

Dismantling Gender Norms: The Transformative Power of Children's Literature

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ABSTRACT: *Gender identity plays a significant role in children who are in the stage of understanding genders or started recognizing their own genders. The most effective way to address gender issues in children's books is through exploration and equality in the narrative. If not addressed at the sensitive age of growing, genderqueer people would feel alienated and would fail to understand their own selves, thus leading to poorer mental health. The production of such children's books is a canonical event in the history of children's literature as this might let the children find a reason to feel comfortable with their own gender identity and the parents might be able to explore different gender identities and understandings of one's self outside the binary.*

KEYWORDS: *children's literature, gender identity, gender dysmorphia, bathroom bill, parents*

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I. INTRODUCTION

At this point in history, every individual has their own perception and assumption of what 'gender' is and, in most cases, the definition of gender known to them is developed by the environment they grew into. From very early childhood an individual is imposed with certain rules regarding their attitudes, appearances, beliefs, and concerns in accordance with the 'sex' assigned to them during their birth based on their genitalia. They are being sensitized about their sex and misrecognized their gender which eventually confuses in the stage of psychosexual differentiation. The former is an individual's biological aspect, and the latter is one's identity in relation to a social construct. As Judith Butler said gender is not tied to material bodily facts but a fiction that is solely and completely constructed by society. However, both are fantasies that are important aspects of an individual's identity and how this identity affects them in day-to-day scenarios. So, it is not the stage of sensitizing an individual about the awareness and concerns regarding the 'two' assumed genders prevalent in society. It is the stage where one needs to discard the prevalent concept of gender that emerged from social structures and recognize themselves as the gender they are.

II. DISCUSSION

An individual develops conscious self-recognition of their gender identity around the adolescent phase, but gender-stereotyped consciousness can be traced in children around the age of three to six. They develop a gender identity that satisfies cultural expectations. They play stereotypical and rigid roles in their assigned gender, believing that gender identity is based on external attributes and is unchangeable. This develops into gender constancy.

The rights and experiences of individuals who do not belong to the binary group of genders have been very much in the discussion over the last several years. This discussion must not be limited to adults only, it must reach out to the children and to the parents whose child(ren) came out as a person other than the two traditional genders. The most effective way to address the issue is through children's books as they are unabridged by ideologies of discrimination of race, gender, class, and other labels which affects the psychological and emotional development of children. These ideologies are presented in the most fanciful narrative form to the children that influence and deform their mindset, and when confronted with reality, the made-believe reality conflicts with the actuality of society. It is predominantly induced in children through such books that adhere to rigid stereotypes to meet cultural expectations. If these books are critically read, then one would find how girls are being sensitized more about the concerns regarding gender than boys. One might find in certain books that the 'boy' character might be able to wear a feminine dress as a kid and how he was convinced through strictness or mockery that 'dress' is for girls. But if the protagonist is a girl, the books start pointing out what a girl should do or wear or how should she speak or walk and other attributes without even letting her experience the perspective of the other gender in most cases. Thus, it points out to Butler's argument that gender is 'performative' because how an individual should act or 'perform' is imposed with the role-play according to the assigned gender and this act also determines the position and identity of the 'subject' in the society.

Fortunately, with political and social movements in the niche of gender and sexuality politics, narratives of the literary world started evolving and showing more egalitarian attitudes related to sexism and gender equality. Approaching issues like single-parent, homosexual, transgender, and non-binary taboos, gender gaps, feminist perspectives, double marginalization towards certain gender due to class differences, and other social issues regarding gender and sexuality. These changes are not bound within the books of young adults and adults but have also entered children's narratives.

One of the dominant issues approached by these undervalued books is recognition of the gender spectrum and not abiding by two traditionally assigned and imposed genders and focusing on transgenders, non-binary, pangender, third gender, intersex, agender, etc. Books like *'I am Jazz'*, *'The Pants Project'*, *'Ho'onani: Hula Warrior'*, *'Jacob's New Dress'*, *'Neither'*, *'Sam is my sister'*, *'The Boy and His Bindi'*, *'The Big Thoughts of Little Luv'*, *'Hikaru and the Dragon'*, and several others.

Gender dysphoria is a very acquainted term among those who do not belong to two traditional genders. It is a feeling of uneasiness caused by a mismatch between a person's biological sex and their gender identification. This psychological matter can be experienced by a transgender individual as young as between ages 3 and 7 according to the figures presented in *"How Early in Life Do Transgender Adults Begin to Experience Gender Dysphoria? Why This Matters for Patients, Providers, and for Our Healthcare System."* So, addressing such issues is important and a child would only be able to understand and interpret the situation when they could see themselves in the figures presented in these books. It is similar to Lacan's mirror stage where a child identifies his image but dissimilarities lie in the difference in identification of the image. The former is the identification of their own self-image and the latter is the identification of their gender. According to an article published by Boston Children's Hospital, gender dysmorphia can be diagnosed in children through their words and actions like the strong preference for clothes or toys or activities or play-mate of the opposite gender, cross-gender roles in make-believe or fantasy play, or comfortable with names of opposite gender or gender-neutral, strong dislike of sexual anatomy or physical sexual attributes.

I Am Jazz, published in 2014, was co-written by Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings and illustrated by Shelagh McNicholas, is a picture book based on the early experiences of a transgender advocate Jazz Jennings who identified herself as a boy at the age of 2. When a child would read the line that how Jazz is confessing that they are not "like Samantha and Casey" though she does almost everything things done by the other two child characters. And on the very next page, Jazz is directly addressing the fact that "I have a girl brain but a boy body. This is called transgender." And the picture depicts Jazz in their 'boy' image i.e., short hair and assigned boy's clothes and dark clouds hovering over them. This shows how a child also faces insecurities and conflicts within themselves because of this 'girl brain' and 'boy body.' The book *The Pants Project* by Cat Clarke targeted 9-13 years old age group, where the eleven-year-old protagonist, Liv, realized his not-so-traditional body in the most natural and realistic manner, how one certain morning he did not realize he is a boy, he would go through numerous internal conflicts as well as conflicts with social images before he realized that the word 'girl' 'did not quite fit' him and instead it 'pinched' him. His constant contemplation about his actual desired gender and the gender he was born into developed into gender dysmorphia and he was distressed and anxious about this newly recognized gender he was not acquainted with.

These complexities grow more within children when their parents are also as confused as their children and it is not to blame the parents entirely. As the parents' generation grew up in the binary-oriented gender community and they are not acquainted with terms like genderqueer, nonbinary, gender fluid, agender, two-spirit, demi girl or demi boy, or the early signs of gender dysphoria, gender constancy or gender identity. They either take it as a child's imagination and fantasy or because of the influence of spending time with genders other than their 'assigned' gender. As Dr. Woodward said, "It's rare that kids just say one day, 'I was born female and I don't identify as that, I identify as a male and that's what I want to be, ... Usually it's much more confusing for the child and family.'" In the novel *Funny Boy* by Shyam Selvadurai, Archie's mother was a 'bad influence' on Archie for dressing as a girl as a child because he used to see his mother dress up in sarees. When Jazz corrected her mother to call them "good GIRL" instead of "good boy" her family was confused initially as they might not have faced such scenarios while her brothers were that age. Jazz chose "princesses and mermaid costumes" over "trucks and superheroes." Her own brother would innocently mock her for playing with 'girl stuff' as they are not aware or exposed to the existence of trans-gender just like their parents. Similarly, in *Pants Project*, Liv could not associate himself with the name 'Olivia' and the school dress code skirts being assigned to the girls. As Liv identifies himself as a 'boy' but his physical attributes are still of a girl. He constantly faces dilemmas and distress in such a life. He felt angry being called 'girl', 'daughter', or 'sister'. Similarly, Jazz dislikes that he was only allowed to wear her sister's clothes only in the house, and in public, she was imposed to wear the clothes according to the gender society identifies her i.e., boy clothes. This scene indicates that the so-called progressive parents who might be closeted transphobic people are okay with this 'funny' aspect of a kid if it is closeted inside the house and not expressed publicly. Furthermore, a similar scene is shown in the children's book *Jacob's New Dress* by Ian Hoffman and Sarah Hoffman where Jacob's mother, initially, agrees with Jacob

wearing a dress till he does that inside the home. But this act of parents could negatively impact the child(ren) and they would develop mental illnesses like anxiety, depression, negative self-image, insecurities, etc.

Another significant aspect presented in the book *I Am Jazz* faced by trans children like male-to-female trans child Jazz or female-to-male trans child Liv is how trans people are denied their basic rights of using the bathroom in accordance with their self-identified gender. It has been a national interest of debate for the past few years where the debate over whether transgender individuals should be allowed to use public restrooms, including locker rooms, and changing rooms, corresponds to their currently expressed gender rather than their biological sex. In North Carolina in 2016, the 'Bathroom Bill' was passed which prohibited transgenders to use public restrooms according to their corresponding gender. Even though Jazz's family accepted her and let her change her name and way of dressing, her teachers still persuaded her to use the "boy's bathroom" or "play on the boy's team in the gym class" because they have known her to be a boy physically ever since and refused to accept the child's chosen gender identity. This shows that even though a family accepts a trans person as the way they are but society might not align with such choices. And Jazz could only overcome these negative thrashes as a child because she was assured by her family that being 'different' is an optimistic point in one's life. Indicating that parents should not ignore a child's way of identifying themselves and gender dysmorphia could only be treated through family counseling.

In the picture book '*Neither*' by Airlie Anderson, the author approaches the intersex as one of the genders in the gender spectrum where the green character with physical attributes of both blue bunnies and yellow birds, and confidently accepts the fact that they are 'both' and does not belong to 'this or that' population. One bunny refuses to accept them being 'both' and as a societal mouthpiece strictly states that they "can't be both" and names them as 'Neither'. As Neither could not fit in any one of the genders, they have always been pushed away for not being 'rabbity enough' or 'birdy enough'. Intersex children could not identify themselves as one of the binary genders and due to cultural and social rejection of them, they get diagnosed with issues like self-esteem problems, infertility and/or insecurities regarding gender identity, heightened sexual fear, problems of sexual communication, and dissatisfaction with sexual functioning and outer appearance of the genitalia. In some cases, parents take decisions regarding their gender identity just by making the child go through sex assignment surgery or genital organ correction soon after birth. In many cases, this led to the failure of acceptance of the assigned gender identity and the development of gender identity disorder. However, this story ends with a positive note indicating that the world would change into the "Land of All" presenting the gender spectrum where all sorts of genders like 'this', 'that', 'somewhat', 'whatnot', 'either', 'very', 'sort of', 'just', 'rather', 'a little' and 'neither and both' would be accepted and would not be judged. This book is similar to an Indian Children's picture book *The Many Colours of Anshu* by Anshumaan Sathé which offers us a story of the seven years old child protagonist, Anshu, where gender is represented with the colour blue and how Anshu could not accept the fact that he has role-play just like others. In one scene, Anshu was shown wearing a red rose behind their ears which is highlighting the point that he might be a non-binary person. Thus, colour plays a significant role in children's books to convey subtle hints and pieces of information to make the reader re-think and criticize. Especially in such books where gender is spoken about the absence or presence of two traditional colours blue for boys and pink for girls and how illustrators subversively create a gender-bending world.

Identifying oneself as non-binary or pangender or genderqueer might be confusing among the kids as they could neither associate themselves with either of the two genders nor do they feel terrible in role-playing both genders. They usually stay neutral regarding their clothing, activities, or identity. For instance, in the book *Jacob's New Dress*, the child protagonist, Jacob, on the one hand, loves to wear beautiful and sparkly dresses like other girls and does not feel uncomfortable being a playmate to the girls, and on the other hand, he is completely comfortable being in the boy's changing room or wearing boy's clothes or having a boy name and most importantly they never denied or accepted the fact that they might be a boy. So, either Jacob is a pangender person or a non-binary character. However, children who are genderqueer and do not adhere to society's binary gender expectations are more likely to struggle with gender acceptability and recognition than binary-identifying transgender persons. As transgenders are choosing one of the two binary gender identities but genderqueer people could not choose likely and thus leading to poorer mental health, lower self-esteem, more suicidal or self-harm tendencies, intensive negative body image, and many more.

III. CONCLUSION

The production of such children's books is a canonical event in the history of children's literature as this might let the children find a reason to feel comfortable with their gender identity and the parents might be able to show that being different from the crowd in an optimistic way. Given the increase in exploration of identities and understandings of one's self outside the binary, mental well-being is at stake among individuals ranging from children to adults and literature has always been the weapon to bring about changes in the world. Thus, the approach to such a complex and sensitive topic is done through comprehensive and simple pictures and dialogues, diverging the direction towards the progressive gender-fluid society by influencing and accepting

the young minds are truly impressive contributions by the writers and illustrators of children's books. And, the high point of such productions is that such representations in children's literature are not only from developed countries of the world but also from developing and under-developed countries which gives the world a unitarian aim of creating a gender-fluid society.

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