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Literary Theories

Queer Sexualities in Children's Picture Books: Indian Cultural Dialogues and Comparison

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Abstract: This article studies how Indian and Western children's picture books describe queer identities, unconventional family structures, and non-binary gender. Through detailed reading of Indian texts *Guthli Has Wings* by Kanak Shashi; *Ritu Weds Chandni* by Ameya Narvankar; *I Want to Ride a Motorbike* by Arthi Parthasarathy; *Rainbow Boys and Rainbow Girls* by Kamla Bhasin; *Sadiq Wants to Stitch* by Mamta Nainy; *Dancing in Thatha's Footsteps* by Srividya Venkat; *Laxmi's Mooch* by Shelly Anand; *Kali Wants to Dance* by Aparna Karthikeyan; and *Reva and Prisha* by Shals Mahajan, besides Western texts such as *Julian is a Mermaid* by Jessica Love; *Tango Makes Three* by Peter Parnell and Justin Richardson; *Heather Has Two Mommies, Mommy, Mama and Me*, and *Daddy, Papa and Me* by Lesléa Newman; *Uncle Bobby's Wedding* by Sarah S. Brannen; *King and King* by Linda de Haan and Stren Nijland; and *Prince and Knight* by Daniel Haack, the paper examines how queerness is recounted, mediated, and normalized. The article emphasizes the pedagogical and cultural consequences of these narratives in imagining inclusive futures for children. Using queer theory, especially the concepts of performativity of gender and critiques of binary sexual categories and the contemporary field of queer children's literature studies, this article compares how Indian and Western books discuss queerness for child readers and how cultural values structure narrative strategies, visibility, and pedagogic aims. This article argues that the Indian picture books usually discuss the gender nonconforming and queer themes through traditional settings such as family, relationships, and traditions, while Western books are often more direct about family diversity. However, the tone, nature, acceptance, and cultural context of these depictions vary significantly between Indian and Western children's picture books. The analysis integrates queer theoretical frameworks by Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Jose Esteban Muñoz to look into how picture books discuss cultural identity, normalize diverse families, and redefine family, desire, gender expression, and futurity.

Keywords: Children, Gender, Indian, Queer, Sexuality, Western.

Introduction

Children's literature plays a fundamental role in introducing social values, the collective unconscious, and identity models to children. Children's literature is never philosophically independent, and therefore books that highlight non-binary gender expressions and unconventional families, either specifically LGBTQ or gender non-binary, have a far-reaching impact on young readers. Picture books play a significant role in shaping the minds of the children through their unique and interesting way of incorporating ideas with visual and verbal storytelling. In India, where religion, community, and familial norms abide strongly, picture books that depict queer themes often stabilize queer perspectives with cultural perceptivity. Children's picture books are not exclusively whimsical tales, but they are a medium for children where ideologies are established, questioned, and modified. The visibility of queer identities in children's literature has long been constrained by standards of heterosexual normativity and cisnormativity. The booming visibility of queer themes in contemporary children's literature indicates comprehensive societal shifts and a continuing fight for queer rights and identification. In consequence, the contemporary setting displays an enlarging outlook where narratives enfold differences, multiplicity, and fluidity. However, this move is not comprehensive in tone and pace; instead, socio-cultural histories, political climates, and belief systems establish how queerness is framed. The portrayal of queer themes is not uniform across cultures. Indian children's picture books work within a sociocultural milieu influenced by colonial legacies, religious diversity, family-oriented principles, and arising discussions on gender and sexuality. Western picture books, particularly from North America and Europe, commonly arise from circumstances where LGBTQ rights movements have attained considerable legal and social visibility. These differences determine the way the stories have been narrated and how they have been told. This article examines queer sexualities and gender fluidity in children's picture books as part of ongoing cultural dialogue. By comparing Indian and Western texts, it examines how queer identities are negotiated through childhood, innocence, family, tradition, and futurity.

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Discussion

Ancient Indian Texts and the Depiction of Queer Identities

In contemporary Indian children's picture books, the depiction of queerness does not exist in cultural isolation; rather, it is influenced by the long-established Indian tradition of acknowledging gender fluidity and sexuality.

Ancient Indian classical texts such as the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Kamasutra disclose a collective consciousness far more flexible than contemporary heteronormative assumptions suggest. Before the advent of colonialism that inflicted strict heteronormative standards, the ancient Indian texts and practices portrayed a flexible comprehension of gender and sexuality. The narratives in ancient epics and texts such as the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the Kama Sutra, etc., demonstrate various gender-fluid and non-heteronormative experiences. For example, the Mahabharata introduces the story of Shikhandi, who was born as a female but brought up as a male and who played a significant role in the war of Kurukshetra. This gender fluidity is not treated as abnormal, but it is consecrated for its courageous act. Similarly, the story of Arjuna living as Brihannala, a gender non-conforming individual during his exile, reviews the acknowledgement and incorporation of gender fluidity. Another crucial representation that portrays the amalgamation of masculine and feminine energies is Ardhanarishvara, a deity and an androgynous form of Shiva and Parvati. The depiction of non-binary individuals in these ancient texts suggests a cultural acceptance of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. According to Vanita and Kidwai, “Indian mythological tradition accepted the multiplicity of sexual types as natural and even divine” (Same-Sex Love in India xxvii). This illustration interrupts the heteronormative notion of gender and presents a comprehensive view of human identity. In their groundbreaking work *Same-Sex Love in India*, Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai argue that before colonialism, Indian literature and culture welcomed diverse forms of love, including homosexual relations: “Pre-modern Indian texts abound in stories of same-sex love and gender variance” (Vanita and Kidwai xxiii). Vatsayana’s *Kamasutra* is the most celebrated text that favorably discusses Indian sexuality. In the ancient Hindu epic, Mahabharata, Krishna and Arjuna are repeatedly mentioned as ‘the two Krishnas’ (Vanita and Kidwai, 2003) to celebrate bonds of friendship that transcend conjugality and procreation. In the Bengali text, Krittivasa’s *Ramayana*, same-sex desire amongst women is introduced. In the text, the birth of Bhagiratha is attributed to the sexual relations between two females. Also, the temple carvings at Konark and Khajuraho, the *Kamasutra*, and other ancient literary works contain enough mentions to indicate that ancient India complied with a whole range of sexual activity. Historical documents and textual evidence also witness to the prevalence of same-sex love and gender non-binary. Often misinterpreted merely as an erotic text, the *Kama Sutra* incorporates entire sections discussing non-heteronormative relationships, gender fluidity, and the ‘third nature’—the *tritriya prakriti*. It also presents varied classifications of sexual types, encompassing sources for men who desire other men (*kliba* and *tritriya-pakriti*).

As stated by Vanita and Kidwai, “Sanskrit and medieval vernacular texts from various regions of India refer to a wide range of same-sex relations and gender transgressions, often without overt censure” (xxiii). In *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*, Vanita and Kidwai argue, “Indian texts from centuries past depict homosexual desire and acts without shock or apology” (xxiii). The inclusivity provides a base for reconceptualizing children’s literature.

However, during the colonial period, the British introduced Section 377 in 1861, which criminalized homosexuality, reconstituting them with heteronormative and binary systems that affected both law and education. The advent of British colonialism created a legal system and moral code based on Victorian values that stigmatized queerness and imposed normative heterosexuality. The execution of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code in 1861 criminalized “carnal intercourse against the order of nature,” successfully striking out eras of cultural variability. According to Leela Gandhi, “Colonialism was not merely territorial but moral,” advocating how colonial ideology altered Indian morality and erased prevailing indigenous flexibility (Gandhi 126).

In postcolonial India, the children’s literature represents a dual purpose: it reclaims the lost traditions of gender non-binary while questioning the remnants of colonial morality. This is evident through several queer narratives in children’s literature. As Stuart Hall asserts, identity is not static but “a production, always in process” (Hall 222).

When contemporary Indian picture books such as *Guthli Has Wings*, *Kali Wants to Dance*, *I Want to Ride a Motorbike*, etc., depict children who counter gender stereotypes, they can be read as involved in a cultural dialogue with this suppressed past. The selected Indian texts do not merely imitate Western queer narratives; rather, they retrieve indigenous histories of non-binary genders. Within this context, Indian children’s literature acts as a platform of cultural recovery, reconnecting contemporary queer identities with precolonial traditions of inclusivity and multiplicity.

Queerness in Indian and Western Children's Picture Books

Children's literature is not just a way of entertainment but a powerful cultural influence that shapes the perspective of young readers. In contemporary times, society's perception of gender and sexuality can be seen through its pivotal change in the narratives of the children's literature through its inclusion of the queer narratives. Judith Butler's concept of the performativity of gender indicates that gender identity is created and reconstructed through repeated actions and socio-cultural norms. This paradigm helps us to read the characters who "perform" gender in a different way. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's work on binaries in sexuality, the "closet," and the limits of hetero/homosexuality encourages attention to subtext and the politics of visibility.

Guthli Has Wings by Kanak Shashi is a story of Guthli, who is born as male but identifies as a girl. Though a boy, Guthli loves wearing dresses and dreams of flying like a bird, an image of independence and personal expression. However, she undergoes denial and confusion from her family. Guthli hopes that the people around her would accept and understand her feelings and that narrative would end with a note of anticipation and appreciation. The theory of gender performativity by Judith Butler is relevant here, where gender is not an innate truth but something enacted repeatedly through actions (Butler 25). Guthli "performs" her identity in ways that question prevailing assumptions, reflecting Butler's assertion that "there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results" (Butler 34). Using a child's perspective, this book criticizes gendered dress codes and highlights the lived experience of a transgender child within an Indian family. Guthli's recurrent acts of femininity reveal gender as socially constructed rather than innate.

Ritu Weds Chandni by Ameya Narvankar is a story about two same-sex couples, Ritu and Chandni, and their wedding. This story challenges the heteronormative norms of the society. The story is narrated by a child, Ayesha, the cousin of Ritu, who is supportive and excited for her cousin's wedding. Ayesha is shown as being deeply excited about the wedding and eagerly participates in the preparations, viewing Ritu and Chandni's marriage with joy rather than prejudice, which contrasts with the hesitation of some adults in the community (Narvankar). This book critiques societal biases through the portrayal of characters who are unsupportive and not happy for the wedding of Ritu and Chandni. The portrayal of customs and rituals and familial objection within the story reflects conflict and disagreement, yet it still celebrates affection and tenacity.

According to Vanita and Kidwai, “Reinscribing queer love within cultural and religious practices is not a violation of tradition but a return to it” (xxv). This story depicts the society’s perception of marriage and the socio-cultural setup.

Sadiq Wants to Stitch by Mamta Nainy revolves around a boy named Sadiq, who dreams of becoming a tailor, a profession traditionally connected to women in the society. The book does not outrightly refer to sexuality, but it critiques the gender-based division of labor and establishes discussions about identity. Sadiq’s actions resonate with Hall’s cultural theory, which suggests that identity and meaning are social constructs and can be challenged. Sadiq’s repeated desire to stitch, despite being constantly reminded that he is a boy, portrays how gender roles are socially enforced rather than naturally determined. At the end of the story, the talent and excellence of Sadiq are acknowledged and accepted, giving future hope where gendered activities are no longer restricted by binary expectations. This ending reverberates with Muñoz’s concept of queer futurity, where queerness is represented as a possibility of change rather than a social problem.

In *Dancing on Thatha’s Footsteps*, a young boy engages in classical dance, an art form often gendered as feminine. The book challenges gendered cultural practices around dance by portraying Varun, who likes to dance, displaying an unusual desire and interest from boys. Butler argues that gender is not an innate essence but “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame” (Butler 191). Varun’s failure to live up to the expectations of the society resonates with Jack Halberstam’s concept of queer failure, suggesting that failing to conform to dominant gender expectations can open up “more creative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (Halberstam 2). *Kali Wants to Dance* is a story about a boy who yearns to learn Bharatnatyam, a classical dance form culturally coded as feminine. The struggle of Kali portrays the social phobia encompassing masculinity and bodily expression. Dance became a medium where gender roles are both imposed and destabilized. Social discomfort surrounding Kali’s desire to dance reflects what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes as the cultural pressure to maintain heteronormative coherence. *I Want to Ride a Motorbike* emphasizes a girl’s desire to ride a motorbike.

Through the aspiration of this girl willing to ride a motorbike, the story depicts the desires and wishes of any child who might not be aware of the gendered structure of the society where particular and specific things are reserved for a particular gender, and the ones who want to transcend are considered to be different. The girl's yearning for mobility can also be read through Jack Halberstam's work on female masculinity. Halberstam argues that masculinity should not be understood as the exclusive property of male bodies, noting that "masculinity must be detached from the male body in order to be fully understood" (Halberstam 1).

Rainbow Boys and Rainbow Girls are pedagogic about gender variance and differences. Through different conversations between the characters, the books highlight varied masculinities and femininities. This book is a deliberate pedagogical text that introduces children to gender diversity, difference, and self-acceptance. Sadiq Wants to Stitch is a picture book about a boy named Sadiq who is interested in stitching, an art traditionally associated with females. The book questions the cultural and community norms, depicting the child's interest in stitching, which is considered unconventional in the society. Shals Mahajan Reva and Prisha, through a tender and child-friendly story, depict a loving relationship between two women. Unlike Ritu Weds Chandni, which highlights social discord, Reva and Prisha feature familiarity and family unity. Laxmi's Mooch questions gender roles through irony and bodily difference. Laxmi's mustache becomes a site of defiance against restraining ideals of beauty and social expectations. Though unambiguously queer in terms of sexuality, the book challenges femininity by acknowledging the female body to subsist outside the standardized framework.

Western children's picture books depict the idea of non-binary and queer identities through primary narratives rather than portraying them through different lenses like in Indian books. The direct depiction of queer concepts plays a fundamental role in normalizing varied family structures.

Julian Is a Mermaid offers a powerful exploration of gender expression through the figure of a child who desires to dress and move like a mermaid. Julian's longing is not framed as confusion but as joy, imagination, and self-recognition. Julian's grandmother simply asserts his fantasy, saying, "You are a mermaid." The grandmother's affirmation disrupts the regulatory norms that often police gender expression in childhood, transforming the domestic space into a site of queer acceptance. This compassionate assistance is in sharp contrast with the objection portrayed in Indian books like Guthli Has Wings, where she struggles to find space in the family and society.

The western narratives pay attention to diversity and celebration within supportive systems. However, formed by residual colonial influence and culture, Indian narratives emphasize more endorsement and revolutionizing. Indian children's picture books are often revolving around diffidence, deliberation, and the preference for social inclusiveness. As stated by queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "An understanding of queerness must take into account the specific histories and oppressions that shape how identities are lived and expressed" (Tendencies 8). Indian texts consider this by rooting queerness in well-known cultural expression—customs, families, and celebrations—enabling them to question hegemonic domination accordingly.

And Tango Makes Three employs a logic of queer kinship beyond the human realm. The story of two male penguins raising a chick together destabilizes assumptions about reproduction, parenting, and naturalness (Richardson and Parnell). As Butler notes, "kinship is not reducible to 'biological' relations but is a social practice" (Butler 102). In Mommy, Mama, and Me, the story shows the daily life of a child with two mothers, and in Daddy, Papa, and Me, the story depicts the day-to-day life of a child with two fathers. Several normal familial activities are represented in the story, highlighting that a family led by same-sex partners too can be as normal as the family of the binary parents. The family is depicted as having no conflict, instead having the love, care, and warmth of the family. The book doesn't use "two moms/dads" as a problem; rather, it depicts a family simply just as any family. These books challenge the idea that the children brought up in the same-sex parent family do not feel the warmth of the family and lack the normal childhood experiences by portraying the daily normal life of a child—playing, bedtime stories with the parents, family love, etc. Uncle Bobby's Wedding tells the story of a young girl, Chloe, whose favourite uncle, Bobby, is marrying his male partner, Jamie. At first, Chloe fears that marriage would change the relationship with her uncle, but later she realizes that having two uncles is better than one. The book addresses same-sex marriage in a gentle way by portraying a normal, ordinary family with a wedding, a family picnic, and day-to-day life. The queer relationship is regarded as part of the normal family and not dramatized. This book also turned controversial and was questioned for portraying homosexual marriage in a children's book. It was also banned in libraries. King and King is a story of a prince who fell in love with a prince instead of meeting many princesses.

His mother expects and wants him to marry a princess rather than a prince, depicting the expectation of any parent who would hope for their children. The story ends with the royal wedding of the two princes. This picture book is regarded as the first children's book that talks about romance between two princes. This depiction of the prince marrying a prince is a breakthrough in children's literature that often depicts the characters of prince and princess with fairy tale expression. This representation opens up space for a new avenue in the children's literature genre that has long administered binary categorization of gender. This book was also backlashed due to its content; many parents and school systems have tried to ban it. *Prince and Knight* is a story of a prince who fell in love with a knight after they both defeated the dragon. The prince here too is expected to marry a princess, but despite the expectations of his family and the kingdom, he, in the end, marries the knight with approval from them. The romance depicted between the prince and the knight in the story is open and straightforward. Jack Halberstam's critique of compulsory heterosexuality is useful here. Halberstam argues that queerness allows us to imagine "alternative modes of life, love, and time" beyond normative scripts (Halberstam 2). Many a time characters such as kings, queens, princes, and princesses are often portrayed with fairy-tale-like stories, but in these stories these characters are portrayed in a way that questions the heteronormative ideas. They dismantle the normative expectations about love, marriage, and family, emphasizing the idea that queer love too can be "happily ever after." *Heather Has Two Mommies* openly talks about a lesbian couple representing diverse familial structures. This book is widely recognized as one of the earliest children's picture books to center a family with same-sex parents. The book also intervenes in what Sedgwick identifies as the cultural impulse to classify identities within rigid binaries of normal and deviant. Sedgwick notes that Western epistemologies rely heavily on "a minoritizing view of homosexuality as a distinct and bounded category" (Sedgwick 1).

Books like *Mommy, Mama, and Me*; *Daddy, Papa, and Me*; *Uncle Bobby's Wedding*; *King and King*; and *Prince and Knight* address queer themes like non-binary and gender variance through the same-sex couple and their queer romantic relationships and queer marriage. These queer themes are discussed through normal everyday life, treating them as a part of normal family structure rather than posing them as a "problem." The focus of these stories is love, care, family, and joy.

However, Indian picture books differ from Western children's picture books in thematic structure and styles. The western books portray same-sex partners and unconventional families in a more direct way. Indian books often employ culturally rooted narratives such as traditions, marriage rites, classical dance, etc., to introduce gender-variant themes without disconnecting readers from shared cultural beliefs. When seen through a conservative lens, Western books are frequently targeted for censorship due to straightforward depictions of queer themes. Indian books, as they structure the narrative through culturally rooted themes, are not targeted directly for censorship, though they may be controversial. Addressing queer themes through several cultural setups, such as marriage and traditions, may increase acceptance among the reluctant audience. Western texts often highlight queer identity directly through parents, coming out, and romantic love, i.e., more in the liberal context. However, Indian texts use mediated design due to cultural circumstances.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that contemporary children's picture books from both Indian and Western contexts play a crucial role in reshaping understandings of gender, sexuality, and family by engaging in what may be described as a quiet yet transformative queer pedagogy. Rather than explicitly naming sexuality in all instances, many of the texts examined destabilize heteronormative assumptions through embodied practices, affective relationships, and everyday desires such as dancing, dressing, mobility, caregiving, and celebration. The expanding presence of queer themes in children's picture books marks a notable cultural change. The Indian picture book undertakes an exquisite yet transitional dialogue, considering cultural peculiarity with the need for inclusivity. In the meantime, Western picture books use a straightforward narrative that normalizes the queer themes in a simple yet significant way. Each of these stories corresponds with the cultural theory that identity is constructed by societal structures but can also be reconceptualized. These books demonstrate this changing cultural identity formation by amalgamating traditional Indian values with continuing modern ideas. These picture books not only act as a way of entertainment and education but are also used as a vehicle for emancipation, contributing to young readers' comprehensive representation of love, freedom, and identity. While Indian picture books involve culturally negotiated dialogues considering queer depiction with familial embrace and acceptance, social tradition, and transformation. By placing these texts in dialogue with queer theorists such as Judith Butler, Jack Halberstam, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and José Estaban Muñoz, the article demonstrates that children's picture books are not merely reflective of social change but actively participate in producing alternative imaginaries.

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