highlights various colors used in *Ako ay May Kiki* with their corresponding interpretations. Positive colors, such as yellow, orange, red, and pink, are the most prominent in the storybook. Neutral colors, such as black, brown, and white, follow in frequency. Negative colors, particularly blue and green, appear the least.

The use of color in the storybook plays a crucial role in visually constructing femininity, which complements the linguistic elements that shape the narrative. This, in turn, contributes significantly to the book's overall tone and message. The representation of color in children's storybooks has a significant impact on gender perception as colors often carry implicit messages about gender roles (Karniol, 2011). Essentially, Xue et al. (2024) found that children begin to associate color with gender identity even before they recognize anatomical differences, which asserts the importance of intentional color use in early childhood books.

Notably, four of the colors used are considered positive, suggesting that the visual tone of the story leans toward an affirming and celebratory portrayal of femininity. Pink, often associated with softness, care, and traditional femininity (Frassanito & Pettorini, 2008), reinforces the book's central theme of embracing female identity. For instance, the girl is illustrated wearing a pink dress in one scene, which directly signals warmth and tenderness while simultaneously normalizing the female body in a non-threatening, approachable way. Red, symbolizing strength and vitality, adds a layer of empowerment to the representation of the female body (Kodzoman, 2019). This is exemplified in the illustration of red flowers surrounding the child, suggesting energy, life, and confidence as part of the body-positive narrative. Yellow, a warm color, contributes to an uplifting tone that aligns with portrayals of femininity as joyful, radiant, and alive (Al-Rasheed, 2015). The overall use of vibrant colors appears intentional, possibly chosen by the author to

visually represent body positivity and promote a healthy self-image. Also, it is important to note that while white is categorized as neutral, it is often linked to purity and innocence in children's literature, which aligns with the theme of early identity exploration (McMillen, 1967).

The author's inclusion of neutral colors, such as black, brown, and white, potentially offers balance and grounding to the story's visual palette. These colors are likely used for backgrounds, outlines, or contextual elements (Painter, 2008). Far from being mere fillers, these tones play a critical role in establishing a familiar and inclusive setting. Their neutrality contributes to maintaining an educational tone, which is suitable for a young audience, while preventing the narrative from becoming visually overwhelming. For example, the brown and black tones used in depicting the girl's hair and skin reflect Filipino identity, grounding the character in local reality rather than defaulting to Westernized portrayals. This intentional choice could reflect the author's aim to authentically represent Filipino identity, as opposed to relying on lighter skin tones and blonde hair, which are often associated with Western ideals (Pineda, 2019).

Interestingly, blue and green are also used in the book, which are categorized as negative colors. In many children's books, blue and green are commonly linked to male characters and conventional masculinity (Cunningham & Macrae, 2011). Thus, the visual choice of including these colors can be inferred as a subtle critique of the societal norms traditionally associated with these colors. Their presence serves as a counterpoint to the vibrant and affirming tones that dominate the narrative. For example, one page features a green background framing the child, which momentarily shifts the tone, signaling the intrusion of societal expectations tied to masculinity before the narrative reasserts its affirming visual palette.

With this, the book not only celebrates femininity but also offers a subtle commentary on the broader cultural norms that can hinder open, honest conversations about the body, especially in early childhood, as implied in the study of Moya-Guijarro and Mateo (2022). Furthermore, it is important to note that the color of the child's dress in the storybook changes, which could imply that her identity potentially changes over time. These distinctive color shifts in books are deemed to contribute to the story development and can be important in the development of character and setting (Martinez et al., 2020).

Overall, the intentional use of color in *Ako ay May Kiki* not only serves as a decorative element that complements the linguistic choice of the book, but more so plays a vital role in shaping its message, reinforcing themes of femininity, and challenging gender stereotypes in children's literature.

Table 4. Types of Color used in *Ako ay May Kiki*

Types of Colors	Frequency
Negative	2
Neutral	3
Positive	4
Total	9

Based on the data presented in Table 4, the types of colors used in *Ako ay May Kiki* reveal an interesting approach to visual storytelling that supports gender

representation. The storybook uses a greater number of positive colors, with four (4) frequencies and a minimal use of negative colors with a frequency of two (2). The inclusion of neutral, negative, and positive colors greatly influences children's understanding of gender identity and stereotypes (Karniol, 2011). This effect is perceived to be significant, as colors often convey implicit messages about gender roles.

The use of positive colors, such as bright and vibrant tones, plays an indispensable role in promoting affirming portrayals of femininity. These colors are often associated with warmth, care, and openness, traits commonly linked to female characters in children's literature (Song, 2024). Such representations can help readers, particularly young girls, develop pride and confidence in their identities at an early age. In the case of *Ako ay May Kiki*, the illustrator's use of these colors not only celebrates the female body respectfully and educationally, but also reclaims traditionally feminine aesthetics to symbolize empowerment rather than limitation. For example, the depiction of the girl smiling in a yellow background scene visually reinforces joy, vitality, and pride in her identity, encouraging children to view femininity positively. This color choice becomes a powerful visual narrative tool that shapes how readers emotionally engage with the content (Karniol, 2011). When positive colors are incorporated in parts that introduce and normalize female anatomy, the storybook counters the societal tendency to associate the female body with secrecy or shame. Rather, it transforms what could be a sensitive topic into one that feels more approachable, kind, and celebratory. This is particularly important in early childhood, where visual cues strongly influence emotional interpretation and long-term attitudes.

This finding carries meaningful implications for children's literature, particularly in advancing gender-sensitive storytelling. The predominance of positive colors in the book indicates a conscious effort by the author and illustrators to frame the female body in an affirming and celebratory light. This is especially relevant in the context of the book's objective, which is to normalize and educate children about female anatomy without shame.

On the other hand, the presence of stereotypically masculine-coded colors such as blue and green, although minimal in frequency, is equally significant. Rather than interpreting these negative colors solely as representations of aggression or dominance, their inclusion in *Ako ay May Kiki* may reflect an evolving perspective on gender representation (Martinez et al., 2020). An illustration showing the girl wearing a green skirt, for instance, expands the meaning of femininity by signaling calmness and growth, qualities not traditionally tied to female representation. By integrating blue and green into a story about the female body, the book subtly challenges the conventional association of femininity with positive colors, such as pink, red, yellow, and orange (Moya-Guijarro & Mateo, 2022). This implies an intentional effort by the author and illustrator to expand the visual vocabulary of what it means to be feminine.

This color choice suggests that femininity need not be boxed into a narrow palette of soft or warm tones. Instead, colors stereotypically linked to masculinity are being reclaimed to broaden the representation of girlhood and womanhood. It infers that girls can be bold, calm, strong, and cool, traits often symbolized by blue and green, without losing their identity as feminine beings (Qiu & Yoke, 2024). For instance, a page that shows a blue ribbon tied to the girl's hair demonstrates how

masculine-coded colors can be appropriated to symbolize strength and individuality within a feminine context. In doing so, the book pushes against rigid gender binaries and opens space for a more expansive understanding of identity.

In summary, the use of positive, neutral, and negative colors in *Ako ay May Kiki* is not merely an aesthetic choice; it rather reflects a deeper intention. It supports a reading and learning experience among young readers that promotes body positivity, challenges gender stereotypes, and highlights inclusivity. These notable findings affirm the importance of visual literacy and gender-conscious design in children's books, especially those related to sensitive but crucial topics like identity and anatomy.

Conclusion

The visual-linguistic choices in *Ako ay May Kiki* established an empowering female representation. Verbs such as "fight", "climb", and "tumble" portrayed the unnamed female protagonist as capable and strong, defying the traditional view of women as passive. Using anatomical terms directly, such as "vagina," normalizes the discussion of the female body by showing that it is empowered and natural. By employing a few adjectives and abstract diction, the story asserts clarity and informational value, framing femininity in terms of perception and action in daily life. Through this approach, the emphasis falls on the relevance of the woman's body presented in an unequivocal and non-taboo manner. To make the representation better in terms of its visual expression, the illustrator chooses a well-adjusted composition of neutral, positive, and negative colors. The topic of respecting female anatomy in the book is complemented by employing such strong, bold colors as pink, yellow, orange, and red to create warmth, happiness, and power. Brown and black are two examples of neutral colors used to represent diverse identities and constitute inclusiveness and authenticity. It is fascinating the way the blue and green colors, which are most often associated with masculinity, are subtly paired to challenge gender expectations and suggest that being strong and calm could be part of being a woman. The illustrator opens the visual representation of femininity by repossessing these colors, making space for an expansive understanding of womanhood. Children's book authors and illustrators are encouraged to continue employing purposeful language and visual strategies to depict femininity in a wide range of strong and varied representations. To make body awareness and gender inclusion the norm, authors need to encourage the application of simple language and inclusive representation. To topple gendered stereotypes, the color scheme can be broadened to support a variety of tones and introduce stereotypically masculine colors. In aid of enabling children to achieve a more expansive and self-assured vision of femininity, parents and teachers are encouraged to use books like *Ako ay May Kiki* to stimulate discussions on gender diversity, body image, and self-esteem.

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