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Research Article

Deciphering Sociopolitical Context of Samantha Lucille Tancontian's *Buhay Frontliner* in the Covid-19 Era

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ABSTRACT

The covid- 19 pandemic changes our society's lifestyle, culture, and issues. The unprecedented event brought people to adjust in their lives as the government also changed its implementation of protocols and guidelines to be safe during the pandemic. This literary research study assumes that Samantha Lucille Tancontian's *Buhay Frontliner*, written during the intense lockdown and early pandemic, reveals the contemporary sociopolitical context. Using critical discourse analysis, the researcher explores the local colors, plot, and themes that reveal contemporary sociopolitical context. The researcher anchors the readers' response theory on analyzing the fictional short story. Results indicate that the short story shows contemporary sociopolitical issues. The study confirms that the short story "*Buhay Frontliners*" has contemporary sociopolitical problems embedded in its literary elements.

Keywords: *contemporary, socio-political, buhay frontliner, covid-19, critical discourse analysis*

Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid- 19) outbreak has created a global crisis that has profoundly impacted the way we see the world and go about our daily lives (Arriaga, Esteves, Pavlova, and Picarra, 2021). It causes great trouble with world's economy (UNICEF, 2020), health (Arriaga et al, 2021), tourism industry (Gursoy and Chi, 2020), scientific world (Zocchi, Pietrobon, Moretto, Bonsembiante, Mazzola, Petruzzi, Iocca, Pichi, Ansarin, Pellini, 2020), and many more. People and organizations worldwide have had to adjust to

new ways of work and life (De, Pandey, Pal, 2020).

However, despite everything the world is facing, literature still documents it. The writers make so many literary pieces worldwide about the covid-19 pandemic. Since the covid-19 onset, many books have been published, and many authors have gone on virtual book tours and at least wrote an increasing number of published books partially during the ongoing crisis (Seattle Times, 2021). Writers express their thoughts, share their experiences, and convey their ideas through making different

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literary pieces. Hamill (2020) documented books reflecting plague, disease, and pandemic published during the crisis. Poems on suffering, loss, and resilience brought about by the covid-19 pandemic are also published (Campo, 2021). Salud (2020) noted that it is the best time for literature to shine, not for its self-gratification or glory, but as a sympathizing voice, or better yet, a clearer looking glass through which the truth can be seen and understood.

Last June 14, 2021, Samantha Lucille Tanconcian, a young writer of the Davao Writers Guild, published in their literary journal, *dagmay. online*, the fictional short story on covid-19 pandemic entitled *Buhay Frontliner*. Tanconcian, a Davao native, is currently studying her Bachelor of Arts in English at the University of the Philippines Mindanao.

Although there are already a lot of literary studies already published in different journals, it is noted that there is no study yet that investigates the sociopolitical context of the short story of Samantha Tanconcian. Thus, this pushes the researcher to conduct the study.

This study looks into the contemporary sociopolitical context of a fiction story in the status quo of the society facing the covid-19 pandemic. The researcher posits that societal issues and concerns are also changing today as the world changes because of the global crisis. This study investigates the contemporary sociopolitical context of Samantha Lucille Tancontian's *Buhay Frontliner*.

Contemporary sociopolitical context is the new and unique societal issue we experienced during the pandemic. Some of these issues existed before the pandemic, and some existed in the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant effect on our lives. Many of us face challenges that can be stressful, overwhelming, and cause strong emotions in adults and children (CDC, 2021). The pandemic causes physical health concerns and results in several psychological disorders (Salari, Hossenian- Far, Jalali, Vaisi- Ragani, Rasoulpoor, Mohammadi Khaledi- Paveh, 2020).

Moreover, pandemic also has adverse effects on the future of children. Gotinga (2020) documented that Senator Sherwin Gatchalian, Head of the Senate Committee on Basic Education, Arts and Culture, said that at least 2.3

million children have not enrolled for the School Year 2020 as the education system migrates to distanced modes of learning. The Department of Education has noted a 9% decline in enrolment in 2020. On the other hand, Joseph Noel Estrada, managing director of the Coordinating Council of Private Educational Associations, affirmed that half of the students have a dropout in private schools from 2.3 million students out of 4.3 million. Furthermore, the country's poverty worsened during the pandemic (De Guzman, 2021). The National Economic and Development Authority sees unemployment staying elevated and more people remaining below the poverty line until 2022. Acting Socioeconomic Planning Secretary Karl Chua emphasized that the pandemic scars the country's economy (Rivas, 2021).

Methodology

This study assumes that Samantha Lucille Tancontian's *Buhay Frontliner* reveals the contemporary sociopolitical context.

This literary research is anchored on Reader's Response Theory.

Reader's Response Theory identifies the significant role of the reader in constructing textual meaning. In acknowledging the reader's essential role, reader reaction differs from New Criticism's early text-based ideas or brain-based psychology viewpoints on reading. Scholars like David Bleich, Norman Holland, Stanley Fish, and Wolfgang Iser contributed to the development of what is now known as reader reaction. Textual meaning is created within the reader in reaction to text, according to this idea, and each reader is placed in a unique way that includes ability, culture, gender, and overall experiences (Brown, Chen, Baroudi, Sevinc, 2021).

Moreover, it is based on the assumption that a literary work occurs in the mutual relationship between the reader and the text. According to this theory, the meaning is constructed through a transaction between the reader and the text within a particular context. Readers assume multiple roles when responding to a variety of forms of literature. Developing responses facilitates active and meaningful reading and increases emotional and intellectual participation in the text, which ultimately

provides learners with better comprehension and awareness of the text. The potential value of classroom discussions helps learners express their emotional reactions, elicit their responses, nourish their perspectives for furthering the depth of their interpretation, corroborate their opinions, and share their answers for building a social relationship. It is crucial that learners perform more adequately in response to texts and actively engage in dialogues to pose literal and inferential questions, explore a range of possible meanings, and foster cognitive development and comprehension (Mart, 2019).

Although the reader's role in creating the meaning and experience of academic work has long been recognized in literary theory, modern reader-response criticism began in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in the United States and Germany, with work by Norman Holland, Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, Hans-Robert Jauss, Roland Barthes, and others. According to reader-response criticism, literature should be understood as a performing art in which each reader develops their own, perhaps unique, text-related performance. It is diametrically opposed to formalism and New Criticism. (Lumen Learning, n.d.)

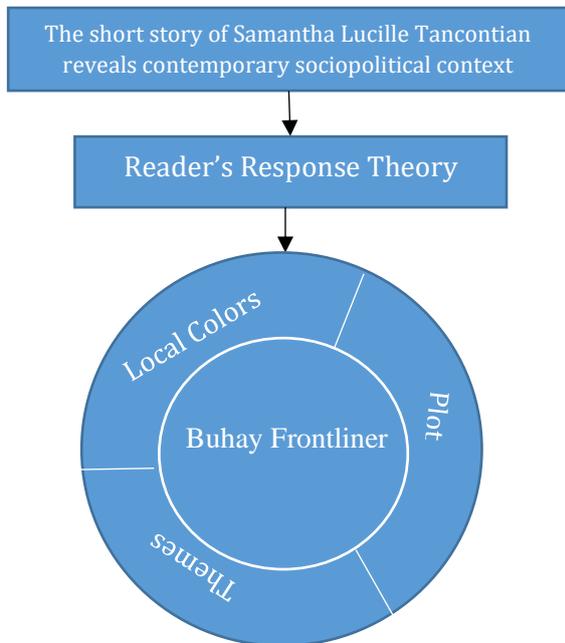


Figure 1. A Schematic Presentation of a Theoretical Background of the study

Reader-response criticism can be connected to post structuralism's emphasis on the reader's role in actively constructing texts rather than passively consuming them. Unlike text-based approaches such as New Criticism, which are grounded upon some objective meaning already present in work being examined, reader-response criticism argues that a text has no meaning before a reader experiences—reads—it. The reader-response critic's job is to explore the scope and variety of reader reactions and analyze how different readers, sometimes called "interpretive communities," make meaning out of both purely personal reactions and inherited or culturally conditioned ways of reading. (Poetry Foundation, n.d.)

Results and Discussion

Local Color

Local Color	Contemporary Sociopolitical Context
room put together by wood planks (setting)	informal settlements
Dumpsite (setting)	poor sanitation
loudness of their snores (social custom)	pandemic fatigue
Mang Kaloy's last thoughts before finally drifting off to a dreamless sleep (character)	Anxiety
communal bathroom (setting)	Poverty
more than three meals a day (social custom)	Hunger
Wife (character)	Depression
Son (character)	school dropout
walk under the sun (social custom)	lack of public transport for the frontliners

The short story was analyzed using the three local colors: characters, setting, and social custom. Mang Kaloy, wife, and son emerge as the characters of the local colors. Mang Kaloy, in the story, was thinking deeply about his thoughts before his sleep. As the head of the

family, he always thinks about the welfare of his wife and son. This character of the story implies the anxiety that people are getting during the covid-19 pandemic. According to the Center for Disease Control and Protection (2021), covid-19 brought a stressful, overwhelming, and caused strong emotions in adults and children. It is also evident in KFF Health Tracking Poll from July 2020. It found out that 36% of the adults experienced negative impacts on their mental health and well-being, such as difficulty sleeping. The second character of the story is his wife. She was laid off because of the budget cut during the pandemic. The study of Panchal, Kamal, Cox, and Garfield (2021) noted that adults in homes with job loss or reduced incomes report greater rates of mental illness symptoms (53%) than those in families without job or income loss (32%). It is also observed that many companies, business, and any other organization cut their human resource because of the limited budget and income they earned due to lockdown. Lastly, the main character's son implies the school dropout. Mang Kaloy's son stopped his studies because they didn't have money to buy gadgets and study in an online learning setup. This social problem was attested by Senator Sherwin Gatchalian, Head of the Senate Committee on Basic Education, Arts and Culture, and Joseph Noel Estrada, managing director of the Coordinating Council of Private Educational Associations. Both affirmed that more than 2 million Filipino students stopped schooling from the start of the pandemic in the year 2020 (Gotinga, 2020).

Moreover, three local colors emerged for the settings. It is the room, dumpsite, and communal bathroom. The story's characters lived in a small space or a room just put together by wood planks to get their privacy. They lived near the dumpsite and had only a communal bathroom with their neighbors. The settings of the story and the living conditions of the characters could be some up into the most common word, poverty. The country's poverty worsened during the pandemic (De Guzman, 2021). According to Kelly Bird, national director of the Asian Development Bank, a poverty incidence rate of 20% would equate to nearly 22 million impoverished Filipinos in 2020, up from 16.7% in 2018. The National Economic and

Development Authority sees unemployment staying elevated and more people remaining below the poverty line until 2022. Acting Socioeconomic Planning Secretary Karl Chua emphasized that the pandemic leaves scars on the country's economy (Rivas, 2021).

Meanwhile, the room in the story also signifies informal settlements, one of the problems our country was already facing before the pandemic. Approximately 4.5 million individuals are homeless or live in informal settlements, according to the statistics agency, with about 106 million population in the Philippines (Chandran, 2018). On the other hand, dumpsite conveys poor sanitation. Poor sanitation, according to the World Health Organization and UNICEF, is one of the country's long-standing socioeconomic challenges. Around 50.3 million Filipinos (around 10 million households) lack access to appropriate sanitation services, with 24 million of them using limited/unimproved toilets or no toilets at all. Sanitation that is securely managed refers to the use of improved toilet facilities that are not shared with other homes and where excreta is safely disposed of on-site or transported and processed off-site. (UNICEF, 2020)

Furthermore, three local colors emerged for social customs. First is the loudness of snores. This social custom signifies pandemic fatigue. According to the World Health Organization, "pandemic fatigue" is "feeling demotivated about following recommended behaviors to protect ourselves and others from the virus." The loudness of snores symbolizes tiredness of what their lives are all about and a night of deep sleep that could be associated with a long bedtime and less socialization with other people. The next social custom is "more than three meals a day." It has always been a tradition of the Filipinos to eat more than three meals for those wealthy and well-sustaining Filipino people. However, the struggling family members could not do this, especially during pandemic like Mang Kaloy's family in the story. This signifies hunger and the lack of food as a contemporary social issue. The United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) noted that the COVID-19 pandemic is disrupting food systems worldwide, particularly in developing countries like the Philippines (Ramos, 2020).

Moreover, based on the Department of Science and Technology's Rapid Nutrition Assessment Survey from Nov. 3 to Dec. 3, 2020, 62.1 percent or six out of ten of the 5,717 homes polled with a total of 7,240 people reported moderate to severe food insecurity, with food security being highest in families with children (7 out of ten) and those with pregnant family members (8 out of 10). This shows that food security worsens, especially during the lockdown in the country. Lastly, the third-social custom is "walked under the sun." This could be associated with the Philippines' social problem, which is lack of transportation, especially

during the lockdown, as frontliners don't have public transit going to their respective works. Enrico Tensuan, President of Makati West Rotary Club, affirmed that many health workers and other essential employees faced daunting commutes to their job with up to two hours each by their foot during the government-mandated lockdown in urban cities (Hyland, 2021)

The data shows that contemporary socio-political contexts through the local colors are pandemic burnout, poverty, hunger, school dropouts, and lack of public transportation for the frontliners this covid-19 pandemic.

Plot

Plot Structure	Scene	Contemporary Socio-political Context
Exposition	Mang Kaloy is walking tired from the hospital leading to their house.	lack of public transport for the frontliners
Rising Action	Mang Kaloy has different thoughts prior to his sleep. He thinks of the society, struggle of the workers, and their own struggle amidst the pandemic.	pandemic fatigue
Climax	The boss fired Mang Kaloy in his work.	Loss of jobs
Falling Action	Mang Kaloy told his wife over the phone about being fired in the work. His wife was angry and got depressed	Loss of jobs poverty
Resolution	Mang Kaloy see his wife committing suicide in their communal bathroom.	Depression and suicide

The exposition is the introduction of the story. The establishment of the characters in the story signifies contemporary social issues on the lack of public transportation for the frontliners. From the lines, Mang Kaloy is just walking from the hospital to his home within six hours. It was established right away by the author of what life he is living as a frontliner during the pandemic. It shows that his son stopped from schooling, his wife was laid off from work because of the budget cut, and he is only the one working for his family amidst this pandemic.

Next is the rising action of the story. The event in the story becomes complicated; the conflict is revealed. There are two types of conflict for rising action, internal and external conflicts. Mang Kaloy remembered the pale face of the last patient he had to bring down to

the morgue for internal conflict. The patient's died with her eyes wide open. This character vs. self struggle conflict signifies the pandemic fatigue that most medical frontliners encounter, especially when they die. It is stress from work that you still bring even before you sleep.

Meanwhile, the main character Mang Kaloy has character vs. society conflict amidst the pandemic for the external conflicts. He couldn't stop thinking about the effects of lockdown that greatly affected the working class. He differentiates the elites or the rich people from the working class. He mentioned the privileges of these people that have not been given to them. This signifies the class struggle problem. Karl Marx developed the idea of class struggle. Marx argues that society was divided into classes and the elites are the ones who are enjoying different privileges in the community. In contrast,

the working class continues to struggle despite the hard work that they put in work every day.

The story's climax is when Mang Kaloy gets fired in his work. It is the turning point of the story. The climax conveys the loss of jobs during the pandemic. According to the Philippine Statistics Authority's (PSA) labor force survey, 4.2 million Filipinos were unemployed, and 7.9 million Filipinos took pay cuts from shorter working hours during the pandemic (De Guzman, 2021). It is unfortunate for Mang Kaloy because he is working for his family to survive. Without his work, questions arise as to how the characters in the story cope with this kind of problem amidst the pandemic.

Next is the falling action of the story. When the resolution begins in the story, complications start to fall into place. The falling action of the story is when Mang Kaloy tells his wife about the status of his work and when his wife is angry and depressed, ending the phone call with these words "... Di ko na kaya to. Hindi ko na talaga kaya, Loy." These two scenes convey poverty as a whole and the lost jobs. With their existing conditions of his son who dropout from schooling and his wife having no work because of the budget cut of the company, it is now Mang Kaloy's work that his family is

relying on. However, he also lost it. This shows that the family is killed by poverty, and the environment worsened it during the pandemic.

Lastly is the resolution of the story. It is considered as a conclusion and the outcome of the events in the story. Given the scenario, the wife was depressed about what happened to their family. She committed suicide in the communal bathroom. Mang Kaloy found out after arriving from the hospital as he walked six hours to his home. This conveys depression and suicide during the pandemic. As the global health crisis progresses, continuing and required public health actions expose a growing number of individuals to scenarios that are connected to poor mental health outcomes, such as isolation and job loss. Job loss is linked to greater sadness, anxiety, distress, and low self-esteem, as well as a higher likelihood of drug use disorder and suicide, according to research from previous economic downturns. (Panchal et al., 2021).

The data shows that contemporary sociopolitical contexts through the structure of the plot are pandemic burnout, class struggle, and lack of public transportation for the frontliners amidst this pandemic.

Themes

Lines	Themes	Contemporary Sociopolitical Context
<i>"... And more often than not, it preys on the poor."</i>	Poverty	Class struggle
<i>"Yet even with all that, people with money, the rich, still think it's a blessing because they have all the time in the world to do what they want."</i>	Privileged	Class struggle
<i>"It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair how these people have the choice on what to consume when his family struggled to find food to eat at least twice a day..."</i>	Poverty	Class struggle
<i>"He looked at Junjun with tears in his eyes dreading to see the sad look on his son's face when he tells him he had to stop studying."</i>	Poverty	School dropout
<i>"Because of the pandemic, his wife was layed off from work."</i>	Budget cuts	Unemployment
<i>"As usual, he didn't get enough sleep but he had to work"</i>	Lack of rest	Pandemic Fatigue
<i>"Defeated and knowing he couldn't do anything else, Mang Kaloy stood up and nodded at his boss in acknowledgement"</i>	Resilience	Unemployment

Lines	Themes	Contemporary Sociopolitical Context
<i>"With an empty stomach under the glaring sun, Mang Kaloy started his walk."</i>	Hunger	Lack of public transport for the frontliners
<i>"The free shuttle only had two service times. One in the morning and another at night"</i>	Lack of Support	Lack of public transport for the frontliners
<i>"He pushed through people to get closer to the front only to see his wife's lifeless body on the bathroom floor with a noose wrapped around her neck"</i>	Suicide	Depression

The themes that emerged from the story are poverty, privilege, budget cuts, lack of rest, resilience, hunger, lack of support, and suicide.

The theme of poverty has two contemporary sociopolitical issues: school dropout and class struggle. School dropout is when Mang Kaloy looked at his son, Junjun, and thought about their lives and why he had to stop studying. It shows poverty amidst the pandemic. The family of Mang Kaloy has not had enough income since his wife has no work because of the layoff of workers in the pandemic. Other lines from the story have poverty themes and signify class struggle. The struggle emphasized in the two lines is about the fairness of life between the working class and the elites. Another sequence shows class struggle but has a different theme, privilege. In this line, Mang Kaloy's thoughts question the battle of the working class and the privilege that the rich people are enjoying amidst the pandemic.

The following emerging sociopolitical issue is the loss of jobs with budget cuts and resilience as the themes. The budget cut is the layoff of the wife of Mang Kaloy, and the resilience is on how Mang Kaloy stand-up to the decision of his boss to fire him from work.

Another emerging sociopolitical issue is the lack of public transport for frontliners. The themes seen are hunger and lack of support. The line for hunger is when Mang Kaloy walks on the streets with an empty stomach. Meanwhile, lack of support shows there are only two shuttle services for a day. It cannot suffice the transportation for our frontliners in a day.

Lastly is the pandemic fatigue and depression as sociopolitical context. Pandemic fatigue has a theme of not having enough rest. It is when Mang Kaloy has an anxiety attack and lacks rest at night. Meanwhile, depression has a

theme on suicide. The depression of the wife of Mang Kaloy leads to her death in the communal bathroom.

The data reveals that contemporary sociopolitical context through the themes is school dropouts, class struggle, loss of jobs, pandemic burnout, and lack of public transport for the frontliners amidst covid- 19 pandemic.

Conclusion

Applying the reader's response theory on the data confirms that the short story of Samantha Lucille Tancontian's Buhay Frontliner has a contemporary sociopolitical context embedded in the literary elements.

The world is now facing a global crisis of the covid-19 pandemic, and we still do not know where this covid-19 era ends. The literature said that this era is the new normal in society. As society evolves, contemporary social issues also emerge in society. Thus, this is a challenge for literary scholars to investigate literary works made during the pandemic on the socio-political, socio-historical, and socio-economical.

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