

Children's Plight to Life of Poverty and Injustice Captured in F.H. Batacan's *Smaller and Smaller Circles*

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Abstract

*This research paper analyzes how children's experiences of poverty and injustice are imagined and articulated in F. H. Batacan's novel *Smaller and Smaller Circles*. By employing content analysis, passages and excerpts from the novel were identified and subjected to in-depth analysis using sociological and philosophical approaches to literary criticism. The study aims to explore the novel's portrayal of the causes and effects of these experiences, and how it reflects the broader discourse on the morality of children's suffering. The findings reveal that the novel imagines children's experiences of poverty and injustice as resulting from a complex interplay of societal norms, such as generational responsibility, the culture of silence, and toxic masculinity. Institutional failures, including the church's complicity, inefficient law enforcement, and barangay deficiencies, further exacerbate these conditions. Additionally, media and societal attitudes, particularly misplaced faith and victim blaming, contribute to the perpetuation of these harmful conditions. The novel portrays these imagined experiences as leading to psychosocial trauma, delayed or denied justice, delinquency, and even suicide. Through this portrayal, the novel positions itself within the discourse on the morality of children's suffering, raising questions about the ethical implications of these societal failures.*

Keywords: *Filipino children; injustice; moral obligations and poverty; *Smaller and Smaller Circles**

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Introduction

Literature holds up to man and society the ignored and numerous unfulfilled aspects of the dreams of his age in the hope that it may aid and direct society in fulfilling them. Literature compels us to deeply analyze societal issues and occasionally offer us a

solution. As a social product, it reflects both the good and bad values of society (Jadhav, 2014). When it mirrors negative values, it prompts us to address and resolve these issues. Conversely, when it reflects good values, it inspires us to adopt them. Often as reflection, literature acts as a portrayal of what people think, say, and do in a given society (Keerthika,

2018).

Literature is considered to be a form of social art, serving as a vehicle for self-expression and societal reflection that highlights societal values and ambitions for a thorough and critical evaluation (Asika, 2014). It records real-life events in society and transforms them into fiction, presenting them as a mirror for people to reflect upon their own actions and make necessary improvements.

Moreover, Nussbaum (1992) as cited in Young, (2019) was one of the early modern philosophers to argue that literary fiction serves as a significant source of moral insight. According to her perspective, engaging with literary fiction enhances readers' comprehension of social contexts and the intricacies involved in moral decision-making. Through this engagement, readers are prompted to reflect on their own moral values and beliefs, as well as consider alternative viewpoints.

One of the literary genres that best encapsulates historical events and occurrences reflected in literary works is the novel. The novel can illustrate the ties between people across different times and locations, portraying emotions such as aspirations, anxieties, joy, and various human sentiments that span from the past to the present (Dimaano, 2018). Thus, as the poet W.H. Auden puts it in his poem, the novelist, as opposed to poets, must "become the whole of boredom, subject to vulgar complains like love, among the just be just, among the filthy, filthy too, and in his own weak person, if he can, must suffer dully all the wrongs of man" (Mendelson, 2010)

The novel is regarded as an effort to recreate the social world and often serves as a mirror of a nation's history, values, beliefs, and experiences. Gide (2011) further suggests the inseparability of literature to its national context and argues that while it is possible to imagine a people without literature as if they were "deaf-mute," it is much more challenging to imagine literature that doesn't express the identity, culture, or experiences of a particular group of people or nation. According to Szakolczai (2016), novels can reflect and shape

the social and political realities of the world, especially in relation to colonialism, nationalism, and globalization and they can expose hidden histories and voices of marginalized groups that are often silenced or ignored by official discourses.

The trend of using novels to expose social issues dates back to the early days of the novel. Authors have long recognized the power of storytelling to educate and inspire readers, and they have used their novels to tackle a wide range of social issues, from poverty and inequality to racism and sexism. One of the most famous examples of a novel that exposes social issues is *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe. This novel was published in 1852 and is credited with helping to turn public opinion against slavery in the United States.

To achieve this purpose, authors often use characters to expose social issues in novels. They may create characters who are stereotyped, discriminated against, or struggle to overcome social injustice. For instance, in the novel *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, the character of Sethe is a former slave who is haunted by the ghost of her dead daughter. Through Sethe's story, readers see the devastating effects of slavery and the importance of finding healing and liberation.

The trend of reflecting societal realities in novels has a long and rich history in the Philippines, dating back to the early days of Spanish colonization. *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*, the two most famous novels by Jose Rizal, are masterpieces of social realism that expose the injustices of Spanish rule and the Filipino people's struggle for independence. In the post-colonial era, Filipino novelists continued to grapple with the challenges facing their country, exploring themes such as poverty, inequality, corruption, and political repression. These can be seen in the novel *Dekada '70* by Lualhati Bautista which provides a vivid account of the everyday lives of ordinary Filipinos during the Marcos dictatorship, while *Dogeaters* by Jessica Hagedorn explores the pre-Marcos era.

As a third-world country that grappled with decades of colonization, insurgencies, and

corruption that led to economic inequality, the Philippines remains below the poverty line with 19.9 million people being poor in 2021 as reported by World Bank Group (2023). In this dilemma, children are the most susceptible, bearing the weight of poverty and injustices. They are highly dependent on others to satisfy their basic needs, and this makes them particularly vulnerable (Bagattini, 2019). Children should be able to study, have enough to eat, have time to play, and so on. However, in the Philippines, more than 13 million children do not experience these rights because they are born into poor families (UNICEF, 2013).

The sociocultural experiences of Filipino children are mirrored, albeit scarcely, in the country's published literature. F.H. Batacan, in her 1996 novel *"Smaller and Smaller Circles,"* expressed her outrage at the Philippines' condition and the "indifference, complacency, and corruption" that perpetuated it. Her novel reveals the harsh realities faced by impoverished children in Payatas, who endure injustice as they sift through mountains of garbage in search of food or sellable items. These same underprivileged children also face further injustice as victims of serial killings.

While numerous studies have examined the role of literature in reflecting societal issues, there has been limited focus on how contemporary Filipino novels specifically address the experiences of children suffering from poverty and injustice. Previous research has explored themes of poverty and social injustice in Filipino literature (e.g., Reyes et al., 2012; Panelo, 2015), but these studies often focus on broader societal impacts rather than the specific experiences of children.

Moreover, existing literature on *Smaller and Smaller Circles* has primarily focused on its portrayal of crime, corruption, and power relations (Ngilangil, 2022; Taan & Lasaten, 2021), with insufficient attention given to its depiction of children's suffering within the context of social discourse. This study seeks to fill this gap by specifically analyzing how Batacan's novel reflects and critiques the experiences of impoverished children in the Philippines, positioning the novel within the frameworks of the sociology of the novel and

cultural materialism.

Literature can remind us of our moral obligations to each other and challenge us to take action to address social injustices. By giving voice to the marginalized and vulnerable, literature can inspire individuals and communities to work towards a more just and equitable society. Thus, this study aims to [1] investigate how children's experiences of poverty and injustice are captured in the novel, [2] determine the causes and effects of poverty and injustice experienced by children as depicted in the novel, and [3] analyze the novel's position within the discourse of morality of children's suffering, offering reflection on its contribution to this discourse.

By addressing these objectives, this research contributes to the existing literature by providing a focused analysis of the intersection between children's suffering, poverty, and literature, particularly in the context of contemporary Filipino fiction.

Methodology

The study made use of a descriptive method in looking into the experiences of the children characters in the novel who suffer from poverty and injustice. This will include content analysis which is used to systematically identify patterns and meaning in the text, aligning with the study's objectives.

The primary data source for this study is the complete text of the novel *"Smaller and Smaller Circles"* by F.H. Batacan. Relevant passages and excerpts from the novel that pertain to children's experiences of poverty and injustice as well as its causes and effects were identified and extracted for in-depth analysis.

The analysis of the novel was conducted using the framework of the sociology of the novel, in addition to sociological and philosophical approaches to literary criticism. The sociology of the novel framework considers literature as a social product that reflects the conditions, ideologies, and conflicts of its time. This study examines how *Smaller and Smaller Circles* serves as a representation of the social discourse

surrounding poverty and injustice, particularly as experienced by children in the Philippines. The framework helps to position the novel within the broader socio-cultural context, analyzing how the text reflects, critiques, and engages with societal issues. The analysis follows Witte's (1941) assertion that literature is deeply intertwined with the social, economic, and political forces of its era.

The sociological approach is employed to investigate the societal contexts and issues presented in the novel, such as poverty and injustice. Literature is viewed as a societal mirror that reflects the social and cultural facets of society. This approach is based on the idea that writers, as critical observers, utilize literature to gauge and respond to societal influences (Setyorini, 2009).

For the philosophical approach, the moral lens was followed to provide a moral reflection on the issues discussed in the text with the aim of improving children's lives. This follows the notion that the bigger purpose of literature is to provide moral lessons and probe philosophical questions. This perspective focuses on how literature reflects, challenges, or reinforces moral values and ethical dilemmas. By applying this lens, critics examine how a text addresses issues of morality, virtue, and vice, and assess the moral lessons it conveys to readers. This approach is rooted in historical perspectives on literature, such as those of Plato and Aristotle, who explored literature's role in shaping and reflecting moral values within society. While not necessarily judging a work as morally 'good' or 'bad,' the moral lens seeks to understand how literature can influence and reflect moral thought and behavior (Bhagat, 2024).

Results and Discussion

1. Children's Experiences of Poverty and Injustice

The novel *"Smaller and Smaller Circles"* by F.H. Batacan provides a sobering look at the experiences of children living in poverty and injustice in the Philippines. From a sociological perspective, these experiences can be

understood as the result of a number of factors, including social inequality, economic disparities, political corruption. The Philippines is a highly stratified society, with a large gap between the rich and the poor. This gap is reflected in the fact that children from poor families are more likely to experience poverty and injustice. The Philippines is also a developing country, with a high rate of poverty. This lack of economic opportunity can make it difficult for families to provide for their children's needs.

The Philippines' struggle with poverty and injustice among children is deeply intertwined with its tumultuous history of political corruption and colonialism. A history of political corruption has led to insufficient investment in essential social services like education and healthcare, hindering the ability of children from impoverished families to access necessary resources for their development. Furthermore, the country's colonial past, which includes over 300 years under Spanish rule followed by nearly 50 years of American control, has bequeathed a legacy of inequality and poverty. Compounding these historical challenges, the Philippines has endured several internal conflicts, such as the Marcos dictatorship and the recent war on drugs, which have wrought havoc on children's lives through displacement, violence, and trauma.

a. Ryan Molino

Ryan Molino was the first identified victim of the serial killings in the Payatas dumpsite. Payatas is the largest dumpsite in the Philippines, taking up an area of 13 hectares. The site is where trash is piled up to seven stories high in some places and the area is inhabited by impoverished squatters, many of whom are children, who rummage through the dump to find goods they can eat or sell (Svenningsen, 2003). One of the many scavengers in Payatas was Ryan Molino. As a child who grew up in poverty, he greatly suffered from malnutrition as he was not provided with enough healthy food to eat – especially meat or fish that are high in protein. This lack of protein in their diets explained how small they were as they hit their teens.

Saenz, in his examination of the boy's cadaver noticed that:

The front teeth of three of the victims ... showed that they had breathed often through their mouths – a sign of chronic respiratory disease. Their families could rarely afford meat or fish, and so they were raised on diets short on protein. (p.16)

A report from UNICEF Philippines in 2014 revealed that each day, 95 children in the Philippines lose their lives due to malnutrition. Twenty-seven out of every 1,000 Filipino children fail to reach their fifth birthday. Additionally, one-third of Filipino children experience stunting, which is characterized by being shorter than average for their age (Reyna, 2014). These statistics align with the novel's portrayal of the pervasive impact of poverty on children's health and well-being, reinforcing the sociological critique embedded in the narrative.

b. John David “Jon-jon” Mendoza

If finding enough food and getting basic nutrition were basically an everyday challenge, what more of attending school to have an education? The meager earnings made by one person are not enough to buy food for even for a day. Whole families are forced to climb the mountain each day, hoping that together they can earn enough to feed everyone.

Most Payatas children do not finish basic education because as early as four years old, they must work in their daily struggle for survival or “isang kahig, isang tuka”. Another identified victim of the serial killings was John David “Jon-jon” Mendoza. He only finished up to 4th grade and had to work for his family as a scavenger in Payatas dumpsite, digging up trash or anything that he could sell. He's also the one who brings food to the table of his family because his parents cannot go to work. When Saenz and Jerome interviewed his mother, she explained that:

If he couldn't find metal or wood or paper to sell, he would look for food—anything thrown away that could still be used. If it was too spoiled or rotten, he would mix it

together for pig slop and sell it. If there were scraps that could still be eaten, he would bring them home. If he didn't go, we didn't eat. (p.45)

Jon-jon's story reflects how economic pressures undermine educational access, illustrating the severe impact of poverty on family life and the lack of resources that forces children into labor instead of schooling. In a report by the Philippine Statistics Authority, among 31.71 million children aged 5 to 17 in the country, 4.7 percent were working children (Xinhua, 2023). Payatas children experience these realities despite the country's labour law, which mandates that children are not allowed to work in hazardous trades such as waste picking. It states that children under 15 years old cannot be employed, unless the legal guardian engages the services of the child, and the job does not endanger the child's life, safety, health, morals and does not impair the child's normal development (Fernandez, 2022).

c. Lino Alcaraz

The character of Lino Alcaraz exemplifies how children in poverty are also victims of less informed decisions of their parents when it comes to family planning. Poverty can lead to limited educational opportunities and a lack of information about reproductive health and family planning methods. With several children to feed, some parents decide to send them for adoption. In the novel, Lino Alcaraz experienced the same. He was born out of marital rape of his mother and was raised by his eldest sister. He grew up being hated by his known “lola” and died not knowing who his real mother was.

While digesting the news that his son is already dead, Binang remembers when she sent off Lino to be raised by her eldest daughter:

It's your turn, all of you, “she said, cold and resentful. “I've served you many years. It's time you started taking care of each other.” The boy grew up not far from his mother's home, seeing her as a sullen, hostile old woman who for as long as he could remember seemed to have an especial

dislike for him. Today, it dawns on Binang that her youngest son died not knowing who his real mother was. Nobody had ever bothered to tell him. (p.178)

Lino's story highlights the novel's critique of emotional neglect and familial dysfunction, which stem from the mother's inability to properly care for her children. This failure is primarily caused by poverty and a lack of support, underscoring the broader societal issues the novel seeks to address.

d. Noel Solis

The novel also highlights the role of economic disparities in perpetuating poverty and injustice in the country through the story of Noel Solis. The Philippines is a developing country with a high rate of poverty. This lack of economic opportunity can make it difficult for families to provide for their children's basic needs. For example, the character of Noel Solis is a realistic portrayal of the dependence of poor families on external aid, often on the form of charity or political patronage, to survive. His mother's efforts to obtain medicine for him by queuing up at politicians' offices or relying on Church outreach programs reflect the broader societal issues of economic inequality and the lack of access to essential services. This reliance on charity and political favors highlights the vulnerabilities of the poor, who must navigate a system that often prioritizes public displays of generosity over sustainable solutions to poverty. The novel provides a deeply emotional portrayal of these hardships through a reflection from Noel's mother:

He didn't crawl until he was over a year old, didn't talk till he was almost three. Thin arms and legs, the head just a little too big for the body, large, serious eyes like her own. She thought he would die before he was five. Nights awake, praying, weeping, hoping the neighbors wouldn't complain about his constant wailing. (p.175)

Noel's experiences highlight the structural inequalities that entrench poverty in the country. In the Philippines, it's a harsh reality that the impoverished often queue up at a politician's office, seeking financial aid, food, or other forms of assistance. When their requests

are granted, politicians typically hand out money in an envelope, accompanied by the obligatory photo op—a symbolic display of generosity. If politicians can't provide sufficient financial support, they may refer individuals to higher officials or agencies. These referral letters extend to hospitals, pharmacies, and even funeral homes, covering the required services at the public official's expense. For example, designated funds are established with hospitals so that individuals with medical needs, who approach the office, can be seamlessly directed to these facilities. Instead of a direct cash disbursement, a piece of paper from the politician's office can be exchanged for essential items such as medicine and even a coffin. This is the second option of poor families on how to get money for food or medical expenses (Montiel, 2012).

e. Vicente or "Enteng" Bansuy

Enteng's life is a stark representation of how poverty can lead to criminal behavior, as explored in the novel. He was forced to find money by being a lookout for older boys for their burglaries. He saw his sick father die in his arms because of pneumonia from working all night in the new wet marking that the mayor wanted to be completed before election. Without a father figure to guide him, he eventually became a delinquent and often visited the police station. In one chapter of the novel, the narrator poignantly describes Enteng's experience of his father's death:

... Enteng watched his father die while Lolit was doing some other family's laundry in a subdivision further down the highway. Saw the light go out of his eyes, the gentle face goes slack. The boy knew better than to telephone her employer's house. They would need whatever money they could scrape together for his father's funeral. (p.180)

As Marcus Aurelius opined (in Dong(2020), "poverty is the mother of crime". With their lack of education, financial resources, and opportunities to endure the day having food on their table, children often submit to committing crimes to survive. Social Disorganization Theory, developed by Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay, posits that crime

flourishes in areas characterized by social disorganization, such as high poverty rates, residential instability, and weak social control. Social disorganization can lead to a range of negative consequences, including crime, violence, and delinquency. Poverty contributes to social disorganization by weakening community bonds, reducing social capital, and diminishing the capacity for informal social control (Bond, 2018). The death of his father highlights the absence of a supportive network, leaving Enteng alone to deal with the grief and burden of responsibility.

f. Unnamed University Student

While investigating rumors of Father Ramirez's inappropriate conduct with minors, Father Guz discovered a disturbing truth: his former student, a quiet and intelligent young man had attempted suicide, ... *"he learned among other things, that he has been molested as a child by Ramirez."* (p.23) Despite seeking verification and reporting the abuse to the Archdiocese, Guz was met with silence and Ramirez was merely transferred.

The Catholic Church, as a dominant social institution in the Philippines, wields significant influence over moral and social norms. However, the Church's authority has also enabled it to suppress scandals, protect abusers, and silence victims, perpetuating a cycle of abuse and cover-up. The student's story highlights the deep-seated issues within the Church that allow such abuses to continue unchecked.

This narrative aligns with real-life cases, such as the arrest of Father Kenneth Hendricks in 2018 for allegedly abusing dozens of boys. The case exposed the culture of silence, cover-ups, and inaction often surrounding these cases. Despite widespread knowledge of Hendricks' actions, fear of retribution prevented locals from taking action or reporting the abuse for years. This case highlights the urgent need for transparency, accountability, and effective policies to address and prevent clerical child abuse within the Church (Cullen, 2021). Poignantly, this also parallels the novel's depiction of Father Ramirez's actions and the institutional response—or lack thereof.

g. Alex Carlos

Alex Carlos is a dentist who provides services on Saturdays in the mobile clinic sponsored by the charity. He graduated from Payatas High. He has his own private practice. He came from a poor family and was able to finish his education through scholarships. Before transforming into a serial killer, Carlos endured repeated sexual abuse perpetrated by his PE teacher, Mr. Gorospe. Emong, a former school mate of Alex, revealed to Fr. Jerome that:

...He [Gorospe] liked Alex best. Alex was smart, clean, neat. He used to get us all together and tell us that Alex was his special boy, that he enjoyed everything Gorospe did to him. And we knew it wasn't true. We all felt sorry for Alex. (p.262)

Alex Carlos's descent into serial killing can be viewed through the lens of Robert Agnew's General Strain Theory. This theory posits that individuals experiencing strain, the inability to achieve goals or meet needs through legitimate means, are more likely to engage in deviant or criminal behavior (Jang and Agnew, 2015). Alex's life was marked by significant strain: growing up in poverty, enduring prolonged sexual abuse from a trusted adult, and lacking support from his family and peers. These experiences likely fueled intense negative emotions like anger, resentment, shame, and helplessness. Unable to find healthy outlets for these emotions, Alex may have turned to violence as a twisted way to seek revenge, regain control, and express his pain.

2. Causes of Children's Experiences of Poverty and Injustice

In the novel, children's experiences of poverty and injustice are not isolated incidents but rather a complex tapestry woven from interwoven threads of societal, cultural, and institutional failures.

a. Societal Norms and Traditional Beliefs

1) Generational Responsibility

In *Smaller and Smaller Circles*, the ingrained Filipino tradition of passing down responsibility highlights how societal norms shape the lives of children in poverty. This tradition burdens children with the weight of family survival, often sacrificing their education and childhood for immediate income. Traditional Filipino families also believe that children, as a gesture of gratitude for their parents bringing them into this world, are obliged to return the favor by working and providing for their family. Instead of enjoying their childhood, going to school, playing with their friends, or developing their passions, Filipino children are burdened with the generational responsibility of lifting their families from poverty. Parents perceive their child as an investment in the future. This cycle of poverty becomes self-perpetuating, limiting future opportunities and perpetuating social inequalities. The novel portrays this reality through characters like Jon-jon Mendoza, who is compelled to work at a young age to support his family. As Saenz's interview with Jon-jon's parents reveals:

I see. So, Jon-jon helped with the family expenses?" "Yes. We depended on his earnings to get by. Often, he would bring food from the dump." Saenz's eyes widened. "From the dump?" They have five kids and "Jon-jon was the oldest. He just turned thirteen in January. The rest are too young to work. (p. 89)

This is a reality as it is consistent with the study conducted by Pua (2001), wherein results revealed that the main motivational factors for the Filipino working students who are eldest in the family, were their sense of responsibility for their family and their desire to improve their socio-economic status.

2) The Culture of Silence

Filipino society's reluctance to report crimes, particularly those within the family or involving influential figures, creates a shroud of secrecy that protects perpetrators and

silences victims. The novel critiques how this pervasive silence shields perpetrators and suppresses the voices of victims, highlighting a critical aspect of societal dysfunction.

The narrative reveals the impact of this culture of silence through the experiences of Saenz, who observes the obstacles faced by those trying to expose the truth:

But Ramirez had powerful friends within the church hierarchy and society, and Saenz was shut out the ensuing Church investigation. One by one, children and teenagers who had been willing to testify dropped out, fearful, and intimidated. (p.23)

This portrayal mirrors real-world cases such as the allegations against Fr. Hendricks, as investigated by Quing (2021). The study revealed how the allegations of sex crimes by priests are still ignored, sometimes for decades, in one of the world's most Catholic countries. The study also exposed how the culture of cover-up, silence, and self-protection among the clergy and the local community enabled the priest to continue his abuse. Thus, the novel clearly mirrors the realities faced by sexual abuse victims in the Philippines and reveals a complexity of Filipino culture.

3) Toxic Masculinity

Traditional expectations of masculinity, emphasizing stoicism and suppressing emotional vulnerability, hinder male victims of abuse from seeking help or acknowledging their trauma. This societal pressure can lead to devastating consequences, as exemplified by Alex Carlos' journey down a dark path. His parents' admission reflects the pervasive influence of these societal norms:

We were afraid. Nobody talked about such things back then. (p. 289)

This statement reveals the broader cultural context in which Alex's suffering occurred—a context where discussing abuse and emotional pain is stigmatized. The novel critiques how such toxic masculinity norms can exacerbate the trauma experienced by

male victims, leading them to internalize their pain and struggle in isolation.

The realities portrayed in the novel are corroborated by Ong et al. (2018), which revealed that male survivors of sexual abuse in the Philippines were often silenced and marginalized by the patriarchal and macho culture that stigmatized and invalidated their experiences. The study also revealed that the male survivors faced several challenges in dealing with their trauma, such as denial, shame, guilt, anger, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and suicidal thoughts.

The novel uses Alex Carlos's tragic journey to critique these traditional masculine ideals and their detrimental effects on male victims. By illustrating the ways in which toxic masculinity perpetuates silence and suffering, *Smaller and Smaller Circles* calls attention to the urgent need for cultural change. It advocates for a more supportive environment where male victims can openly acknowledge their experiences and seek the help they need, challenging the societal norms that hinder emotional expression and healing.

b. Institutional Failures

1) The Church's Complicity

The novel critiques how the Church hierarchy's protection of abusive figures like Fr. Ramirez exposes a systemic failure to protect children and uphold moral standards. This lack of accountability fosters an environment where abuse thrives, leaving victims vulnerable and questioning their faith. After receiving the outcome of the Church's inquiry into Fr. Ramirez's action, Saenz blurted out in exasperation that:

He 'll keep doing the same thing, no matter which parish he's rotated to, no matter what project he takes on. And this charity he runs—he's just using it as a way to choose and groom more victims. (p. 45)

This critique highlights the systemic issues within the Church. Instead of addressing the abuse, the institution's failure to act allows perpetrators to continue their actions under the guise of different roles and projects. This

pattern of behavior underscores a significant failure in accountability, where the institution's protection of its own members outweighs the protection of vulnerable children.

2) Inefficient Law Enforcement

In the novel, the police's dismissal of reports from marginalized communities, particularly those involving missing children from poor families, signifies a systemic bias and inadequate service delivery. This negligence perpetuates a sense of powerlessness and undermines trust in the justice system. Ben Arcinas, hoping to get cases that would get him more media exposure argued that:

We see it all the time, especially in slums like Payatas. I'm not saying that we shouldn't investigate this, but I don't get the extreme focus on it. We've got bigger, more pressing things to take care of. (p.36).

Arcinas's comment underscores the police's tendency to prioritize cases based on their perceived importance or media value, often neglecting cases involving marginalized communities. This systemic bias contributes to a sense of powerlessness among these communities and undermines trust in law enforcement.

3) Barangay Deficiencies

The novel also addresses deficiencies within the barangay system, such as limited resources and training which hinder their ability to effectively prevent crime and protect children. This lack of capacity leaves communities vulnerable and exposes children to potential harm. Moreover, the public has less trust on them and instead of reporting missing persons directly to barangay or police authorities, they would instead:

... turn to a local radio or television station to issue a panawagan—an appeal to the public for help or information to locate the person. Often, that's as far as things go; little police effort, if any, is expended toward following up on the cases after that—unless,

of course, the victims are wealthy or influential. (p. 36)

This observation highlights how the barangay system's deficiencies lead to ineffective crime prevention and response. The reliance on media appeals rather than systematic police efforts underscore the limited capacity of local authorities to address serious issues effectively.

c. Media and Societal Attitudes

1) Misplaced Faith

The novel critiques Filipino society's idealized view of its culture, which emphasizes exceptionalism, strong religious faith, and close family ties. This idealization creates a blind spot for recognizing serious issues such as child abuse and serial killings. The belief that such heinous crimes are impossible in the Philippines due to its moral values leads to denial and inadequate intervention. This misplaced faith results in the assumption that missing children have simply run away, allowing these problems to fester and preventing effective solutions. Ben Arcina's statement reflects this misplaced faith:

There are no serial killers in the Philippines... Our neighborhoods are too congested, our neighbors too nosy, our families too tightly knit for secrets to be kept and allowed to fester. We have too many ways to blow off steam – the nightclub, the karaoke bar, the after-work drinking binges with our fun-loving barkada. We're too Catholic, too God-fearing, too fearful of scandal. (p.33)

Arcinas's denial of the existence of serial killers in the Philippines illustrates a common societal attitude that dismisses the possibility of such crimes due to an idealized perception of Filipino culture. This perspective reflects a broader phenomenon where exceptionalism and cultural pride obscure the reality of serious issues. The belief that Filipino society is too close-knit and moral to harbor such problems prevents a realistic and critical examination of the issues at hand.

Angeles (2020) discusses Filipino exceptionalism, the idea that the Philippines and its people are uniquely exceptional compared to other countries in Southeast Asia. This concept is often used to deny, minimize, or justify various issues, including poverty, corruption, violence, human rights violations, and environmental degradation. In the context of the novel, Filipino exceptionalism contributes to a refusal to confront and address issues like child abuse and serial killings. By promoting the belief that such problems are inconceivable within the context of a "God-fearing" and "family-oriented" society, Filipino exceptionalism hinders effective intervention and perpetuates a cycle of denial and inaction.

3. Effects of Children's Experiences of Poverty and Injustice

a. Psychosocial Trauma

Children exposed to poverty, violence, and abuse experience long-term psychological trauma, including depression, anxiety, and PTSD. This trauma can manifest in various ways, impacting their emotional well-being, social relationships, and future development (Colich et al., 2020). In Alex Carlos's case, the psychological trauma inflicted by repeated sexual abuse during his childhood plays a critical role in his eventual transformation into a serial killer. The trauma from these early experiences contributes to his intense negative emotions and actions, as illustrated in his reflections:

...And just as an authority figure started this whole mess, he's looking to an authority figure—the police, maybe even you—to bring it to an end. He knows he has to answer to society's justice, but only after he's exacted his own personal justice. (page 384).

This reflects how deep-seated trauma can lead to a desire for personal retribution and a distorted sense of justice, further complicating the victim's ability to seek or accept societal help.

b. Delayed or Denied Justice

Victims of crime and exploitation often face delayed or even denied justice due to systemic failures and societal biases. This lack of justice exacerbates their suffering, fuels further trauma, and erodes their faith in the system. In Alex Carlos's situation, the family's decision to keep him in a potentially abusive environment due to financial constraints illustrates this issue:

...So, you let him stay there? You allowed it to go on?" "He was on scholarship at Payatas High." "If we pulled him out, we would not have had enough money to send him to school." "He said he'd take care of Alex, that he was just going through a normal phase that all young boys go through. Told us not to give up on our son. (p.289).

This demonstrates how systemic failures, such as inadequate responses to abuse and exploitation, contribute to prolonged victimization and delayed justice.

c. Suicide

The crushing weight of poverty, injustice, and trauma can lead children to take their own lives. This tragic outcome highlights the devastating consequences of these interconnected issues and emphasizes the urgent need for intervention. According to a review by (Perez-González and Pereda, 2015), 16 studies revealed that childhood sexual abuse victims were two to three times more likely to think about suicide and three to four times more likely to attempt suicide than the general population. Yoon, Cederbaum, and Schwartz (2018) found a similar pattern in their study, which indicated that adolescents who had experienced sexual abuse were 3.08 times more likely to have suicidal thoughts.

The case of Saenz's former student, who attempted suicide after enduring abuse, highlights this critical issue:

...he became involved when one of his former pupils, a quiet, intelligent young man who had been struggling to get through university, attempted suicide.

When Saenz tried to find out why, he learned, among other things, that he had been molested as a child by Ramirez. (p. 25)

Ramiro, Madrid, and Brown (2010) found in their study that childhood sexual abuse victims were five times more likely to try to kill themselves in the Philippines. Thus, the case of Saenz's former student represents these realities in the Philippines.

d. Delinquency

Enteng, a once quiet and well-behaved boy, descends into delinquency after his father's death. Poverty forces him to associate with older boys who engage in petty crimes. He misses his father deeply and yearns for the normalcy of a father-son relationship. Despite his mother's attempts to help him, Enteng's life spirals downward, culminating in his disappearance. Enteng witnesses his father's suffering and eventual death from pneumonia due to working long hours in harsh conditions. This traumatic experience leaves a deep emotional scar, contributing to his behavioral changes. Lolit reminisces how Enteng changed behavior and remembers that:

Then, a year later, a purse snatching, his first run-in with the police. Witnesses said he didn't do it; the older boy who did had passed the purse on to him and dissolved into the noontime crowd at the junction of Tandang Sora and the highway. Enteng, the budding juvenile delinquent, not quite as fleet of foot or swift of reflex. Running straight in the direction of a few traffic cops who had parked their patrol vehicles on the side of the highway. And afterward the first of several visits from the police. (p. 180)

This is prevalent as evident in the study of Esguerra (1979) wherein he used data from the Philippine National Police and the Department of Social Welfare and Development to examine the characteristics and trends of youthful offenders in the country. The study found that poverty was a major factor that influenced juvenile delinquency, as most of the youthful offenders came from low-income families and had low

educational attainment. The study also found that Manila had the highest youth crime rate, and that most of the crimes committed by the young offenders were theft, robbery, and physical injury.

4. Moral Reflection

The novel *"Smaller and Smaller Circles"* is a powerful call for social change. It shows that the experiences of children living in poverty and injustice are not inevitable, but rather the result of structural inequality and injustice. The findings of objectives 1 and 2 reveal the devastating impact of poverty and injustice on children in the Philippines. Children from poor and marginalized communities are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of poverty and injustice. They are more likely to be victims of crime, exploitation, and neglect. They are also more likely to be denied access to education, healthcare, and other essential services.

These findings raise a number of important moral questions. How can we justify a society in which children are allowed to suffer in this way? What are our moral obligations to these children? What can we do to create a more just and equitable society where all children have the opportunity to thrive?

Here are some specific moral reflections on the findings of objectives 1 and 2:

a. It is morally wrong to allow children to suffer from poverty and injustice. Children are the most vulnerable members of our society, and we have a moral obligation to protect them.

b. We have a moral obligation to challenge the systems and structures that perpetuate poverty and injustice. This includes challenging institutions such as the church, the police, and the barangay. It also includes challenging cultural norms that contribute to the problem.

c. We have a moral obligation to help children who are affected by poverty and injustice. We can do this by supporting programs that provide children with access to

education, healthcare, and other essential services. We can also work to create a more just and equitable society where all children have the opportunity to thrive.

Utilitarianism is the moral theory that holds that the right action is the one that maximizes the overall happiness or well-being of all sentient beings. According to utilitarianism, we should act in ways that promote the greatest good for the greatest number of people (Burns, 1989).

The novel shows that the current situation of children living in poverty and injustice in the Philippines is morally unacceptable, because it causes immense suffering and misery for a large number of people, especially children. This violates the utilitarian principle of maximizing happiness and minimizing suffering.

The novel also shows that social change and reform are possible, if people are willing to challenge the systems and structures that perpetuate poverty and injustice, and to help those who are affected by them. This suggests that there is a moral opportunity to act in accordance with the utilitarian principle of maximizing happiness and minimizing suffering, by supporting programs that provide children with access to education, healthcare, and other essential services, and by working to create a more just and equitable society where all children could thrive.

Conclusion

The novel *"Smaller and Smaller Circles"* by F.H. Batacan is a powerful and disturbing portrayal of children's experiences of poverty and injustice in the Philippines. The characters grappled with numerous challenges, including inadequate access to food, education, and healthcare. They are often forced to work to support their families, sacrificing their childhoods and compromising their future prospects. Some of them were also victims of sexual abuse by people of authority.

The analyst identified several causes of these experiences contributing to children's suffering, including societal norms, institutional failures, and media and societal

attitudes. Generational responsibility, the culture of silence, and toxic masculinity were identified as key societal factors. Additionally, the analysis revealed inefficiencies within the Church, law enforcement, and the barangay system, further exacerbating the vulnerabilities of children. Furthermore, misplaced faith in Filipino exceptionalism and the tendency to minimize or deny issues like sexual abuse of men and serial killings impede progress towards a more just and equitable society. These resulted in psychosocial trauma, delayed, or denied justice, suicide, and delinquency.

Lastly, the experiences of the children in the novel raise a number of important moral questions and a call for action. It is morally wrong to allow children to suffer from poverty and injustice, we have a moral obligation to challenge the systems and structures that perpetuate poverty and injustice, and we have a moral obligation to help children who are affected by poverty and injustice.

The novel *"Smaller and Smaller Circles"* provides a powerful reminder that we must not turn away from the suffering of children. This novel urges readers to take action. We can support organizations that provide education, healthcare, and other essential services to children in need. We must collectively challenge the structures that perpetuate poverty and injustice, demanding a society where all children have the opportunity to thrive.

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