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**A Journey of Self-discovery:
The Representation of Minority Girls in Cynthia
Kadohata's *The Thing About Luck*, Alicia D.
Williams' *Genesis Begins Again* and Rebecca
Balcárcel's *The Other Half of Happy***

21st Century American Children's Literature

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Abstract

The United States is a country of constant immigration which could be defined by the concepts of diversity and multiculturalism. Given the large population consisting of minority people in the country, the American society is progressively enriching by virtue of the variety of cultures, races and religions; however, people of color have to endure discrimination and a slow process of integration. Besides, this multiplicity leads to children interacting with people ethnically different to them and since the acquisition of systematic prejudice has its origins in childhood, minority children's literature and its representation could play a major part in avoiding it. The purpose of this paper is to explore how minority girls are represented in the middle-grade novels *The Thing About Luck* (2013) by the Japanese American author Cynthia Kadohata, *Genesis Begins Again* (2019) by the African American author Alicia D. Williams, and *The Other Half of Happy* (2019) by the mixed-raced half-Guatemalan, half-American author Rebecca Balcárcel, as well as to prove that the protagonists are in journey of defining their identity which is conditioned by the fact that they are women in a patriarchal world, by their difficult family circumstances and by their belonging to a minority in the United States. The first part of the analysis deals with the gender of the characters; it is examined how, for being women, they have to deal with gender roles and expectations of a male-centered society. In the second section, the family environments of the girls are analyzed, regarding how dysfunctional families cause children to have responsibilities affecting their mental health. Finally, this study covers the consequences of belonging to a minority, delving into the racism the girls endure along with the way they perceive themselves. This research aims to remark the importance of minority children's literature for the representation of multicultural people with the objective of conveying real integration in America.

Key words: Children's literature, minority literature, gender roles, family relationships, racism, identity.

Table of contents

1. Introduction	4
2. Theoretical background	5
3. <i>The Thing About Luck</i> (2013), <i>Genesis Begins Again</i> (2019) and <i>The Other Half of Happy</i> (2019): minority middle-grade girls facing patriarchy, family issues and racism. 6	
3.1. Gender: women in a patriarchal society	8
3.2. Family relationships: dysfunctional families and responsibilities	13
3.3. Belonging to a minority in the United States: racism and prejudice.....	18
4. Conclusions	24
Works cited	27

1. Introduction

The presence of minorities in the United States has been a relevant subject for discussion as it is a country of continuous immigration. As Massey states, “the nature of ethnicity is likely to change as a result of a new immigration that is linguistically concentrated, geographically clustered and temporally continuous into an American society that is increasingly stratified and unequal” (632-633). The integration of minority people in America has been a slow process and as a result of their racial, religious, and other ethnic characteristics, these minorities have been excluded to a great extent from the established dominant culture in the United States (Gast 12). In addition, people belonging to a minority have been and continue to be marginalized.

The shaping of this prejudice begins in childhood when children learn intolerance of people who are racially and culturally different from themselves (Gast 12). Thus, in a diverse country like the United States, the concern of ethnic presence in books for children is critical. Minority literature helps multicultural children see themselves represented while exposing American children to other cultures, which is relevant to open a conversation on concerns regarding diversity (Colby and Lyon 24). This way, pushing minority literature to the forefront, children’s perception of race can be influenced from the very beginning of their lives.

Thus, by analyzing three minority literature books for children, this paper will discuss the minorities in the United States along with the racism and various other issues they have to go through. The books this research is going to cover are *The Thing About Luck* (2013) by Cynthia Kadohata, *Genesis Begins Again* (2019) by Alicia D. Williams and *The Other Half of Happy* (2019) by Rebecca Balcárcel. The criteria I followed for the selection of the novels are the following ones: they are middle-grade books, the authors belong to a minority, the stories take place in the United States in the twenty-first century, and the narrators are racially identifiable – the protagonist girls are Japanese American, African American and a mixture of Guatemalan and American. Besides, racial oppression is evident to the reader, and the resolution of the conflicts leads to change. In fact, they are three coming-of-age novels with protagonists of ages twelve to thirteen who are in the process of shaping their identity.

Taking this information into consideration, this research paper aims to demonstrate how the way Summer, Genesis and Quijana – the protagonists of the three novels – define their identity is conditioned by gender roles, by their family ties and by their belonging to a minority. Moreover, this paper also stresses the importance of minority children’s literature for the representation of multicultural people with the objective of achieving real integration in America.

The first section of the analysis covers the gender of the characters, commenting on how women have to adapt to specific gender roles that the patriarchal society imposes on them. The second section will analyze how family relationships affect children’s development and mental health. Finally, the third section focuses on the repercussions of belonging to a minority, of suffering from racism and of self-discrimination.

Throughout the paper, the 8th edition of the MLA style will be used to quote and reference sources.

2. Theoretical background

Before delving into the analysis of the novels, it is important to clarify what minority literature is. As Deleuze and Guattari state, it is a “literary production that is created by a minority using the majority language” (as cited in Cergol). Banks adds that this literature reflects the lifestyles and perspectives of marginalized cultural groups that traditionally lack representation in publications and media (as cited in Rogers and Christian 23).

A debate has been opened about what minority literature has to be like to reflect the reality of minorities. Historically, most works about minorities have been written outside of those cultures. Critics are now indicating that only those who belong to a minority – that is, insiders – can truly represent their own culture in books (Vandergrift 355). Cynthia Kadohata, Alicia D. Williams and Rebecca Balcárcel all belong to minorities, which is very significant when analyzing these novels.

Another matter of concern is that there are many more books about minority characters which, as Lyn Miller-Lachmann (1992) states, “focus exclusively on questions related to heritage, conflicts and issues within the minority community, and culturally specific developmental issues” (as cited in Vandergrift 356). Our three books for analysis focus on the characters’ struggles due to their race and culture. However, they also have problems and experiences that are not related to their race. As Duren states, these minority books are “developed around the concepts of friendship, family relations, celebrations, and efforts to assimilate” (17). These themes are accessible to any kind of young reader, regardless of their race.

Besides, when analyzing minority books it is important to take into account the concept of whiteness. Duren argues that “failure to address racism reinforces the ideological concept that whiteness is the cultural norm by which all other cultures are compared” (17). Thus, it is essential to examine how racism is discussed in children’s literature (Rogers and Christian 22). Critical use of this literature provides a discourse for students to understand the social construction of race and how they are privileged by their whiteness (Duren 16). As we are going to see, the novels of this analysis are right on target with how they address racism.

Moreover, many of the children’s books dealing with racism are primarily set in the past and in the South, what also entails focusing on legalized segregation and slavery. This emphasis on past events helps to support the wrong idea that racism no longer exists (Duren 19). This research focuses on novels set in the present dealing with modern-day discrimination, which demonstrates that racism is an issue that keeps happening in the twenty-first century.

3. *The Thing About Luck* (2013), *Genesis Begins Again* (2019) and *The Other Half of Happy* (2019): minority middle-grade girls facing patriarchy, family issues and racism

In order to analyze the novels *The Thing About Luck* (2013), *Genesis Begins Again* (2019), and *The Other Half of Happy* (2019), it is important to introduce the authors and briefly summarize the three novels. Cynthia Kadohata, the writer of *The*

Thing About Luck, was born in Chicago in 1956 and is Japanese American. With this novel, she was recognized by winning various awards, including the National Book Award. In addition, Kadohata has published ten books for children and three for adults (Kadohata).

In *The Thing About Luck*, Cynthia Kadohata writes from the point of view of Summer, a twelve-year-old Japanese American girl. Summer has been ill due to Malaria and, when she thinks the situation cannot get any worse, her parents need to travel to Japan to take care of elder relatives, leaving Summer and her brother Jaz with their grandparents, Obaachan and Jiichan. The book narrates in the first person the experiences of Summer in her grandparents' workplace during harvest time and the many responsibilities she has to assume: working while managing the problematic relationship with Obaachan, taking care of her brother, suffering from discrimination, and falling in love for the first time.

Regarding Alicia D. Williams, author of *Genesis Begins Again*, she is an American writer and teacher born in 1970. She writes about the life of Black females, and her most successful novel is the one analyzed in this research paper, which has received awards such as the 2020 ALA Newbery Honor Book. Besides, she is the writer of other children's books like *Jump At The Sun: The True Life Tale of Unstoppable Storycatcher Zora Neale Hurston* (2021) (Williams).

Genesis Begins Again follows thirteen-year-old Genesis Anderson, an African American girl who owns a list of a hundred things she hates about herself. She hates her dark skin and her coily hair, and wishes to be beautiful like her lighter-skinned mother. In addition, she must fight racist situations at school, an alcoholic father and multiple evictions. Genesis finds solace in singing, and support in her new friends and in her teacher. The protagonist of this novel tries to save her family being herself the one who gets hurt. However, when she starts liking things about herself, she starts finding her voice.

The third and last author is Rebecca Balcárcel, a mixed-race children's book author, poet and English teacher, whose mother is American and whose father is Guatemalan. *The Other Half of Happy*, her first published novel, has been categorized

as 2019 Booklist's "Top Ten First Novels of 2019". In addition, her essays and poems have appeared in over forty literary journals, and she has a new book named *Shine On, Luz Véliz* coming out in 2022 (Balcárcel).

In *The Other Half of Happy* the reader meets Quijana Carrillo, a thirteen-year-old mixed-race girl. Quijana is half Guatemalan and half American and struggles to find her place in both cultures. Because of her lack of Spanish knowledge that stems from the fact that she is growing up in the United States, Quijana does not feel close to her Guatemalan heritage. Thus, she refuses to travel to Guatemala and meet her Latino family. In a journey of self-discovery, Quijana has to learn about her Latino origins while dealing with discrimination from both Latino and American people. In this way, she will discover where she belongs and who she really is.

In the following sections, the three constraints for the protagonists in their path to shaping their identity will be analyzed: their being female in a patriarchal society, their family environment and their belonging to a minority.

3.1. Gender: women in a patriarchal society

According to Janet Evans, "it would appear that something happens to girls which leaves them with the impression that they are not as good as, are less talented than and cannot do as well as the men who surround them in later life" (5). This impression is a result of the media, literature, films and the examples of gender stereotypes that we find in them, telling us what being a man or a woman means in nowadays society and expecting us to act accordingly (Evans 5). In fact, texts for children, such as middle-grade books, have traditionally conveyed these gendered discourses, but have evolved and are starting to question the concepts of femininity and masculinity.

In the 1970s, with the feminist movement, researchers noticed the gender stereotypes that prevailed in children's books and prompted questions about this issue (Gooden and Gooden 90-91). When the characters were female, they were usually described as insignificant or inconspicuous (Weitzman 1129). Thus, it comes as no

surprise that child psychologists reported that, during that period, girls at every age were less likely to identify with the feminine role that was depicted in those books. In contrast, boys of every age were more likely to identify with the masculine role (Weitzman 1130). However, despite the fact of not feeling represented by the female characters in those books, girls internalized the message of those novels and thought that women could not have as many aspirations as men (Weitzman 1146). Nevertheless, in the twenty-first century, the representation of gender roles has changed as steps towards equality between women and men have increased. Thus, it is logical that this equality increases in children's books as well (Gooden and Gooden 92).

By observing adult men and women, young boys and girls learn what will be expected from them in the future. They are likely to identify with adults of the same sex and try to adopt their behaviors, wishing to be like them. This identification causes children to be influenced by the adults surrounding them and know what aspirations and goals they can aim for according to their gender (Weitzman 1139). This idea is present in our three books for analysis.

In *The Thing About Luck* by Cynthia Kadohata, Summer is under the care of Obaachan, her grandmother, and Jiichan, her grandfather. Obaachan is the one in charge of the family. This empowered woman raises her voice above the rest and takes the lead in all the decisions, but at the same time educates Summer in patriarchal Japanese values. What is more, Obaachan is stricter with Summer than with her brother Jaz. She expects things from Summer – such as helping her, having an appropriate behavior and working as a cook –, while she does not demand anything from Jaz. As to Summer's grandfather, Jiichan specifies that he is the one who drives the combines, while Obaachan cooks for the workers, reinforcing the gender role of a domestic woman (Kadohata 48). The behavior of both her grandmother and her grandfather makes Summer be aware of the patriarchal patterns in her family.

The relationships between men and women are also determined by gender roles in Summer's household. Summer is quite curious about the concept of falling in love due to their grandparents' arranged marriage, which Obaachan addresses from a sexist point of view: "Obaachan said that if I had an arranged marriage, I would never give or receive a broken heart. [...] If I rebelled and wanted love, however, all bets were off.

Broken hearts would come my way like locusts” (Kadohata 6). Along the same path, Obaachan tells her granddaughter that she is too young to stare at boys or be interested in them, asserting that boys cause trouble (Kadohata 52).

In spite of what Obaachan has taught her, Summer is interested in boys and is concerned about her relationship with them. As a matter of fact, this experience of the first love incites her to be insecure because she is very different from the girls her age that boys tend to like:

Unfortunately, I couldn’t think of a single reason why a boy would want to be my boyfriend. Some girls in my class already had boyfriends. They wore makeup and had cell phones and polished their nails. I tried to polish my nails once, and it smelled so horrible, I knew I could never do that again. Then I thought of one reason I’d make a good girlfriend. ‘I’m a good cook,’ I said triumphantly. (Kadohata 143)

In this way, we can see that Summer worries about how she is perceived by the opposite sex, comparing herself to other women and assuming that being a good cook can attract a man. Besides, when she falls in love with Robbie, the custom harvesters’ son, she begins to develop a dependency that makes her notice his absence when he is not around, feeling incomplete without him (Kadohata 171).

In *Genesis Begins Again* by Alicia D. Williams, Genesis’ beliefs about gender roles are influenced by three central adult figures: her grandmother, her mother and her father. Throughout the book, the perception that the man is the one who has to work to sustain and manage the family is very present. For instance, Genesis’ grandmother on her mother’s side clarifies that a man who is not able to sustain her daughter economically is not a good one (Williams 16). This statement reinforces the idea that the man has to be the one who maintains the woman, while she stays at home and gives up her dreams outside the private sphere as Genesis’ mother did: “One time she told me she wanted to go to college, dreamed of being a newscaster. ‘Then I met your daddy’, she’d said” (Williams 123-124). As a consequence of these types of conversations, Genesis is indirectly assuming gender roles, understanding that, as her mother gave up her dreams for a man, that is the fate that awaits her as well.

In spite of living in a sexist environment, Genesis' mother, Sharon, starts to deconstruct herself step by step and realizes she has always put her husband before herself and before her daughter: "I never wanted to be one of those women who put their 'man' before their child. And you know, all this time I thought I was better than these types of women. I thought I was choosing *family*. Come to find out I'm no different" (Williams 290). Genesis' mother mentions "these type of women" in a disdainful way, saying that she thought she was not like them. Yet, she has come to the realization that, as her husband has repressed her, she has been perpetuating female subordination all along.

After that moment of awareness, Sharon decides to start fighting for her dreams and plans to go to college. To do so, she applies for better-paying jobs and starts saving money behind her husband's back (Williams 138) while at the same time trusting Genesis with her secret and searching for her approval and help. Genesis takes responsibility for the house chores – therefore assuming traditional gender roles – to help Sharon start studying again (Williams 139). The change in her mother's attitude makes Genesis see that the previous situation was not correct and that she and her mother, as well as the female gender in general, can aspire to more and be the bosses of their own lives.

It is necessary to mention that the dependency that Genesis develops in a man, in this case, is towards Emory, her father. As will be analyzed in the next section, her father is always absent due to his addiction to alcohol and gambling. Genesis depends on Emory's approval and she feels that something is wrong with her and that it is her fault. Thus, she is always trying to please him.

Genesis' feeling of being imperfect and not enough for her father may be the reason why she develops a tendency to compare herself to other girls and criticize them. She has been taught what the "perfect woman" must be like, and when she encounters real women and girls – that is, women that look just like her –, she is faced with reality, and her way to approach it is to criticize them. Still, Genesis realizes that she should not be judgemental towards other women and that she should let them choose their own identity: "Then I really stop short as something occurs to me—I sound judgy! [...] Nope I'm not going there. Nia can be who she wants" (Williams 253-254).

When it comes to *The Other Half of Happy* by Rebecca Balcárcel, as Quijana belongs to two different cultures – her mother is from the USA and her father from Guatemala – there are two diverse ways of approaching gender roles and stereotypes in this book: her father has been educated in a traditional division of gender roles, while her mother’s education has been more progressive. Nevertheless, in spite of the education he has received, Quijana’s father is always there to support her in everything she needs and does not expect her to conform to traditional gender roles. Furthermore, by admitting he cried when Quijana and her friends got lost in their expedition with the bicycles, he shows signs of vulnerability that are not typical of a man according to patriarchal society (Balcárcel 107-108).

Regardless of being a good figure for Quijana and not perpetuating gender roles, Quijana’s father recognizes a difference in how his own culture conceives these gender roles and how he started to question them thanks to his American mother-in-law: ““You know, your grandma’s the one who taught me to use a microwave. And how to wash dishes, too. At home, my sisters did that, but your grandma—she set me straight, said men in America help in the kitchen”” (Balcárcel 287). While in Guatemala his sisters were the ones to cook and execute the household chores, in America his mother-in-law reminds him that men need to learn and to take responsibilities as well.

These differences between cultures can also be noticed in a conversation between Aunt Jess – Quijana’s mother’s sister – and Tía Lencha – Quijana’s father’s sister –. Aunt Jess, who is not married, has a feminist mind-set: ““The wife’ says Aunt Jess. ‘It’s the leading role every girl auditions for, but I don’t want the part”” (Balcárcel 291-292). Tía Lencha, on the other hand, debates with reasonings typical of her Guatemalan origin in how they have raised her and criticizes the lack of children when there is no marriage: “Who will take care of you when you are old?” (Balcárcel 292). This debate shows the different attitudes towards marriage: the thought that a woman can be perfectly happy on her own, versus a more conventional approach that reinforces the idea that a woman is not complete without a man and children in her life.

Another adult role model in Quijana’s life is her mother, who is studying the master’s degree in teaching. Quijana’s mother is an empowered woman and an influential figure for her daughter. Hence, Quijana does not experience as many gender

stereotypes in her house as the protagonists of the other two books. However, she still suffers from the dictates of a patriarchal culture that is also present in the USA, what leads her to compare herself to other girls (Balcárcel 43) and to get jealous of them when it comes to boys: “Truthfully, my imagination is killing me with visions of Jayden texting some new girlfriend from the play, who isn’t me” (Balcárcel 157). Still, thanks to the influence of her father and her grandmother, Quijana realizes that she is just as great as the girls she is comparing herself with and that she should not change herself for any boy, or anyone at all, because she is a unique individual: “Her shine doesn’t take away from yours, says a voice in my head. It sounds like something dad might tell me, but I’m not sure where it came from” (Balcárcel 43).

All in all, these three middle-grade books of the twenty-first century do not portray inconspicuous female characters. Contrarily, our three protagonists are women with strong personalities that, despite being influenced by the patriarchal society, eventually find themselves and learn how to deconstruct gender stereotypes while learning their value as women. Hence, the girls who read these novels can identify with these feminine characters in their fight and struggles and feel empowered by their example in such a way that they can learn to aim for bigger aspirations than those conceived for their gender.

3.2. Family relationships: dysfunctional families and responsibilities

A factor also relevant in the quest of our protagonists for their identity is the relationship they have with their family. Research carried out by Pamela E. Davis-Kean proved that many variables such as parents’ education and income, and parental expectations and behaviors indirectly affect children’s achievements and mental health (295).

Thus, the family environment is a remarkable aspect of the three middle-grade novels. Summer, Quijana and Genesis, as children, depend on their adult figures and are affected by their problems, mistakes and overall wellbeing. For instance, being part of a dysfunctional family or not is determinant in the lives of these girls. According to

Shonkoff (2010), safe physical and relational environments and access to adequate nutrition are fundamental for children and the lack of these factors alters their long-term development (as cited in Dinh et al. 43). As it has been analyzed in researches carried out by Cooksey et al., 1997; Dinh and Racionero, 2017 and Dinh et al., 2017, parents' jobs not only determine family resources but also the time parents spend with children and their own wellbeing (as cited in Dinh et al. 43).

Going through a divorce, having a poor economic status, having family members with health conditions or dealing with hard adult figures – all of them circumstances that are present in the three novels analyzed in this work – can result in children taking many responsibilities which is, in turn, an obstacle in the way of shaping their own identity. In this section, we are going to delve into the influence of the family and home environment in the protagonists of the three novels.

In *The Thing About Luck*, Cynthia Kadohata presents us the life of Summer, whose family has had no “kouun” – “good luck” in Japanese – that year (Kadohata 1). In fact, Summer got Malaria, and her parents had to move away to Japan to care for elder relatives. Thus, Summer must stay with her grandparents feeling restless due mainly to her complicated relationship with her grandmother Obaachan, who puts too much pressure on her grandchildren: “Obaachan was so much more strict than my mother or my father. She told us what to eat and drink and how to live” (Kadohata 26). Summer wishes she could be with her parents instead of lacking freedom due to her grandmother. Nevertheless, she feels confused about the relationship with Obaachan. She feels that Obaachan is there for her but that at the same time she treats her so rigorously (Kadohata 240-241). Hence, as Summer sees it, the good and the bad exist side-by-side in her grandmother. This contradictory behavior causes her to even doubt if Obaachan genuinely loves her: “Once, I asked my mother if Obaachan loved me, and mom said, ‘Of course she does. She thinks about you all the time.’ I knew she thought about me all the time, but that wasn’t the same as love, was it? No. It wasn’t” (Kadohata 54-55). Having a severe grandmother and not feeling loved induces in Summer a feeling of loneliness.

Summer’s restlessness is aggravated by the fact that the harvesting season has arrived and she and her family have to work. Her grandfather Jiichan works driving

combines, and Obaachan cooks for the workers. As they are both advanced in age, and have to make much effort to carry out the job, it is difficult for them to maintain their source of income. Thus, they resort to Summer who takes accountability for cooking for the workers and taking care of her brother Jaz: “The thing about being a kid is that you don’t get to make any decisions on harvest. You just work all the time. I help cook for the crew because my grandmother, who is supposed to be cooking, isn’t well” (Kadohata 149). Eventually, she even drives the combines without her grandparents knowing about it so that her grandfather, who is too ill to drive them, is not fired. As to Summer’s brother Jaz, his extremely withdrawn character makes him receive a favorable treatment from his grandparents. Summer understands that he is treated differently and takes good care of him. However, his condition overwhelms her: “[...] nobody ever thought about how hard it was for me to have Jaz for a brother” (Kadohata 35).

Her responsibilities and her worry about the wellbeing of her family members make Summer mature rapidly. After all the hard circumstances she has had to endure during the past year of her life, one night she reflects on it and states that her bad luck is over, that it is in her power to make everything get better; she can change her own luck (Kadohata 270). This journey and her declaration portray her maturing process, a clear example of a coming-of-age novel.

Genesis Begins Again presents a different family environment. In this novel, Alicia D. Williams introduces the complicated issues of gambling and alcoholism. Genesis’ father is an alcoholic and is addicted to gambling. Having a parent with these issues is incredibly problematic for Genesis; her father repeatedly treats her with disrespect, while her mother tries to justify him: ““He didn’t mean it Gen. His drinking... it’s a sickness, understand?” No, I didn’t. I don’t” (Williams 112). For Genesis, it is tough to understand her father’s behavior and feels that it is affecting her mental health.

Furthermore, this situation affects the family’s economy. For instance, Genesis’ father is absent from home for long periods without her daughter and wife knowing where he is, when he will get back and if he will bring money to pay the rent or not: “Dad will come. He always does—not always the very next day, but who knows? Maybe

he'll not only come, but also run up Grandma's walkway, pull me in his arms, and tell me he misses me" (Williams 20-21). Genesis dreams of the day in which her father comes and never leaves again, showing her that he loves her.

As a result of their economic instability, Genesis' family must go through several evictions. One day, Genesis gets back from school and the furniture of the house is out in the front yard: "Then I curse Dad for not paying the rent. Again. I curse him for making me wait out here while passing spectators stare stupidly, like maybe I don't realize furniture is supposed to be inside a house" (Williams 6). Despite being a child, Genesis is fully aware of the circumstances and realizes it is not an everyday scene she should be going through.

In spite of his hurtful actions, Genesis feels the need to please her father and be loved by him. Besides, she values every little positive gesture she can receive from him: "He winks at me. Again. To be real with you, one of Dad's winks is worth putting up with him calling me Chubby Cheeks" (Williams 90). The reason why Genesis depends on her father's love and approval is that she feels that her father chose alcohol over her and that he hates her due to her skin color (Williams 296).

With all these circumstances going on in Genesis' life, the presence of Mrs. Hill, her teacher, is essential. While Genesis' father discriminates against her for not looking like her mother, Mrs. Hill helps Genesis accept herself. Mrs. Hill is black, what makes Genesis see herself reflected on the teacher: "Then a Black lady straightens up and closes the door. I haven't seen any other Black adults here. Well, not in any of my classes, and I pray right then that she's the teacher" (Williams 63-64). For Genesis, to have a Black teacher is certainly significant; she feels represented seeing an adult just like her. In addition, Genesis has direct support from her teacher as she listens to her and inspires her to love herself. Alicia D. Williams revealed that Mrs. Hill is actually based on a teacher she had growing up, who really heard her (Williams). This way, Williams showcases that not only good parenting is crucial for children, but also appropriate teaching.

On another note, Genesis, just like Summer, assumes many responsibilities and tries to protect her family as much as she can. This tendency is something Genesis'

mother feels guilty about: “‘You shouldn’t have worries either. Our grown-up mess has been your mess way too long... You didn’t sign up for this... out here trying to be the parent, rescuing us. My baby girl, trying to rescue us!’ Mama exhales. ‘How’d it get this bad?’” (Williams 289-290). Genesis pours out the liquor from some of her dad’s alcohol bottles, she keeps some of her father’s secrets and hides the eviction letter that arrives to the last house they have moved into, so that her parents do not worry and they do not have to move again. Besides, she makes a long trip alone to her father’s workplace and discovers that he is unemployed. When Genesis’ mother finds out, she states how brave she thinks her daughter is, and by saying that Genesis is not a child anymore, her mother introduces the idea that Genesis has matured because of her circumstances (Williams 291).

At the end of the novel, Genesis starts to learn how to love herself and her father tries to behave like one, although with doubtful success: he attends his daughter’s choir show at school – Genesis’ biggest wish – but he shows up drunk. With this bittersweet ending, Alicia D. Williams sends her reader the message that changing is not easy and takes time.

In *The Other Half of Happy*, the protagonist’s circumstances are more favorable than in previous novels. Quijana Carrillo has a more adequate family environment than Summer or Genesis. Indeed, her parents are supportive of her and her brother Memito. Therefore, Quijana grows up in a healthy household and is loved by her father and her mother. Nevertheless, Quijana and her brother do not spend much time with their parents, as the father works and the mother is studying for a master’s degree.

Furthermore, the fact that her parents spend little time at home means that Quijana has to assume plenty of responsibilities. For instance, she has to take care of her brother: “‘Can you make dinner for you and your brother? Dad has to stay late tonight, and I have class.’ Ah, a job already. Too bad it’s unpaid” (Balcárcel 75). Although Quijana thinks these responsibilities should not fall on her, she gladly looks after her brother: “I’m the one who watches him when Mom and Dad are cooking or outside, when they’re not home or just not paying attention. When he cries, I usually know why” (Balcárcel 150). Quijana profoundly cares about Memito and has a special connection with him that helps her understand him even when their parents do not. Nevertheless,

from time to time, taking care of him feels too overwhelming, especially because he has a condition that she has detected but that family and doctors do not recognize. Eventually, they diagnose him with autism.

What is more, since her grandmother from her father's side passes away, Quijana must deal with the death of a family member. For Quijana, her grandmother was one of the most influential people in her life, and the fact that she had cancer was something Quijana could not cope with. In one way or another, death is an incredibly problematic issue for a child to understand and overcome. As a consequence, Quijana feels that so much is going on in her life. Now that she is growing up, she is facing responsibilities and also moments of great pain, and hence, she would like to return to her carefree childhood: "When I was little, I thought I wanted to grow up; now I wish I could unknow things" (Balcárcel 257).

As it has been explored, the economic situation of the families and their work related conflicts impact the lives of the protagonists of these novels. Having less quality time with their parents makes them have many responsibilities. Consequently, dealing with issues at home, makes these middle-grade girls mature and gradually become adults at an emotional level, which proves these novels to be coming-of-age. Summer, Genesis and Quijana have to deal with an assortment of experiences and circumstances that are just in the middle of the path of shaping their identity. All things considered, the three novels analyzed in this research paper stress the importance of the adult family members and of other adults – teachers, in particular – in children's development.

3.3. Belonging to a minority in the United States: racism and prejudice

Diversity and multiculturalism: these are words used to describe the United States, a country that has changed from being mostly white to a country that has a variety of colors, cultures, races and religions (Willis-Rivera and Meeker 269). In fact, Asian Americans, African Americans, and Latin Americans represent a large part of the United States population. According to the United States Census, in 2019, it was estimated that 13.4% of the population were Black or African Americans, 5.9% Asians

and 18.5% Hispanic or Latinos (“QuickFacts: United States”). Given this population, children that are born nowadays in the USA will coexist and interact with people from various cultures or races. Therefore, children should learn about other cultures since the beginning of their lives. A tool for this education towards tolerance can be the employment of literature. Minority books talk about what a culture is, and describe the experiences people belonging to different minorities might go through (Willis-Rivera and Meeker 269).

According to Kay E. Vandergrift, in “books for young people published during the first half of the twentieth century, it is clear that there was little or no multicultural literature within the United States available to young readers. Young Americans could more easily read about cultures of those in distant lands than they could about the various racial, ethnic, class, or religious differences within their neighborhoods or nation” (354). Undoubtedly, people belonging to a minority had their own stories within their cultures, but they were not available to the larger dominant culture. As a result, many American children could not recognize themselves in literature (Vandergrift 354). Thus, it is positive that more and more minority books for children are being written nowadays.

In *The Thing About Luck*, Cynthia Kadohata created the character of Summer, a Japanese American girl who suffers racism because of the minority she belongs to. It is important to take into account that the Japanese suffered discrimination since they first arrived in the United States as temporary migrants in the period of 1890 to 1924 after the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 (Onozawa 117). They had to go through segregation and the Gentlemen’s Agreement of 1908, a treaty that did not allow them to keep emigrating. Notwithstanding, there was an inflow of Japanese immigrants during World War I. Between 1908 and 1941, the second and third generations were born and raised as American citizens, creating their own unique culture as Japanese Americans (Onozawa 119). Unfortunately, after the attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese, the Japanese Americans in the United States were suspected to be loyal to Japan and, thus, taken to concentration camps. However, in the years that followed, the Japanese were successful in mobilizing themselves after 1952, especially after the Immigration Act of 1965. From the end of the nineteen seventies, there was an increase in the Japanese population due to the arrival of students and business workers (Onozawa 121-122).

Summer knows about the hardships Japanese immigrants in the United States had to go through, and that is why she shows great admiration towards her grandfather, feeling proud of her origins. Nevertheless, belonging to a minority is also complicated for her. Both Summer and her family receive racist comments and discrimination because of their Asian identity. In fact, when they arrive at their workplace in the harvesting season, a worker is wearing a T-shirt that has “KEEP AMERICA FOR THE AMERICANS” inscribed on it (Kadohata 47). In addition, a farmer says to Jiichan – Summer’s grandfather – that he has never seen a Chinese wheatie¹ before (Kadohata 209). Jiichan does not correct him, maybe because he fears being fired. However, Summer feels as if she has to represent the whole Asian race (Kadohata 209), and thus, does not hesitate to correct a comment that portrays all the Asian as Chinese, which is a mixture of ignorance and racism.

On another note, having a Japanese family but being born and raised in the USA, Summer has a feeling of not belonging anywhere sometimes. Besides, her physical features are not those of a traditional Japanese girl, even if she has Japanese genes; she has frizzy hair, unlike the majority of Asian people. This characteristic creates a conflict in Summer, and she usually tends to braid it. In part, this is also because her grandmother and the white bosses constantly bring it to her attention. On the same path, Obaachan – her grandmother – treats Summer differently sometimes for belonging to both cultures. She is jealous of Summer for speaking such good English and always calls her “Miss Talk So Good” (Kadohata 248). On this account, we can see that Summer has to deal with the conflicts that belonging to a minority entails but that, at the same time, she feels proud of her heritage.

In *Genesis Begins Again* (2019), we come across an African American girl. Most of the Black Americans nowadays in the United States descend from enslaved people brought from Africa to North America during the slave trade between 1619 and 1859. Still, new waves of immigrants from Africa kept arriving after that: by 1980, the foreign-born Black population multiplied nearly sevenfold, and it tripled by 2005 (Waters et al. 371). Furthermore, Capps et al. (2012) state that “over the last decade,

¹ Worker in the wheat harvest.

Africans have become the fastest-growing immigrant group in the country” (as cited in Waters et al. 373). Being one of the largest in number minority groups in the U.S., they had to and continue to suffer several issues such as racism, segregation or colorism², which Genesis gets to know in detail.

Indeed, for Genesis, belonging to a minority is also a hard fight. She has to deal with several racist comments and situations that make her feel insecure about how she looks, as she explains to her friend Sophia: “‘I’ve never had friends because I’m too ugly, and I hate that I’m so black and my hair’s not straight and kids tease me all the time too, [...]. And I sing in the mirror with a shirt over my head, pretending to be light-skinned with good hair’” (Williams 237). Besides, other students constantly make references to Genesis’ dark skin and say that, with that skin color, she can only be African but not American (Williams 105).

In addition to receiving racist attitudes from colleagues, Genesis also suffers colorism from part of her family. Indeed, Genesis’ grandmother tells Genesis their family history and why she does not completely like Emory. Both Genesis and her father are more dark-skinned than Sharon’s side of the family. Thus, her grandmother believes that Sharon married down when she fell in love with a darker person than her. This thinking comes from Genesis’ great grandfather, who used to get frustrated with other Blacks for settling for sharecropping, owing everything to white people. He had a colorist behavior towards Black people that were more dark-skinned than him, and this attitude was passed through generations in the family.

In fact, her grandmother tells Genesis that her own grandfather used to put a brown paper bag and held it next to his daughter’s boyfriend’s faces to decide if they were light enough to marry them. This way, creating offspring as less black as possible: “‘Understand that my grandpapa was a forward thinker. Our lineage is full of doctors and professors and successful businessmen. It’s not luck, Genesis’” (Williams 152). Genesis’ grandmother even admits that she would have preferred Genesis to be more light-skinned.

² Discrimination against an individual with darker skin tone than those among the same ethnic or racial group.

Her grandmother's thoughts profoundly impact Genesis, to a point where she starts discriminating against herself and hurting herself. She already had a list of "100 reasons why we hate Genesis" that she keeps updating almost every day. Furthermore, Genesis starts trying to find ways to lighten her skin to look more like her mother and be loved by her grandmother and father. In fact, her father, although having dark skin, also discriminates against Genesis (Williams 14). Consequently, Genesis starts having milk baths, putting yogurt in her face, scrubbing her skin with lemons, and even bathing with bleach and buying a cream that changes her skin. These attempts deeply hurt Genesis, her skin and her mental health, as they lead her to hate herself.

Nevertheless, her new friends Sophia and Troy love Genesis the way she is and prevent her from causing herself damage. Besides, Genesis is inspired by Mrs. Hill – her teacher –, a proud Black woman who makes the protagonist discover Black singers such as Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, or Etta James. By doing so, Genesis feels represented by them, and understands that she can also admire Black singers which look like her. These sources of support and inspiration, along with her mother's unconditional love, lead Genesis to start loving herself just as she is (Williams 348). Genesis now cannot wait to discover all the things she loves about herself, instead of focusing on the things she hates (Williams 364).

Quijana Carrillo, the protagonist of *The Other Half of Happy*, belongs to the Latino community. As already stated, over the last several decades, the racial and ethnic composition of the U.S. population has varied considerably, and, over the last hundred years, few racial groups have had such a large effect on the demography of the country as the Latinos. As a matter of fact, in 1900, there were only slightly more than five hundred thousand Latinos. Nowadays, the population of Latinos is more than thirty-five million and represents one of the most diverse ethnic groups in the United States (Saenz 1). In their arrival, Mexicans and Puerto Ricans incorporated into the country through welfare, while other Latino groups emigrated to the United States escaping political persecution or in search of an opportunity (Saenz 5-6).

Regarding Quijana's Guatemalan family – that is, her family from her father's side – they came from Guatemala to the United States to start a new life. On the contrary, her family from her mother's side is from the USA. This mixed condition

makes Quijana receive discrimination from both cultures. On the one hand, Latinos criticize her for not embracing her culture and for adjusting to the American community. In fact, she gets called “coconut” and “pocha”. “Coconut” is a “slang term for a Latino who acts white” (Balcárcel 26). As to “pochos”, “it’s slang—someone who has no heritage, who’s forgotten where he comes from, who pretends to be white” (Balcárcel 228). On the other hand, Quijana also must suffer racist behaviors, and she fights to adapt to a country where she is not always perceived as American either.

These experiences induce Quijana to deny her Guatemalan culture and identity. She realizes she conforms to neither Latina expectations nor American prototypes. Hence, she tries to fit in with the American society by holding back her Latino identity. She wishes her dad did not have an accent and that he could be more “common”, and she would rather have a name that American people would know how to pronounce (Balcárcel 11). She even avoids defending some Mexican kids that get racist comments every day at the bus stop. She camouflages herself between the American children and does not stand up for them.

Moreover, Quijana starts to develop a feeling of rejection towards Guatemala in general. Consequently, when her parents decide to travel to Guatemala at Christmas to visit her father’s family, Quijana works on a plan to avoid going with them. To do so, she sells the “huipil” – a Guatemalan handmade cloth – that her Latina grandmother gifted to her. With the money, she intends to get a bus to Florida to stay with her grandmother from her mother’s side and avoid going to the airport with her family: “The thing is, I wish I did want to go. I wish I wanted to meet these strangers who are actually family. At the same time, I wish there was no Guatemala. No place that would ever make me feel stupid and not-good-enough. I blink fast, trying to stop the tears” (Balcárcel 66). Quijana has a sense of not belonging anywhere, and her way of coping with that feeling is to judge her father’s heritage, which hurts him. At the same time, Quijana feels bad about her attitude towards her father’s family: “Sometimes it feels like I’m nothing but a pile of flaws. A better Quijana would love the Guatemalan stuff on our walls, get A’s in Spanish, and stand up for the bus-stop boys. Grandma said to stay true to myself. Is my real self a failed Latina?” (Balcárcel 128).

Nevertheless, Quijana goes through self-acceptance and embraces the two cultures, being aware that she can belong to both. This awareness increases after she stands up for the Mexican boys at the bus stop. She tries to be friendly with them and introduce herself to them for the first time. This act of kindness provokes racist comments towards her, too. However, she feels proud of her origins and defends herself. Consequently, all the white kids there get on the side of the Latinos, supporting them. When she eventually travels to Guatemala, she realizes that her Latino family loves her just as she is: “I remember thinking I would hate Guatemala. I look around at the friendly faces—como la mía—and feel Abuela’s warm hand on my shoulder. I don’t hate it. It feels like a place where I could belong” (Balcárcel 316).

Through these novels, it can be noticed that minorities are represented in the American children’s literature of the twenty-first century. *The Thing About Luck*, *Genesis Begins Again* and *The Other Half of Happy* bring to the front the racism that comes along belonging to a minority, writing from their own experiences. In this way, minority children can feel represented and inspired by the characters of these novels, while white kids can learn to accept different cultures. As it has been analyzed, Summer, Genesis and Quijana fight against racism, and against their own prejudice to achieve self-acceptance and shape their own identity. This way, our three protagonists can be role models and influence many other children who go through the same issues.

4. Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to demonstrate that the process of identity definition of the three middle-grade protagonists of the minority literature novels *The Thing About Luck* (2013), *Genesis Begins Again* (2019) and *The Other Half of Happy* (2019) is influenced by their belonging to the female gender, by their family circumstances and by their belonging to a minority in the United States. At the same time, this research emphasizes the relevance of having a real and appropriate minority representation in American children’s books nowadays.

Cynthia Kadohata, Alicia D. Williams and Rebecca Balcárcel, authors of the three novels analyzed in this research paper, explore gender through a feminist approach

in three different ways. In the case of *The Thing About Luck* (2013) we could say that Summer finds it harder to construct her identity, and it could be because she is raised by her grandparents, who belong to a more traditional generation. Summer is surrounded by a more conventional environment and does not have a feminine referent to discover her value as a woman. In *Genesis Begins Again* (2019), Alicia D. Williams shows a family following gender roles, with an absent father, a subdued mother and an insecure daughter. However, she also displays a reality in which women can become empowered and dismantle the structures built by society. Finally, *The Other Half of Happy* (2019) is set in a feminist household with a father figure and a mother figure who question traditional gender roles, which helps Quijana accept herself.

When it comes to family relationships, it has been examined that Summer, Genesis and Quijana suffer the consequences of their irregular family circumstances, which are the taking on too many responsibilities inside the household. This additional pressure and the worry about their families impact their mental health. In *The Thing About Luck* (2013), Summer, while having to work and take care of her brother, lacks freedom, and struggles due to her complicated relationship with her grandmother. Thus, she encounters an obstacle in her maturation process. In *Genesis Begins Again* (2019), Genesis suffers from a highly dysfunctional family, experiencing an alcoholic father, economic issues and responsibilities, which eventually affect her mental health. Thirdly, in *The Other Half of Happy* (2019), Rebecca Balcárcel creates a safe and loving household for Quijana, but the protagonist still has to take on the responsibility of taking care of her brother, who has autism, while her parents are working too many hours outside from home. Therefore, Quijana wishes she could return to an innocent childhood and not grow up.

Concerning the conception of belonging to a minority, Cynthia Kadohata, Alicia D. Williams, and Rebecca Balcárcel write from their own experiences to construct characters that undergo racism, self-judgment, and insecurities because of their ethnicity. In the case of *The Thing About Luck* (2013), we find a Japanese American girl who is proud of her origins, but at the same time, suffers racist comments, which make her doubt her identity. In *Genesis Begins Again* (2019), Alicia D. Williams constructs an African American girl who profoundly hates herself due to her black skin and the racist and colorist behaviors she has to endure. Thirdly, in *The Other Half of Happy*

(2019), Rebecca Balcárcel presents a mixed-race half-Guatemalan half-American girl who does not know where she belongs. And although Quijana disowns her Latino heritage, she finds a way to accept both herself and her culture.

All in all, Cynthia Kadohata, Alicia D. Williams and Rebecca Balcárcel all write about middle-grade girls with strong and resilient personalities that despite bearing with gender roles, learn to understand their worth as women. Moreover, they mature and make their transitions to adolescence while undertaking a mental and familial burden not appropriate for their ages. Thirdly, they also discover how to cope with being part of a minority in the United States, loving themselves despite the hardship of suffering racism. These girls define their identity living the realities of many children in America, overcoming difficult situations that could be taken as a referent for others. As it has been proved, minority literature is pertinent in the pursuance of an open-minded and tolerant society. Thus, it is important to let children read about people different to them and to allow children who belong to a minority to read about their realities and see themselves represented. Along these lines, a dialogue of inclusion and diversity is now opening within children's literature to turn the United States' integration myth into a reality.

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