

Resistance and Solidarity against Domestic Violence in Children's Novel *Lola Rose* (2003) by Jacqueline Wilson

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Introduction

Dame Jacqueline Wilson is a former Children's Laureate (2005 - 2007) with more than 100 contemporary realistic children's novels which have been translated into over 30 languages. Drawing from her childhood experiences, Wilson's works highlight "subjects once seldom discussed in literature aimed at the young but with which children themselves may be familiar either from their own lives or through observing others in the classroom or playground" (Tucker & Gamble, 2001, p. 72). The issues discussed are "seen through the eyes of children who survive, observing and adapting to their complicated lives" (Eccleshare, 2003, para. 1). Despite that, there remains a scarcity in the scholarship devoted to serious analyses of her novels (Armitstead, 2004; Corbett, 2007; Duncan, 2009). The paper responds to this gap by focusing on Wilson's *Lola Rose* (2003) with particular attention given to the theme of domestic violence encountered by Lola Rose, the pre-adolescent girl protagonist.

According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), one of the most worrying global concerns involves the "tremendous violence [...] committed against children" (Payton, 2014, para. 5). In the effort to protect the rights of children, UNICEF highlights the "presumably large numbers of children unable or unwilling to report their experiences [as many] victims are too young or too vulnerable to disclose their experience or to protect themselves" ("Children from", 2016, para. 4). Likewise in Malaysia, the "Welfare Department statistics show that the number of children in need of protection and care following abuse and neglect cases [...] has increased", involving "more female children than male children in reported cases" (Lee, 2016, para. 9-10). As such, although the selected work to analyse in this study is set in England, the issue which the author discusses remains familiar to children across the continents.

Methodology

Featuring mostly pre-adolescent girl protagonists, Wilson's works are considered as feminist texts. According to Trites (1997), feminist children's novels often contain "adults who perpetuate stereotypical gender roles" (p. 6). This is because,

the presence of traditionally depicted females could be used to serve as part of the revision (of female ideologies) for it is only against the passive female, the silent female, the objectified female, that the female protagonist's achievements can be fully understood. [parenthesis original] (p. 6)

In view of that, the selected novel is read from the feminist lens of Amy Allen's theory of power forwarded in her seminal work, *The power of feminist theory: Domination, resistance, solidarity* (1999). The concepts utilized consist of "domination, the limitation of [women's] opportunities and choices by men (or others); resistance, the ability to resist that domination; and solidarity, the joining together with others to gain strength to challenge domination" [parenthesis original] (Peabody, 2010, p. 17). The discussion charts how Lola Rose, the pre-adolescent girl protagonist encounters power abuse from domestic violence. Following that, it also traces how she uses power to exert individual resistance and collective resistance through solidarity to overcome the domination experienced. It is hoped that the study contributes to "rejecting stereotypes and affirming the right of all children to find positive reflections of themselves and their lives in literature" (Wigutoff, 1981, para. 3).

Discussion

Domestic violence is one of the most visible forms of domination present in *Lola Rose* (2003). Jay, the father character of the story, is portrayed as a violent person with a history of conviction for causing "grievous bodily harm" (Wilson, 2003, p. 12). He also frequently hits his wife, Nikki. Jayni, the pre-adolescent girl protagonist, and her younger brother, Kenny, witness repeated episodes of domestic violence imposed upon their mother: "I had to listen, even though I couldn't bear it" (p. 18). According to Watkins (2000), "children are violated not only when they are the direct targets of patriarchal violence but as well when they are forced to witness violent acts" (p. 63).

When Jay's temper is provoked after a family dinner one evening, Jayni attempts to resist him individually by speaking up against her father: "'You spoil everything! It's all spoiled because of you and your moods and your shouting and your hitting [...] Why can't you be like a real dad?' I yelled" (Wilson, 2003, p. 30). Resulting from that, her father hits her. The incident instigates Nikki to run away with the children and start a new life in London (pp. 30-2). They also change their names to prevent Jay from locating them. Nikki takes on the pseudonym Victoria (Vicky) Luck while Jayni adopts the glamorous-sounding Lola Rose. Kenny renames himself as Kendall¹. Thus begins the family's solidarity in overcoming domestic violence.

When Lola Rose discovers that Vicky grew up in a violent home, she further extends solidarity to her mother by assuring her that domestic violence is not her fault. Rather, it is the men who use violent ways to exert their power over others who should be held responsible (pp. 67-73). In contrast to Vicky who seems powerless to resist the cycle of domestic violence and remains trapped within a victim mindset, Lola Rose represents a figure of empowerment to resist the domination encountered. Their livelihood and condition gradually improve when Vicky finds employment (p. 90) as Lola Rose settles into a new school (p. 102).

In the second half of the novel, Vicky discovers a lump on her breast. In her naivety, Lola Rose assumes that her father's physical violence is the cause of her mother's illness. When Vicky is admitted to the hospital for a surgery, Lola Rose fears that the children will be forced to return to Jay. She thus seeks solidarity through Auntie Barbara, her mother's long-lost elder sister. The arrival and presence of Auntie Barbara in the story provide Lola Rose with the power of solidarity to challenge the domination of domestic violence. When Jay appears in their new flat, the physical safety of the family is compromised. Lola Rose interprets his presence as a form of captivity: "Dad, arms round us all. Imprisoning us" (Wilson, 2003, p. 242). In this instance, Auntie Barbara offers her solidarity and assures Lola Rose that she will not allow Jay to harm them (p. 246). Lola Rose is further empowered to individually resist Jay when he tries to hit Vicky: "He raised his hand, his fist clenched. I ran towards Mum" (p. 248). However, Auntie Barbara is quick to physically overpower Jay as she demands him to leave

them permanently (pp. 248-9). Auntie Barbara's actions hence become examples of collective resistance for the pre-adolescent girl protagonist in overthrowing the domination of domestic violence.

The novel closes with Auntie Barbara inviting the family to live with her, ensuring that their safety and well-being are protected. The analysis shows that although Lola Rose is individually powerless to completely overthrow the domination of her father's domestic violence, she benefits from the power of solidarity offered by her Auntie Barbara to subvert the domination: "I don't really worry about Dad now. Auntie Barbara will protect us if he ever comes back [...] We're going to live happily ever after, Mum and Auntie Barbara and Kendall and me. Fingers crossed" (Wilson, 2003, p. 288).

Conclusion

With the statistics of child abuse cases increasing at an alarming rate in both Malaysia and other parts of the world, there is an urgent need to address the mounting challenges which our children face. The paper proposes the analysing of Wilson's contemporary realistic children's novels as a strategy to create public awareness and educate the children on how to identify the traits of domination which they may encounter. In *Lola Rose* (2003), the pre-adolescent girl protagonist experiences power abuse from the domestic violence encountered uses. Nonetheless, by using power as "positive forms of autonomy, self-expression, and self-awareness" (Trites, 1997, p. 8), Lola Rose is able to challenge the domination experienced. As Trites (1997) maintains, "[t]he feminist character's recognition of her agency and her voice invariably leads to some sort of transcendence, usually taking the form of a triumph over whatever system or stricture was representing her" (p. 7).

Trites (1997) asserts that there are "no more powerful tool than children's books" to advance the feminist agenda (p. 4). The study of feminism in children's literature is hence recognized as "a corpus of literature that can speak to readers of all races and both genders" with the fundamental goal of creating an environment free from gender discrimination (p. 9). The rewarding analyses of the selected contemporary realistic children's novel authored by Wilson points to a potential for the study of her other works in similar approach. For Tucker and Gamble (2001) the author's works "are also worthwhile reading for parents and carers for the insights they give to children's predicaments in the postmodern era" (p. 27). Concluding, it is hoped that the study "will pave the way for many more novels to be identified and used, especially in the classroom, as feminist texts" (Trites, 1997, p. 9).

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