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The Routledge Companion to Gender and Childhood

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CONTEMPORARY CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN INDIA

Shifting Paradigms

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For nearly 5000 years, the oral traditions in India have been employed as means of children's education and entertainment. In fact, the Indian subcontinent has long been a treasure trove of stories, as seen in works like the Kathasaritsagara, Panchatantra, Jataka Tales, Hitopadesha, as well as epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Stories featuring iconic characters such as Akbar Birbal, Tenali Rama, Mullah Nasruddin, and Sheikh Chilli have been immensely popular for children in India. Traditionally, storytellers did not create separate stories for adults and children; their tales were intended for everyone. Only a few specific genres, like lullabies and riddles, or collections such as the Panchatantra, were designed solely for children. Nevertheless, storytelling, especially during mealtimes, was a common practice for children. Cultural lore, mythology, and folk narratives were passed down through generations and across regions through various performative traditions, including song, art, dance, and theatrical forms (Menon & Rao, 2024, p. 9).

However, the institutional origins of what we understand as children's literature in India today can be traced back to the country's colonial past and specifically the nineteenth century. The colonial period witnessed the introduction of the printing press and missionary-driven formal education, which eventually led to the creation of a distinct literary corpus catering specifically to young readers (Banerjee, 2008).

Children's literature in the colonial period was deeply impacted by Victorian-era ideology. Influenced by philosophers such as Locke and Rousseau, the Victorians considered the child a blank slate: innocent, pure, and in constant need of protection and care. At the same time, central to the Victorian ideals of childhood was ensuring the moral education of the child. Consequently, the theme of morality and obedience remained central to the colonial projects of children's literature in India. While this influence was pervasive, a colonial sensibility emphasized the importance of translating and circulating ancient Indian classics such as the *Panchatantra* and *Jataka Tales*. This attention—an instance of colonizing gaze and exoticizing Indian culture—not only vindicated and consolidated the Victorian ethos of morality and puritanism but also served as an alternative resource for creating the colonial governmentmentality in India. In other words, the moral and ethical lessons embedded in the ancient Indian texts like *Panchatantra* and *Jataka Tales* were believed to be in alignment with the Victorian values that the British held crucial for the colonizing mission in India, using Indian

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literature to support their ideological framework. By promoting these (Indian) texts, the colonial rulers could reinforce their own moral standards and puritanical views. The tales' focus on virtues such as honesty, integrity, and righteousness dovetailed with Victorian ideals, making them useful tools for moral instruction. Moreover, the *Panchatantra* and *Jataka Tales* offered insights into governance and political strategy. The stories often contain allegories and lessons about leadership, statecraft, and diplomacy, which the British could adapt to suit their administrative practices. By translating and circulating these texts, the colonizers not only educated themselves about Indian thought but also found alternative perspectives that could inform their approach to rule a diverse and complex society like India.

The Victorian-era sensibility was the self-fashioning device till India became independent in the year 1947. The post-independent India witnessed a remarkable shift, marked by the emergence of various publication houses dedicated to the cause of children's literature. Notably, the establishment of state-owned publication houses such as the *National Book Trust (NBT)* and the *Children's Book Trust (CBT)* in 1957 played a crucial role in introducing new themes and notions centered around nation-building, secularism, and the responsibilities of citizens in a new and independent India. These initiatives were inspired by the Nehruvian model,[1] which promoted ideals of progress, unity, and modernization. Thus, setting aside the hitherto overreliance on texts like *Panchatantra*, *Jataka Tales*, and mythological stories of kings and queens, post-independence children's literature began to explore more diverse and realistic themes, including stories of individuals coping with disability, illness, pain, and loss.

The NBT, apart from its English titles, also focused on translating children's literature from other Indian languages and promoting accessibility through exhibitions and book fairs nationwide. In 1968, Delhi Press launched *Champak*, a children's magazine in Hindi. In later years, *Champak* was translated and made available in other Indian languages, including English. The stories in *Champak* often featured anthropomorphized animals and employed slapstick humor to convey moral messages. The launch of *Amar Chitra Katha* in 1969 marked yet another significant step in post-independent children's literature in India. The magazine identified a perceived shift in the societal trends wherein Indian children were seemingly becoming disconnected from their cultural, religious, and historical foundations. Consequently, *Amar Chitra Katha* aimed to reintroduce and reinforce these traditional roots. Despite facing criticism for potentially perpetuating existing class and caste structures, as well as gender stereotypes, the publication maintained popularity, particularly among the Indian diaspora. Notably, over time, the publisher has endeavored to address these concerns by introducing a more balanced representation, like introducing women-centric titles and narratives featuring women pioneers and freedom fighters, among others.

The year 1979 witnessed the inception of *Target*, a children's magazine combining information, jokes, puzzles, and stories in an easily accessible style. It actively engaged child readers by inviting their participation in letters, stories, jokes, and illustrations for special issues, thereby challenging the traditional notions of children as being passive consumers of books. What was also new in *Target* was its thought-provoking stories that mirrored a child's life dilemmas without imposing moral messages. The portrayal of adults as non-authoritarian figures contributed to the magazine's success. In the 1980s, two other major publishing houses, *Eklavya* and *Katha*, emerged with a focus on educational reform in India. The late 1990s also witnessed a transformative period with the advent of publishing ventures named *Tara, Tulika*, and *Karadi Tales*, all based in Chennai and specializing in picture books. They touched upon newer topics like child abuse, child labor, child adoption, and peer pressure in schools, to mention a few. The launch of *Pratham* (2004)

sought to make books accessible to children in remote areas. Later, the introduction of *Storyweaver* and its e-platform in 2015 further democratized access by allowing readers to translate and publish stories, transcending language barriers.

However, the major paradigm shift in Indian children's literature over the past decade has been the incorporation of themes related to gender identities and alternative sexualities. Prominent publishing houses such as *Pratham* and international publishers like *Penguin Random House* have started to address these themes, reflecting a broader cultural shift towards inclusivity and diversity. Additionally, the emergence of independent publishers such as *Gaysi* has further enriched the literary landscape. Gaysi, a platform in India dedicated to the expression of queer sensibilities, utilizes various mediums such as literature, performing arts, workshops, and other media that represent the queer experience. This development signifies a progressive movement in children's literature, aiming to foster a more inclusive and empathetic society by addressing previously marginalized narratives and providing representation for diverse identities.

Consequently, foregrounding a set of contemporary picture books, this exploratory study examines the representation of (child) characters within the space of alternative sexual orientation and the subsequent challenge such a space/choice poses to conventional gender roles and expressions. The presence of the child in this discussion is noted either as a witness or as a participant in the ongoing display of sexual/gender roles in day-to-day societal setup. At the same time, these picture books offer a nuanced yet underexplored avenue for broadening cultural awareness. These works challenge entrenched heteronormative norms and foster inclusivity by gently introducing children to diverse identities, though their reach remains limited due to societal taboos and censorship. The illustrated format allows for symbolic representation, which can mitigate direct confrontation with sensitive subjects, making the material accessible to younger readers. However, the genre still struggles to gain mainstream acceptance in India's conservative educational and family systems.

The potential of picture books in handling alternative sexuality within Indian children's literature lies in their ability to initiate early conversations about diversity and acceptance. Emerging literary works that have been taken as primary material in this study will demonstrate how visual storytelling can resonate with young minds, encouraging empathy and open-mindedness. By utilizing vibrant imagery and subtle narratives, these books help children to question traditional roles and identities. Despite progress, the space remains limited, requiring more active engagement from publishers, educators, and parents to normalize alternative sexuality themes within India's socio-cultural framework.

For educators and caregivers, picture books addressing alternative sexuality in contemporary Indian children's literature provide a functional tool to foster dialogue about gender diversity and sexual orientation. The visual and narrative techniques employed allow for an age-appropriate exploration of complex topics, giving children a framework to understand and respect differences. When introduced in safe environments, these books can serve as catalysts for broader conversations on inclusivity, helping to break down prejudice from a young age. To be truly effective, however, they require integration into a supportive educational curriculum and more widespread advocacy from institutions and cultural influencers.

Gender, Sexuality and Body Roles: A Focus on India

Contrary to popular belief, scholars argue that India has had a robust historical tradition addressing the existence of alternative sexual orientations such as homosexuality,

transgender identities, and gender fluidity (Chakravarti, 2011; Vanita & Kidwai, 2001). In fact, the rich and diverse (literary) history of India—ranging from ancient epics and scriptures such as the Kamasutra, Ramayana, and Mahabharata, to medieval prose, poetry, art, and architecture—demonstrates a continuous engagement with questions of sexual expression and gender roles.

This is not to suggest that people who exhibited alternative sexualities did not get ill-treated during precolonial times. However, their situation started to deteriorate after the introduction of Section 377 in the Indian Penal Code (1860), which said:

> Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with [imprisonment for life], or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine. Explanation: Penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offense described in the section.

The law was drafted by Thomas Babington Macaulay, who based it on anti-sodomy laws that already existed in Britain (Srivastava & Kumar, 2019). In their groundbreaking text *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*, Vanita and Kidwai (2001) argue that sexual puritanism and homophobia in India gained strength under the British Raj and continue to be a dictating norm in Indian culture. The British Raj's conceptualization regarding sexual Puritanism was shaped by the Victorian moral ethos. Michel Foucault (1990) theorizes the dynamics of sexuality within the framework of Victorian Puritanism in Europe thus:

> Sexuality was carefully confined; it moved into the home. The conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction. On the subject of sex, silence became the rule. The legitimate and procreative couple laid down the law. The couple imposed itself as model, enforced the norm, safeguarded the truth, and reserved the right to speak while retaining the principle of secrecy.
>
> *(p. 3)*

This perspective captures the influence of Victorian puritanical ideas on how colonial India perceived sexual propriety. Indian scholars aim to portray colonial India as aspiring to match the social progressiveness of the British metropole. Consequently, the formerly tolerant attitude in ancient and medieval India transformed into severe intolerance. Acts such as rape, honor killings, lynching, abuse, and violence were employed as means to suppress socially unacceptable expressions of love and sexuality (Roy, 2022). Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code stands as a direct legacy of the British Raj, and the criminalization of homosexuality in India reflects the fact that "older indigenous discourses of same-sex love and romantic friendship came into dialog with the new Western legal and medical discourses of homosexuality as an abnormality or an illness" (Vanita & Kidwai, p. 196).

In post-liberal India, particularly over the past few decades, queer activism has emerged alongside new sexual identities that were previously suppressed by heterosexual social norms and legal frameworks. The proliferation of mass media and cross-cultural interactions has facilitated the spread of queer activism, although significant challenges remain. In response to the restrictive Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, organizations such as the Naz Foundation, Humsafar Trust, Voices Against 377, and SAKHI have created

supportive spaces for the queer community (Srivastava, 2014, p. 378). Despite opposition from right-wing groups condemning homosexuality, queer activism has gradually gained momentum and continues to do so. Since 2000, gay pride walks across the country have marked the growing visibility and strength of the queer community in India.

Eventually, after this long legal battle, sexual minorities now can claim to have covered improved ground for social acceptance, at least on the legal front. For instance, in 2014, transgender persons were officially recognized as the third gender and given reservations in public sector jobs. Subsequently, in 2018, the Supreme Court of India invalidated part of Section 377, making homosexuality "legal" in India. In striking down the law that made gay sex punishable by up to 10 years in prison, one judge said the landmark decision would "pave the way for a better future" (Sharma, 2018). However, the judgement remained silent for other members of the queer community.

The impact of these legal reforms is evident in the new titles produced for children. Led principally by private publishers, taboo subjects related to stereotypical representation of gender roles and sexual orientations are increasingly being given space in children's books. These publishing houses seem to be operating with the idea that the shaping of attitudes in individuals should start from an early age. As a result, these "new texts" provide active space and agency to the characters representing alternative sexualities. Additionally, shifts in critical theory discourses in the West have contributed to changing the literary landscape in India. The result is a positive transformation in children's literature, fostering a more inclusive and just attitude towards sexual minorities and alternative gender preferences.

To exemplify this new trend in contemporary children's literature, we set out to discuss the following books: *The Unboy Boy* (2013), *Sadiq Wants to Stitch* (2018, 2020), *Kali Wants to Dance* (2018), *Guthli Has Wings* (2019), *Friends Under the Summer Sun* (2019), *Rainbow Boys* (2019), *Rainbow Girls* (2019), *Ritu Weds Chandani* (2020), *The Boy in the Cupboard* (2021), *Many Colours of Anshu* (2022), and *The Boy Who Wore Bangles* (2022). These books are not only indicators of the evolving nature of children's literature but also serve as potential vehicles for challenging societal norms. The subsequent sections will delve into the analysis of textual as well as pictorial representations of these curated texts. These picture books have been chosen because, as editors Shailaja Menon and Sandhya Rao assert in their book *Children's Books: An Indian Story*, the genre of picture books in India has significantly expanded in recent decades, reflecting a growing appreciation for the importance of "visuals" in reading (p. 16). This expansion has led to a greater diversity of themes and narratives, including stories that address complex societal issues. By analyzing these texts, we aim to highlight how contemporary picture books enrich children's literature and contribute to a broader cultural dialogue about identity, acceptance, and social change.

Emergence of "New" Children's Literature: Shifting Paradigms

The books under consideration can be classified into various subcategories based on distinct sexual and gender identities. For example, *The Boy in the Cupboard* and *Guthli Has Wings* prominently feature explicit transgender child protagonists, assigned male at birth but identifying as female. These characters express their gender through clothing, hairstyles, and other desires, asserting their female identity. For instance, Karan in *The Boy* dons his mother's saree, wears marigolds on his head like a crown, and plays with a pink bat and a kitchen set, displaying a preference for traditionally feminine behavior. Likewise,

Guthli in *Guthli* rejects male clothing, opting for a light, frilly frock of her sister and aspiring to be a fairy. *Friends Under the Summer Sun* introduces Shri, a transgender woman, into the life of Nimmi. Nimmi notices Shri's distinctive features having a tall and slender body, long black hair falling onto her shoulders, and colorfully painted fingernails. In *Ritu Weds Chandani*, little Ayesha supports and fights for her elder sister Ritu's wedding with her girlfriend Chandani. She finds Ritu the most beautiful bride with dupatta worn as a turban on her head and watches as her aunt "painted a tilak on Ritu didi's forehead and then she helped Ritu didi climb on to a decorated mare" (Narvankar, 2022, p. 11), just as a traditional male bridegroom is supposed to do.

Other texts give their characters space to explore gender identity without asserting it definitively. In *Many Colours*, Anshu is tired of the "boring" shades of blue and prefers to wear the bright yellow shirt, his favorite floral socks, and even tucks a red flower into his hair. *The Unboy Boy* features Gagan, whose character is shown deviating from traditional male stereotypes. He refrains from playing with guns and doesn't like to hear stories about battles and wars. His distaste for fighting, unlike other boys, makes him "abnormal" in the eyes of others. Unlike the previous texts having overtly queer characters, the gender identity of Anshu and Gagan remains ambiguous, exhibiting what can be considered "charged silences"—the author's strategic omission of words or syllables (Agyeya, as cited in Rani & Kumar, 2024). Anshumaan Sathe, the author of *Many Colours*, states at the end, "neither the word 'boy' nor the word 'girl' fully describes Anshu and that he could be transgender, non-binary, gender fluid and gender queer—we'll learn the words that describe Anshu whenever Anshu does on his own gender play journey" (Sathe, 2022). Similarly, Gagan's identity also remains uncertain. When sad and "unsure," Gagan asks his mother, "Mummy, am I not a boy?" (Jha, 2013, p. 9). While his mother affirms his boyhood, a subsequent line, "But the others didn't know what Mummy knew" (Jha, 2013, p. 11), is an indication of some undisclosed knowledge. In her canonical 1991 publication "How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay," Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick underscores that even as society appears to become more accepting of homosexuality, there is an underlying resistance or reluctance, particularly towards effeminate expressions in boys. Sedgwick suggests that this shift reflects a subconscious desire for the non-existence of gay men. To counteract this, she proposes a more profound solution: rather than merely destigmatizing and depathologizing effeminate boys and the gay men they may become, society should actively embrace and desire the presence of gay individuals in everyday life (Sedgwick, 1991).

The prevailing stereotypical notions associated with gender roles and expressions are challenged in other texts as well. For instance, in *Kali Wants to Dance*, the narrative portrays Kali engaging in what is considered typical boys' activities such as attending school, playing with friends, and watching TV. However, what sets Kali apart is his passion for dancing, a pursuit typically associated with girls. Similarly, *Sadiq Wants to Stitch* articulates Sadiq's unwavering desire to engage in stitching and embroidery, and *The Boy Who Wore Bangles* introduces Bhargav, who revels in the melodic sounds produced by the bangles on his wrists as he dances, challenging gender norms that often dictate such activities as exclusively feminine.

Nonetheless, the pervasive depiction of stereotypical gender roles in the books under consideration is also undeniably apparent, particularly in those narratives featuring transgender characters. Trans characters assigned male at birth and identifying as girls or women often reinforce conventional gender norms related to clothing, appearance, and preferences traditionally associated with femininity. Examples include the longing to wear frocks

and embody a fairy-like persona (*Guthli*), the preference for a "pink" bat, playing with a kitchen set, and dressing up (*The Boy in the Cupboard*), and having long hair, painted nails, and engaging in culinary activities (*Friends*). These texts suggest there are limited ways to occupy the category of girlhood or womanhood as a trans girl or woman and require an adherence to hyperfemininity. While this might be some trans girls' and women's journeys, it is not everyone's. The stereotypical representations are also extended to the parents and the caregivers as well. For example, in *Friends* Nimmi's mother is depicted as constantly engaged in household responsibilities, feeding the family, and tending to Nimmi's newborn brother, Momo. Nimmi, in turn, assumes that she "had to help her (mother) out, after all, she was the big girl of the house now" (Pathak, 2019, p. 5), exemplifying traditional gender roles within the family dynamic. A similar illustration can be found in *Sadiq*, where Sadiq's mother is portrayed engaging in domestic tasks like cooking and stitching, while the male members are depicted tending the sheep—an outdoor activity.

However, one can also defend such a stereotype taking a cue from "Just How Radical is Radical," where the authors claim that it is crucial to recognize that establishing stereotypes in literature is a prerequisite for subverting them (Bedford et al., 2023; Kumar, 2019). There is no denying the fact that some of these texts overtly challenge stereotyped gendered notions. A compelling example can be found in *Many Colours*, where Anshu aspires to be as cool and strong as his female relatives or as soft and gentle as his male family members. Here, the author not only subverts stifling gender norms in the subtlest of ways but also holds up the possibility of a happy family, devoid of binary rules. Moreover, some select texts challenge traditional gender norms by portraying working women, debunking the stereotype where women normatively perform as homemakers. For instance, *The Boy in the Cupboard* depicts Karan's mother working on her laptop, and in *Kali*, Kali's mother works as a laborer to support her family following the death of her husband.

Contrasting with the preceding narratives, *Rainbow Girls* and *Rainbow Boys*, both authored by Kamala Bhasin, distinguish themselves by eschewing a traditional story format. Instead, these books explicitly assert that no two boys or girls are identical. For instance, in *Rainbow Boys,* Bhasin challenges stereotypes surrounding boys, presenting a diverse range of behaviors and interests as she writes:

> Some boys like to shout and bully their friends.
> Some are gentle. They don't pick fights and lend a helping hand to all.
> Some love to sew and knit and are very good at it. Some love to study and have no interest in games.
>
> *(Bhasin, 2019, pp. 7–8)*

Similar concepts are reiterated in *Rainbow Girls*, reinforcing the notion that individual preferences and inclinations defy gender-based expectations:

> Some girls like to sing loudly and some are just happy to hum.
> Some like to climb trees. Some are happy making dolls and taking care of them.
> Some girls like to ride anything that moves. A cycle, a horse, even a donkey.
>
> *(Bhasin, 2019, pp. 6–8)*

Throughout Bhasin's works, the terms "like" and "love" are employed judiciously to convey that preferences in hobbies and attire are unrelated to gender norms. Collectively,

Bhasin's work seeks to dismantle gender-related societal expectations and encourage children to embrace their identities, transcending the limitations imposed by biological sex. In an interview, she links societal expectations of gender to restrictive boxes and endeavors to challenge "gender" and "boxes" (Yadav & Kalia, 2022). Regarding both these books, the author says: "I have always challenged gender, and I have challenged boxes—for girls and boys. Boxes are bad for all. In these books also, we are calling them *satrangi* (signifying seven colors of the rainbow, in Hindi)" (Mittra, 2020). Bhasin's *satrangi* approach underscores the beauty of diversity, challenging societal norms that seek to impose uniformity on individuals. While reflecting on her two books, the author asserts her ongoing commitment in challenging gender stereotypes and societal norms that perpetuate inequality based on gender, caste, and race. Bhasin contends that while nature celebrates the uniqueness of every creation, societal constructs such as gender rules, caste rules, and race rules contribute to inequality.

Desires, Dreams, and Emotions: Literary Manifestations

The emotional experiences of the characters challenging stereotypical gender roles and sexual identities are directly linked with their relationship with family, peers, and others. In all the books (excluding *Rainbow Boys* and *Rainbow Girls*), the characters undergo an emotional journey marked by initial sadness, frustration, and isolation. However, the narratives evolve, eventually, towards a certain happiness, pride, and self-confidence. These emotions are explicitly articulated and visually conveyed in the books as they challenge gendered stereotypes. For instance, Bhargav in *The Boy Who Wore Bangles* exhibits sadness and frustration when denied the opportunity to wear bangles during Garba festival by his father and grandmother, who explain to him that "certain things are meant only for girls" (Doda, 2022, p. 18). Similarly, Sadiq's face saddens when his mother prohibits him from stitching, saying, "Because, in our community, it is the women who stitch. Men tend to the sheep" (Nainy, 2020, p. 12), and Kali also feels saddened when his school friends tease him, saying, "Only girls dance! You'll become girlish" (Karthikeyan, 2018, p. 7).

The theme of isolation and loneliness is more evident in books featuring characters displaying alternative sexualities. Here, illustrations frequently depict them as isolated, reinforcing the idea of their loneliness and distinctiveness. This isolation is emphasized through the spacing and scale of such characters compared to others, as seen prominently in *The Unboy*, *Boy in the Cupboard*, and *Guthli*. Gagan in *The Unboy*, subjected to ridicule as "Baby G-I-R-L" by his classmates and dubbed "Chooha" (mouse) by his grandfather, is visually depicted in solitude and tears on one side of the page. On the opposite side, the entire page is rendered intentionally empty, except for the words "Gagan felt sad and lonely and unsure" (Jha, 2013, p. 8), emphasizing the profound sense of emptiness experienced by Gagan. *Guthli* takes this concept to the extreme, consistently illustrating Guthli alone on a page and physically separated from others by the gutter, "intensifying the sense of physical and emotional distance" (Crawley, 2017). In *Boy in the Cupboard*, Karan locks himself in the cupboard, both literally and metaphorically, after being ridiculed by his friends. When his mother asks him why he locks himself in, he says because his friends sneer at his pink bat and laugh at his kitchen set. He further says:

> So I keep them all safe here,
> Where nothing can break

And nobody can say
Who I am is a mistake.
(Gupte, 2021, p. 8)

Even in *Friends*, Shri, the transgender character, is portrayed working alone in a chaotic kitchen, further emphasizing the portrayal of these individuals as almost invariably lonely and outcasts.

The characters' experience of isolation due to unfulfilled desires manifests in their dreams, particularly evident in *Sadiq* and *The Unboy*. In *Sadiq*, when Sadiq's attempts to pursue stitching are thwarted, he dreams of a night filled with colorful threads. In this dream, he intricately weaves the threads into a vibrant floral design on a rug, earning approval from his mother. Similarly, in *The Unboy*, Gagan faces isolation and sadness as he is mocked by his family and friends for his deviation from traditionally stereotyped masculine roles. He is constantly rebuked as a mouse—an undesired pest that pollutes the environment and can also be represented as a symbol of cowardness. The only consolation and love come from his mother, who reassures him of his worth. Gagan dreams of transforming into a superhero, joyfully saving the world and conquering dragons accompanied by his toy bear, Bingo. Sigmund Freud (1899), in his book, *The Interpretation of Dreams,* argues that these dreams can be interpreted as instances of "wish fulfilment," where unconscious desires (id) repressed by the ego and superego seek resolution. Freud posits that repression originates from societal guilt and taboos, and dreams serve as attempts by the unconscious to reconcile these repressed conflicts. In essence, dreams encapsulate the fulfillment of unconscious wishes suppressed by the conscious mind, offering insights into the dreamer's deepest desires, fears, and unresolved conflicts. Thus, Sadiq's wish to stitch and get approval from his mother and Gagan's wish to prove that he is not a mouse (coward) and can save the world get fulfilled in their respective dreams.

Moving on, it is nature that serves as a refuge from isolation and a source of solace for the child character in distress. Guthli's case can be cited as an example to bring home this aspect. When denied her wish to wear a frock, Guthli experiences disappointment when her mother insists, "Don't be stubborn. You are a boy. Now go and change out of your frock" (Shashi, 2019, p. 10). Throughout the festival of Diwali, Guthli remains sad. Even amidst the noise of crackers, the glowing diyas, and the food and sweets, she felt alone, lost in her thoughts, away from everyone else's laughter and happiness. With each passing day, her loneliness increased and "she would talk only to the trees and leaves among which she roamed. And to a few chickens that she was friends with" (Shashi, 2019, p. 14).

At the same time, the concepts of male space and female space play an important role in the texts under discussion. The characters grapple with the challenges of conforming to these rigid constraints of gendered spaces, leading to a complex journey of questioning sexuality and challenging traditional gender roles and expressions. The failure to fit into these predetermined molds results in a series of struggles and traumatic experiences for the characters. In response to the constraints imposed by societal expectations, the characters find solace in the act of carving out their own spaces. Whether manifested in the realm of dreams or amidst the tranquility of nature, these self-fashioned spaces act as sanctuaries where individuals can freely express and explore their identities. The act of creating these alternative spaces not only serves as a form of resistance against societal norms but also become a source of empowerment, allowing the characters to reclaim agency over their lives and identities.

The Act of Coming Out: Asserting Agency

Another theme that emerges in these texts is the struggle that the protagonists have to undergo in order to assert their desires and sexual identity. For their genuine feelings and emotions to be accepted, they are forced to undergo persistent efforts and suffering. The child protagonists engage in open discussions about their gender identity and sexuality with their families and actively advocate for change. Parental support varies, with some parents being immediately accepting, while others grow in their support over time. In *Many Colours*, Anshu's mother immediately helps him find excitement and happiness in other things when he becomes "bored" of the color blue and eventually when he figures out that he did not "have to be just a boy or just a girl!" (Sathe, 2022, p. 29), his mother happily accepts him. In *The Boy in the Cupboard*, Karan's mother supports him with unconditional love and urges him to come out of the cupboard, affirming that:

> Don't surround yourself with darkness,
> Where love can't enter
> Come out because Ma and Pa love you just the same with your pink bat and glitter
> People say many things,
> Not all of which are true.
> You have nothing to fear
> As long as you are being you!
>
> *(Gupte, 2021, p. 12)*

Similarly, in *The Unboy,* Gagan's mother affirms his identity of a boy when he questions it and consoles him by saying that he is a boy, "the loveliest, gentlest one who always makes me proud" (Jha, 2013, p. 9). Eventually, Gagan demonstrates agency by independently finding his friend's lost cat in the middle of the night, earning the reputation of being 'the bravest' among his friends. However, the story's last line hints at societal resistance, as Gagan's brother and some of his friends still persist in trying to make him conform to traditional gender notions. Similarly, in *Kali Wants to Dance*, Kali with the support of his mother finally defies societal expectations and embraces his passion for classical dance, despite facing teasing and opposition from relatives and friends who perpetuate the stereotype that dance is exclusively for girls and women.

In cases where initial attempts prove unsuccessful, the characters exhibit an indomitable spirit in pursuit of their happiness and acceptance. For example, in *Sadiq*, Sadiq takes the initiative to secretly finish stitching a rug at midnight when his mother is asleep. Upon discovering the completed rug, Sadiq's mother, instead of selling it, expresses pride in his accomplishment and acknowledges his desire to stitch, albeit with the additional responsibility of other chores. Wrapping her arms around Sadiq and giving him a tight hug, just the way he had dreamt the other night, his mother says, "So you want to stitch, eh? Don't think it is easy. I am going to work you very hard. And no neglecting your other chores" (Nainy, 2020, p. 23). In *Guthli*, recognizing Guthli's distress, her mother presents her a frock and says, "Wear it and be what you want, but you will always be my little *sonchiriya* (Golden Sparrow)" (Shashi, 2019, p. 16). Bhargav in *The Boy Who Wore Bangles* is finally successful in changing his grandmother's perception that clothing and appearance are not inherently linked to gender. He cleverly points out examples of men with traditionally feminine styles and women with traditionally masculine styles, and says, "Look Ba, Rakesh bhai is

wearing his hair in a ponytail. And there is Chandresh with earrings and Jaswinder bhai who is wearing a silver bangle . . . that aunty has short hair like me and she is wearing trousers!" (Doda, 2022, pp. 19–22). The story concludes with his grandmother offering him to wear her bangles, symbolizing her love and acceptance. These narrative underscore that individual choices, preferences, and activities are not inherently linked to their biological sex.

While the aforementioned texts emphasize the protagonists' journeys of coming out and asserting their desires and identities, the books *Friends* and *Ritu Weds Chandani* focus on teaching children the importance of being allies with individuals regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation. In *Friends*, Nimmi curiously asks Shri, "Are you a girl or a boy?" to which Shri responds, "Does it matter?" Nimmi's acceptance of Shri's gender ambiguity is highlighted when she thoughtfully remarks, "No, not at all. It's all the same, as long as I get more cakes. Anyway, we are all friends under the summer sun" (Pathak, 2019, p. 16). While the line "Does it matter?" is no doubt intended to be affirming, and probably serve as a vehicle to introduce individuals of alternative sexualities, it reflects a desire to merely explain gender diversity in a simple, age-appropriate way (Jones, 2016). Similarly, in *Ritu Weds Chandani,* little Ayesha courageously stands up for her sister Ritu's same-sex wedding, inspiring others to join in the celebration despite attempts to disrupt it. With all the courage she could muster, she walked up to the riders and announced as loudly as she could:

> My Ritu didi is getting married today
> And I'm going to dance in her baraat ALL THE WAY!
> *(Narvankar, 2022, p. 23)*

Saying this, Ayesha starts to dance, which motivates others to join in too. These acts of camaraderie demonstrate the significance of promoting understanding and empathy, and fostering an inclusive environment.

However, it is noteworthy that in every book, it is the women who often take the major proactive roles to provide support and help children understand and/or identify with individuals who fall outside of dominant gender or sexual norms. Even in *Friends*, it is Nimmi's mother who encourages her to befriend Shri, the transgender woman. Further, at the end of the story where they were having a birthday celebration, there is not a single male adult but only children and Nimmi's mother with Shri. Also, in *Ritu Weds Chandani,* while both of Ayesha's parents support Ritu's same-sex marriage, it is Ayesha's aunt who articulates that there is nothing amiss with Ritu and Chandani getting married, sadly emphasizing that "it is just that some people do not understand their love" (Narvankar, 2022, p. 9). It is interesting to note that even in these two books, there are girls (Nimmi and Ayesha) who are depicted as allies to persons of alternative sexualities. Similarly, the other books too depict women, mostly mothers (except the grandmother in *Boy Who Wore Bangles*) as supporters of their children who do not adhere to the traditionally gendered roles and sexual identities. As Crawley (2017) points out, these recurrent representations of girls and women taking on supportive roles underscore a noteworthy absence of depictions of adult men in similar roles throughout the examined books. This observation suggests a few key points about the representation of gender roles in children's literature. Firstly, it indicates that female characters are more frequently assigned the role of supporters and allies, which may reflect broader societal stereotypes about women being more nurturing and empathetic. Women's roles as supporters in these stories align with traditional views that perceive

women as caretakers and advocates for marginalized individuals. Secondly, the absence of male characters in supportive roles could indicate a gap in how masculinity and supportiveness are represented in literature. It might suggest that societal expectations or stereotypes about masculinity limit the depiction of men as empathetic and supportive figures. If men's roles are predominantly portrayed in more traditional or authoritative contexts, it may reinforce outdated notions about gender roles and hinder progress towards a more inclusive representation of all genders. Overall, this pattern highlights the need for more balanced portrayals that include men as allies and supporters. By expanding the representation of supportive roles to include both genders, literature can contribute to a more equitable understanding of gender dynamics, promoting the idea that empathy and support are qualities that transcend traditional gender roles.

Open-ended Conclusions: Towards an Inclusive Future

Over time, the purpose of children's literature has evolved from focusing on moral instruction and educating a rational being about the world (as seen during the colonial era) to nation-building in the post-Independence period, and more recently, to embracing realism in a multicultural, capitalist, post-liberalization India, particularly in English-language books published by independent publishers (Menon & Rao, 2024, p. 18). As a result, the reader's concept has also changed, now envisioning a child not as a passive recipient of the morals of the stories but active participant who likes to maintain more equal relationships with adults, and can navigate a complex world with nicety and finesse. There is a growing effort to move children beyond traditional notions of innocence and safety, placing them alongside adults. Consequently, the themes that were earlier considered to be taboo are now being tackled in the children's literature in India. The shift in cultural conversations around gender and sexuality can be cited as a perfect example here.

Historically, these conversations were neglected due to a conventional belief that such topics are not age-appropriate for children. However, a gradual and deliberate process is now unfolding in India, representing a nuanced approach in fostering respect for individuals at the margins—particularly those inhabiting alternative sexualities and gender identities. By incorporating such themes into children's literature, educators and authors are working to create a more inclusive and empathetic society. Teaching children about gender and sexual diversity from a young age can help break down prejudices and stereotypes before they become deeply ingrained. This early education will help lead to a more open-minded and accepting generation, which will further benefit society as a whole by promoting equality, reducing discrimination, and enhancing social cohesion.

Additionally, this inclusivity extends to minor religious and regional communities, not just the dominant group in India. For instance, within the curated picture books, *Sadiq* stands out as a narrative that explores the Muslim community of Bakarwals—a nomadic group of shepherds of Jammu and Kashmir. The book sheds light on their unique way of life and also seeks to emphasize the urgent need to revive the fading tradition of Bakarwal embroidery. Further diversifying the narrative landscape, two other books, *Kali* and *The Boy Who Wore Bangles* delve into the cultural richness of the regional communities of Tamil Nadu and Gujarat, respectively. The former portrays the challenges faced by a boy from a Dalit fishing community aspiring to master Bharatnatyam, while the latter celebrates the vibrant Garba Dance performed during the festival of Navratri, offering rich visual depictions of traditional styles and dance steps. The books *Rainbow Boys* and *Rainbow*

Girls navigate deeper and difficult issues around gender and sexuality. The illustrations are diligently carried out with the intention that almost every individual can find himself/herself on at least one page in the book. Priya Kuriyan, its illustrator, says:

> I ensure that the characters I am designing look diverse and not just from one section of society. I keep in mind representation of gender, race, skin colour, different body types, religious communities; things that reflect the true lived reality of our children.
>
> *(Adlakha, 2022)*

By embracing diversity in all its forms, the select picture books aim to promote understanding and acceptance of different cultural, religious, and regional backgrounds. This approach ensures that all children, regardless of their community or background, see themselves represented and valued in the stories they read. It fosters a sense of belonging and respect for different cultural, religious, and regional identities, further strengthening the idea of India where "the real self of a/our nation can only be realised in its heterogeneity" (Kumar, 2022, p. 59).

Anupama Dalmia reflects on the dynamic evolution of children's literature in India, emphasizing the breaking of boundaries, the shattering of myths, and the profound changes in narrative styles, subjects, voice, and lens. She further highlights that this shift towards inclusivity, perception, nuance, and variety in children's literature is deemed encouraging, recognizing the pivotal role that content plays in children's overall development (Rath, 2021). In their book, *Celebrating Children's Books*, Hearne and Kaye rightly state: "When you read to a child, when you put a book in a child's hands, you are bringing that child news of the infinitely varied nature of life. You are an awakener" (1986, p. 24). Authors and illustrators of children's picture books are increasingly speaking to both adults and children "separately or together, in words and images that not only delight but shock, provoke, and perhaps, enlighten" (Cech, 1987, p. 198). Cech sees this an opportunity for children to confront more complex issues:

> If we cannot protect our children from a violent world, perhaps we can at least equip them with the political insight and the moral courage to recognize and to act to change some of these conditions.
>
> *(p. 206)*

To conclude, the picture books examined in this study display a transformative approach that encourages young readers to transcend traditional notions of gender and sexual identities, challenge prevailing stereotypes, and acknowledge the potential for multiple expressions of masculinity and femininity. The texts further help to reflect the multicultural, multilingual, multi-religious, and multi-ethnic world that India is.

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