Why Do you Keep Saying I'm a Boy when I'm a Girl?: Exploring Queer Desires, Identities, and Expressions in Indian Children's Illustrated Fiction

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Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting –
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

(Mary Oliver)

The year 1984 saw the publication of Jacqueline Rose's phenomenal essay "The Case of Peter Pan, Or, The Impossibility of Children's Fiction", that eventually went on to become one of the seminal works on children's literature and its subsequent field of criticism. Rose begins her essay by noting that "children's fiction rests on the idea that there is a child who is simply there to be addressed and that speaking to it might be then simple" (58). "The Case of Peter Pan" refutes this singular claim, by positing exactly how addressing the child as the "reader" is quite opposite of what can be labelled as "simple". But to understand why it is difficult to concretise and compartmentalise the idea of a "child reader", it is important to ask some rudimentary questions first. To begin with, what is children's literature? Who is it addressed to? Who gets to read it or benefit from it? In extension, one might also look at some poignant questions that Karín Lesnik-Oberstein puts forward in this direction:

> (…) Is a children's book a book written by children, or for children? And, crucially: what does it mean to write a book 'for' children? If it is a book written 'for' children, is it then still a children's book if it is (only) read by adults? What of 'adult' books read also by children—are they 'children's literature'? (15)

It can probably be agreed that the definition of a child or childhood can never be universally unanimous. The identity of a child differs across generations, classes, races and creeds. A child then, becomes a construct, built extremely cautiously, with ardour, thoughts and plans. This attempt is probably nowhere as self-evident as in the fascinating composition of what is known as children's literature. In children's fiction, it is always the adult (author, maker, giver) that comes before the child (reader, product, receiver). There is a distinct imbalance of power between the two giving the former control over the latter – power that not only gives the adult the right to tell the story of the child, but also make that story the only, definitive story. The portrayal of the child in children's literature essentially becomes an epitome of the adult imagination, which can trace its roots back to a sense of what they once were or what they envisioned themselves as being.

However, this overt and sometimes conscious romantic idealization of the nostalgia of what one once was, often shields what would otherwise have been easily recognised as a political disavowal of the multiple facets that make up a child. When one delineates a book as being a part of children's

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literature, one almost preposterously assumes that children are meant to be part of a homogeneous community, devoid of the historical, political or sexual markers that separate the adults themselves. Is this conscious effort to homogenise all human beings of a certain age range, under an overarching epithet, not then a step towards moulding a universal structure of the archetypal child, in a way that is probably not possible in reality? The adult author, through an attempt at writing books for children, not only moralises the child but concomitantly seduces him/her/them into becoming a part of the normative, the conventional, the exemplar. It ostracises the child only to trap them into what the adult thinks is the ideal.

Incidentally, the idea of childhood itself emerged sometime during the early 18th century. The Romantic Age is invariably understood as a liberator of the imagination and is also seen as the time when the child takes centre stage as a child, and not a small adult (Sky 363). Until then, children were separated from adulthood only by infancy which ended by seven years of age. There hardly was any effort to separate the discourses of knowledge for the child and the adult. However, what followed the conception of childhood, were ways to protect the innocence of children from being tainted by sin, sensation and scandal. Adults started looking at children as a mixture of good and bad, whose goodness had to be nurtured and badness suppressed, whose character must be formed and firmed before it was exposed to a corrupt world (MacLeod 26).

The idea of the 'pure' or the 'innocent' brought with it expectations and responsibilities on the part of the adults to shield children's eyes and minds from 'inappropriate' content. Some of the earliest efforts to censor works for children developed vehemently under the influence of Rousseau and Locke, both of whom earnestly believed in the innocence of childhood. Locke compared the minds of children to blank slates. On the other hand, Rousseau once famously said "Everything is good as it comes from the hands of the Maker of the world but degenerates once it gets into the hands of man" (Emile 11). Both of these philosophers deprived children of any agentive function and called for active censorship of books to form a corpus of 'child-appropriate' literature. Social inequalities, problems, politics, and sexualities were conveniently and convincingly discarded as subjects that the child should complacently ignore and circumvent. In doing so, the child was rendered innocent of all the contradictions which flawed the adult's interaction with the world (Rose 64). Furthermore, through repeated censorship trials, children's books deliberately tried to deprive a child of his or her understanding of his/her own identity, aspirations and wants. 'Childhood' was univocally heralded as a monolithic, paradigmatic framework of reference in these books, which strived to eradicate all sorts of individual and socio-cultural differences that children, no less than adults, are undeniably a part of.

However, an adult's attempt to repress a child's understanding of social, historical or in this case sexual differences is not as much a sign of them trying to protect a child's innocence as it is a step taken to challenge anything that threatens the adult's moral perspectives of right and wrong. Perry Nodelman identifies this as a process of colonisation perpetuated carefully by adults. Peter Pan did not grow up solely because the adult writer never wanted him to. Similarly, the queer child is distorted, manipulated and forcibly made to appear straight in children's books, in order to appeal to the adult's conception of the normative heterosexual world order. Therefore, the child protagonist is made to take on a sexual identity that the adults would like to acknowledge and recognise amongst themselves. It is exactly for this reason that the queer child had, for a long time, been invisible from the pages of popular children's fiction. Anything that replaced conventional categories of sexual expression with a new fluid movement among and between forms of sexual behaviour was seen as an unwanted deviation and hence was kept strongly outside the purview of young minds.

All rules however have loopholes. Covert nods to varying sexual orientations and gender identities have long been disguised in children's books, but in recent decades, challenges to heteronormativity started becoming more overt (Masad). Calls for diversity and inclusion were made more prominent, as more queer writers started writing books themselves, advocating a sense of belonging for children who had been made to believe they are different. Many of these books even managed to stir contro-

versies as well. For example, the now famous book about two penguin dads, *And Tango makes three*, by partners Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell, topped the American Library Association's list of challenged books for several years in a row (Driscoll). The 1990s and 2000s saw a huge leap in queer visibility in books for children, as queer activist circles became more active and started advocating for equal rights more voraciously. This group of writers recognised the ability of books to penetrate through the developing consciousness of the children and turned it into an endeavour to help queer or questioning children to find themselves in the heteronormative social order, otherwise prescribed and celebrated.

Moon and Sedgwick note that the appearance of the "protogay" child protagonist was revolutionary. He/She/They became an anti-theoretical moment, resistant to analysis, itself the figure deployed as resistance (qtd in Lesnik-Oberstein and Thomson 36). The protogay child, however, though pretty frequent in the Western literary circles, hardly made an entry into the Indian context till the late 2010s/early 2020s. It is very recent that more and more Indian writers have started including queer characters in their books for children. In the context of the hostile environment that the country hosts for its queer people (though changes are being made slowly), it is not a surprise that the development has been slow to usher in. However, now that it has, this paper will strive to analyse five of them to understand more about how queer representations have been portrayed through these works.

"The Cupboard is dark at all times, Ma": Bringing The Closeted Queer Child Out in Kanak Shashi's *Guthli Has Wings* and Harshala Gupte's *The Boy In The Cupboard*

It is not without reason that most of the children's books in India in which queer protagonists have featured have been illustrated picture books. Nodelman believes picture books are a paradox; they are often the young child's province – silly, casual, funny, but also simultaneously are polyphonic, absorbing and using many codes, styles, and textual devices, and which frequently push at the borders of convention (69). Picture books attract the attention of children very easily. But more than that, they often help children to not only identify or recognise themselves with the pictures (mirror), but also provide a window to look at the representation of the world outside. Graphic novels or illustrated books engage with the politics of representation better. They make it easier for children to take up 'subject positions' – because the 'subject' is a child like them – and understand their own subjectivity, selfhood or individuality.

With such an aim of presenting different sexual subjectivities to young readers, writer and illustrator Kanak Shashi's 2019 book *Guthli has Wings* introduces us to Guthli, the youngest and the most favourite member of her small family. Guthli is like every other child, she is a "chatterbox", she roams around the Satpura hills for hours, collects leaves of various kinds and draws fairies wherever she can. However, there is only a small difference. Guthli was born a boy, though she is sure she is a girl underneath. The usage of the pronoun "she" in the narrative, from the very beginning, aligns with how Guthli feels about her own self, what she knew she actually is, despite the boy's body that she was born with or the impositions that the society wants to levy on her. Interestingly, the illustrations also do not try to portray Guthli either as a boy or a girl, portraying her more as a gender-fluid child, with her dishevelled hair, riding bicycles and swinging happily. Her hobbies refute any kind of gender stereotype and she stands out from the illustrations of both her brother and sister. However, all of Guthli's choices are not accepted by her family. On Diwali, when Guthli, unhappy with her "boy clothes", comes out dressed in her sister's frock, she is met with caustic derision, mockery and anger. The page where the author illustrates Guthli revealing her frock to everyone, is marked by three faces (figure 1) – her sister's (whose face is turned and hence not visible, but gives an essence of shock nonetheless), her brother's cruel laughing expression, and her father's angry frown. The brother's face is not given any visible marker of familiarity, aligning his reaction to how most people react to children like Guthli. Both the brother and the father's faces are fragmented from their bodies,

insinuating that these actually are the faces of the bigger society in general – the ones which try to suppress the queer child's desires and wants oppressively under its usual smirks and glares.

Fig. 1. Guthli's Frock Reveal

Guthli's mother is a little more sympathetic. Yet she does not wait long before reminding Guthli what the society expects of her: "Son, you are a boy. You should wear your own clothes, not your sister's" (n.p.). Guthli's heart does not accept this distinction. For the first time in the story, she reacts fiercely: "But I want to be a fairy! And why do you keep saying I'm a boy when I'm a girl?" (n.p.)

The child's language is often incomprehensible. The world is not convinced that Guthli could be a "fairy", as she otherwise firmly believed. She is made to change out of her frock. With this turn in the story, there is a sudden change in the illustrations used so far as well. The colours, that were abundant throughout the pages till this crucial point, are obliterated by a depressing white. Guthli appears in shades of darker colours, her features are no more visible. She loses her own identity and in turn, all hues from her life. The lights of Diwali are contrasted against the scary blackness of despair that engulfs Guthli.

Soon, the sadness starts to bother her parents. Perplexed, her mother understands Guthli's plight and hands over a frock to her: ""Yes", she said, "it's a frock. Wear it and be what you want, but you will always be my little *sonchiriya*"" (n.p.). Indeed, girl or boy, Guthli first and foremost was a human being, a child, her mother's beloved *sonchiriya* (golden bird). With this, the author tells his readers that no matter what their identity is, they are loved and deserve to be what they want to. The colours finally return to Guthli's life and subsequently to the pages of the book. Guthli was finally happy:

> She was a golden bird and could fly high up in the sky, over all the rules of the world. Rules that she said she was a boy because she was born with a boy's body, and not the girl she *knew* she was. (n.p.)

Through her advocacy of her own self, Guthli disrupts the idea that gender and biological sex are the same. It is almost a stepping stone for young readers to re-learn, understand and question the conceptualization of the normative.

The book ends with a picture of Guthli in her beautiful yellow frock swinging in the playground. All throughout, the book has minimal text and an overload of great illustrations. Instead of focusing on facial expressions, the author tries using colours to depict the emotions of the protagonist. In doing so, she also makes it easier for children to understand how Guthli was feeling in every stage of her life. What is noteworthy is that the author has not tried to limit herself to using stereotypical colours like blue or pink (as has been done in many queer children's books like *Kathy is Keith* or *But, I'm not a boy*) to highlight Guthli's gender transition. In fact, the cover of the book has a rainbow palette (also symbolising the LGBTQ+ spectrum) as its background, colours from which are used throughout the pages as backdrops in various instances.

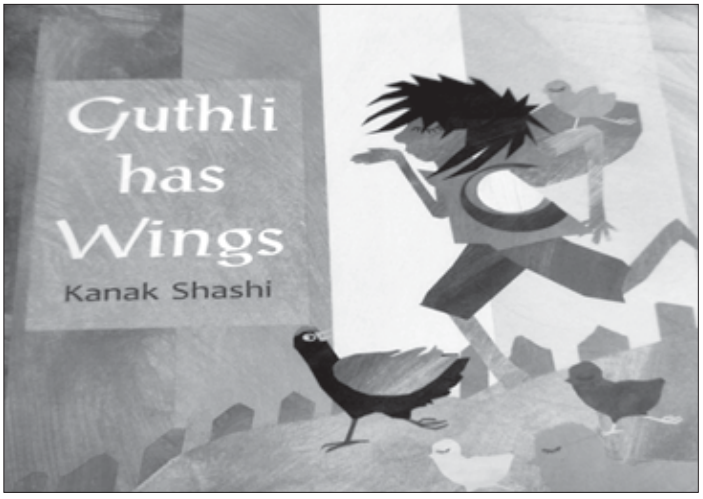

Fig. 2. The Cover

Guthli is centred in almost all the pages of the book, giving an opportunity to children to not only familiarise themselves with her but also learn to empathise with the character. The story is narrated by an omnipresent narrator, but Guthli's thoughts and emotions are significantly portrayed through the illustrations drawn. The "frock" for Guthli becomes a powerful emblem, symbolising among other things self-expression, as well as integrity, pride and love. Guthli wants to change the world. But for today, she says, this is enough. With this, Shashi hands over the mantle of change to other transgender and queer children and urges them to come out of their closets, put on their pretty frocks and try to change the world.

While Guthli was met with initial apprehension and opposition by her parents, Karan's parents in *The Boy in the Cupboard* (2021) are supportive, encouraging and loving. Author Harshala Gupte in her Author's note writes: "Karan is not the only child that hides behind a closeted door – literal or metaphorical – out of the fear of being queer" (n.p.). It is from her own experience as a child that Harshala recounts the trauma that regular sneers, taunts and grimaces gave Karan, so much so that one day he decides to lock himself up in his purple cupboard and not come out. His mother is worried and after a few days, decides to knock on the cupboard and ask what is wrong. What Karan replies is heart-breaking:

> In here, I am who I always thought I'd be
> When I'm inside the cupboard,
> Even Daadi can't say a thing to me. (n.p.)

Truly, Karan is safer and happier inside the cupboard. The reference to "Daadi" (grandmother) not being able to say anything to him suggests that Karan has been rebuked before for how he was. Priya Dali's brilliant illustrations show him studying, playing and twirling inside the cupboard, sometimes with a crown of marigolds or in his mother's saree, draped as a gown. The illustrations try to portray the turmoil going on in Karan's head. There is a distinction between the facial expressions that the protagonist has while being "himself" in the cupboard, and while being outside in the open, where he is mocked and bullied. However, even the cupboard gets too dark for Karan in a while. He wants to come out but steps back, afraid that his friends will laugh at his "pink bat" or "kitchen set" again. The cupboard is bleak, but it gives him no illusion of having "friends" who hurt him incessantly:

> The cupboard is dark at all times, Ma.
> No matter the night no matter the day,
> The cupboard stays the same. (n.p.)

The idea of "coming out" scares Karan. His mother is however distraught at his confession. She decides to extend her hand of support to him through the cupboard's peep-hole. She encourages him to be himself and assures him that he has "nothing to fear". Overjoyed, Karan breaks open his cupboard and comes out in his pink skirt and marigold-crown.

Fig. 3. Karan Comes Out

Like Guthli's frock, the skirt and the crown become extended symbols of Karan's own identity. Both Guthli and Karan try to "perform" their true gender by trying to associate themselves with things that are considered more feminine, and by trying to derive agency from the very power regimes which constitute them, and which they oppose (Butler 136). The background of the pages also become bright again as Karan twirls around in joy and starts going out to play with his friends again. He is no longer afraid of wearing a flower in his hair or dancing in the open. The illustrations show how Karan has changed after "coming out" – he is happier, more content and playful. He is finally out of the "closet" and he has no intention of going back again.

The language used in the book is interesting. It is mainly written in rhyming words, making it easier for young readers to find the story interesting and meaningful. Rhyming words also make learning more convenient, alongside helping in grabbing the fluctuating attention of children well. It is also essentially the language of children, and thus makes the narrative voice more of a reflection of Karan's thoughts, rather than the author's. Words of assurance are also scattered throughout the narrative, making it tangible for children to believe that they can be loved no matter who they are: "You have nothing to fear, as long as you are being you!" (n.p.).

Gupte writes the book from her years of experience of being bullied and feeling dejected. This makes the book a part of what Isabel Millán proposes as the "Autofantasia" genre, whereby authors deliberately insert themselves (or their experiences) within a text in order to fantasize solutions or responses to hegemonic structures that they might have faced earlier. Harshala understands that the peers who bullied her were children themselves "acting and speaking out of what their environment had taught them". She wished that her peers realized what kind of hurt they were causing her, and hence years later, decided to write *The Boy in the Cupboard* to "make a difference". The book thus stands not only as a form of support for closeted children, but also as a device to teach young readers how to be gentler, more inclusive and empathetic.

"I'm a prince who likes dresses"[1]: Portrayals Of Gender Creativity, Roles and Stereotypes in Richa Jha's *The Unboy Boy* and Vivek Shraya's *The Boy And The Bindi*

The heteronormative order not only divides the entire world into binaries but also tries to strictly put the man and the woman in rigid boxes. The stereotypical genders are thus associated with

certain characteristic traits, and any movement away from those often is counted as an unacceptable aberration. Richa Jha's *The Unboy Boy* (2013) talks about one such aberrant boy. Gagan, Jha's protagonist, likes to look at all things beautiful and to wish the Sun, the flowers and the birds "Good Morning" every day. However, all of these things are considered "unboyish" by Gagan's peers; they are quite sure that Gagan is a "sissy". Stereotypes project themselves onto the pages of the picture book where Gagan is constantly seen being ostracised as the "other" by his cruel, violent, "manly" friends. Meekness, cowardice, empathy are largely seen to be feminine traits and are looked down upon when they are manifested in young boys, especially in their developmental stage. Gagan hates listening to tales of horror, gore and violence and yet his grandfather tries to force him to listen to war stories. When the former turns his face away, he is called a "*chooha*" (mouse) by his grandfather. Interestingly, the word "*chooha*" is illustrated with the two Os extended to form the two ears of a mouse. Picture books generally can often trespass the limits of language (Hindi in this case) through pictures that specifically signify what words mean, and the "*Chooha*" illustration by Gautam Benegal is one such endeavour. It also reaches out to young readers to show how Gagan was deliberately being treated as something he most definitely was not.

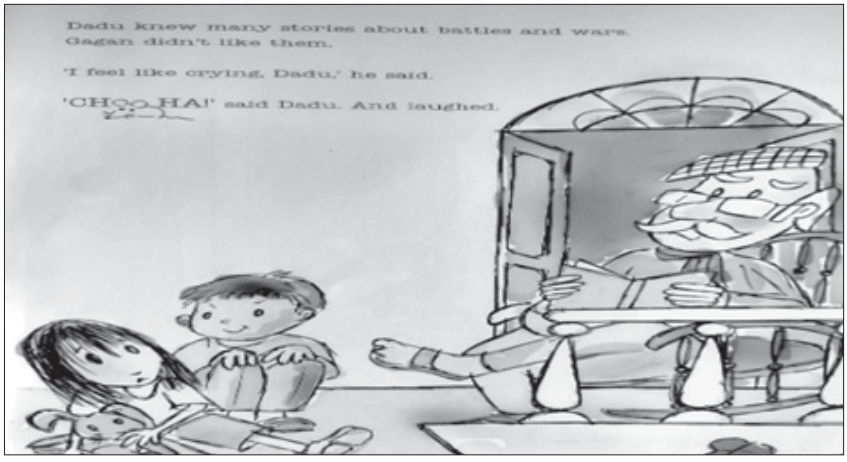

Fig. 4. "Chooha"

Gagan's only friend is a stuffed teddy bear named Bingo. He is constantly made to feel lonely, sad and unloved. The page where Gagan's loneliness is portrayed is illustrated quite tellingly. The boy sits alone with his teddy, with shadows overcasting him while a very mellow white occupies the entirety of the rest of the two pages.

Gagan knows inside that he is indeed a boy but he needs reassurance. So, he asks his mother: "Mummy, am I not a boy?" (n.p.). Gagan's mother assures him that he truly is one and that his gentleness only makes her proud of him. Such words of love, encouragement and strength help Gagan fall asleep, dreaming of saving the world as a Superman, with Bingo. Gagan's dreams are quite intriguing. He dreams of saving the world and fighting with dinosaurs one day. Though he subverts gender stereotypes in his real life, he actually does cater to a significant part of the boy-as-the-saviour-complex in his dreams. Does the unconscious mind of the bullied child then actually want to conform at times, or is it entirely Gagan's fantasy to spread his charm throughout the world in his own way and extend a dogma of social acceptance all over?

The crucial turn in the story comes with the onset of the annual summer camp. In an evocative use of the "show, don't tell" storytelling method, Benegal dexterously draws pictures of children enjoying their stay at the camp. However, Gagan is shown to be alone in most of the pictures – doing his own thing and clutching onto Bingo. The other children bully Gagan by telling him of "trolls" who

rip teddy bears. Afraid, Gagan tries to seek refuge in the world of his dreams. In a turn of events however, Charit's cat Scuttle gets lost. All the children start looking for the cat while speculating about the various ghosts that are known to hide in the school premises. The illustrations of the ghosts and supernatural beings in the book are fascinating because they can very well fuel the imagination of little children who are often made to believe in the existence of such creatures, in order for them to be submissive and compliant.

As the children run away frightened and defeated, Gagan rescues the cat alone and brings it back. It is thus his time to call the other "scaredy poos". It is however only when Gagan does something commendable, that he is started to be taken seriously:

> "Brave Gagan!", said the children, "The bravest of us all!" (n.p.)

This is an extremely common trope used in children's literature. Only when the bullied child solves an unsolvable problem is he started to be treated equally. Similarly, Gagan becomes a hero after that day. Nobody calls Gagan names anymore. He himself is not bothered anymore; he is happy being an "unboy boy". Gagan's story extends the writer's advocacy of a gender-neutral world further.

If Gagan's story speaks of gender stereotyping and child bullying, Vivek Shraya's 2016 book *The Boy and the Bindi* is a vivid portrayal of the instinct of gender creativity in children. The unnamed protagonist is extremely fascinated and curious about his mother's "dot" on her forehead: "Have you seen my Ammi's dot? It's a bright and pretty spot" (n.p.). In a meticulous evocation of the Indian culture, the illustrator opens the book with a picture of the boy's mother, Ammi – a dusky woman with open hair – donning a beautiful red "bindi" on her forehead.

The bindi, depicted in various shapes, forms and sizes, becomes the paramount visual symbol in the book. It stands for the variegated gender identities that are often suppressed in children. The protagonist looks at his mother putting on the bindi every day and wants to know what it means. Like it is important for the little child to understand the true relevance of the bindi, it is important for the readers to be cognizant of the complexities of the coexistence of several gender identities and the desire in many children to be creative with gender expression. Ammi saying that her bindi "keeps (her) safe and true" further extends the metaphorical connection between the rather innocent dot and what the protagonist "truly" feels he is within.

Enchanted, the little boy also wants to wear a bindi and to his joy, receives a little yellow dot on his forehead. Ammi is supportive of her child's gender creativity and does not hesitate much before giving him a way of expressing his own self. Illustrator Rajni Perera brilliantly paints beautiful flowers on the ground on which Ammi and her son stand. As Ammi places the bindi on the latter's forehead, the flowers grow into a forest and engulf both of their surroundings, symbolising a safe space for the child, where he can be his rawest self, without any inhibition or fear.

The bindi becomes a source of support for the boy:

> "As soon as it's on, I feel so calm –
> Like all the noise around is gone." (n.p.)

However, people outside are not as accepting. Though they do not bully him directly, they are curious about the "dot". The boy cannot really explain what it means to him, except that the bindi "turns into a star and then (his) forehead turns into a sky", driving all his fears and reluctance away. The bindi becomes a singular force that gives strength in difficult situations to both the boy and his mother.

The book also raises concern over body dysmorphia and the alienation that children might struggle against, with regards to their own body, when they cannot identify with it from within. In one part the boy says:

> But sometimes I've felt small like a dot
> And sometimes ugly like a blot. (n.p.)

It is alarming to note that children like him do often feel "ugly" and out of place. Small moments of gender fluidity or creative expression might give them opportunities to finally find their true selves and rejoice in the glory of that discovery. The book ends with the narrator addressing the readers directly:

> "Why do you wear a bindi?" you say.
> "Why is it so special anyway?"
> "Well, my bindi is like a third eye
> Watching over me all the time
> Making sure I don't hide
> Everything I am inside
> And everything I can be." (n.p.)

The bindi provides the protagonist an opportunity to be part of the bigger world – a world in which he was initially uncomfortable. The little dot becomes his strongest aid in the journey of expressing his queer desires. It also becomes a shared zone of support between him and his mother. No wonder the protagonist ends the story by thanking his mother for the "bindi".

Fig. 5. The Boy, Ammi and their shared Bindi

A Family is a family is a family: Ameya Narvankar's *Ritu Weds Chandni* as a Child's Guide to Understanding Queer Love, Relationships, and Marriages

Children are often made to believe in heteronormative families as the only acceptable form of family. They are often shielded from knowing and understanding more about queer love, relationships and families. Lesléa Newman, in her extremely significant book on queer families for children, *Heather Has Two Mommies* writes: "The most important thing about a family is that all the people in it love each other". No two families are alike, and it is important for children to be sensitive towards the differences and choices of every singular familial unit. Ameya Narvankar's recent work *Ritu weds Chandni* is an attempt to start a conversation around "desi" families and queer marriages.

The book tries to use the "innocence" of children, that has been used against them for so long, to question and criticise heteronormativity and queerphobia. The story starts with the protagonist Ayesha getting ready for her cousin Ritu's wedding. However, this wedding is no ordinary feat. Instead of marrying a man, Ritu was all set to marry her girlfriend, Chandni. Ayesha, however, fails to understand why this wedding is any different than the others she has attended all throughout her life. With this premise, the author deliberately tries to invert the heteronormative social institution of marriage into a battleground for queer love to play out and eventually fight and win against the brooding evil of homophobia.

The picture-book is made in the form of a wedding album, adding to the author's intention of normalising gay marriage. The first page invites the readers to join the wedding of the two brides and flaunts a picture of two mehendi-clad hands, with the initials 'R' and 'C' hidden on both the palms, as is the custom with traditional Hindu weddings. Replete with pictures and captivating description of a fun and amusing wedding sequence, the book not only tries to familiarise its readers with their own memories of weddings they must have attended, but also plays a significant part in urging them to look at both heterosexual and homosexual marriages as equal and normal.

Ritu's wedding is also set to be the first one in the family, in which the bride leads the "Baraat" (wedding procession). Narvankar revealed in an interview that the baraat in the story was set in tune to his own Bollywood inspirations and was modelled like a pride parade itself. But while such a baraat should have been the talk of the town, Ayesha could not understand why most of her relatives decided to give it a miss:

> "*Where is everyone*? Ayesha wondered." (n.p.)

The author portrays the child's questioning voice as the only voice of dissent. While the adults were ready to compromise, adjust and even justify the ostracization that they were facing, Ayesha was not ready to understand why this wedding was portrayed to be any different than her cousin Deepak's wedding to his wife:

> "But why what is wrong with that? Why shouldn't she marry Chandni Didi?" (n.p.)

It is however quite stimulating to see some family members being supportive. With their aid, the "parade" finally began. The illustration of the baraat is magnificent – fun, colourful and vibrant. However, in the very next page, the image of joy and happiness is overshadowed by an ambience of tension as the neighbours start blurting expletives at the bride. This illustration is particularly powerful because it shows how strong homophobia actually is. What is interesting in this illustration is how all the dissenters are portrayed in black and their screams depicted as ugly knots in disorganised speech bubbles. In an intelligent attempt to use children's understanding of good versus evil, the illustrator tries to draw a deliberate distinction between "us" and the "others" by making the emotions of the bride and her family stand out strongly against the anger and violence of the "others".

Fig. 6. Good Vs Evil

This is however the beginning. Immediately after, some stern-looking riders on horses start throwing water at the brides and their family members. Narvankar illustrates the wedding venue like a

metaphorical puzzle sequence almost, where the two key pieces (the two brides) are constantly stopped from uniting and completing the puzzle by rival gangs. It is Ayesha however who reacts first against this. She starts dancing and loudly pronouncing the rhyme she had been uttering all day long:

> "My Ritu didi is getting married today.
> And I'm going to dance in her baraat ALL THE WAY!" (n.p.)

This part is extremely significant. Not only does a child become the saviour and lead the way forward, but also uses something as rudimentary and as "childish/childlike" as a rhyme to fight through years of queerphobia and hatred.

The book ends with pictures of various moments from Ritu and Chandni's wedding, manifesting the author's fantasy of a "happily ever after" (it should be remembered that gay marriages are still not legal in India). Narvankar, in the Author's note writes how growing up, "there were no role models for the kind of relationship (he) wanted to have with (his) partner" (33). As a man, societal expectations burdened him but he was not late to realize that the situation was worse for women. Thus, by centering the story around two female lovers, he wishes to start a more nuanced and intersectional discussion.

The afternote of the book is equally significant. The author provides a guide to who an "ally" is and how Ayesha becomes one herself. The author believes that this guide would help teachers and parents to talk about the LGBTQ+ issue comfortably with their students or children and to answer any follow up questions they might have afterwards. The book concludes with a do-it-yourself section, where children are motivated to create their own mehendi design on two clean palms. This not only comes with the fun learning that even boys can wear mehendi, but also gives an opportunity to the readers to take part in the story as active participants. With this lesson on gender roles and gender stereotypes, the book seems to complete a full circle from where it starts, and succeeds in fulfilling the author's dream to "inspire children to stand up for what is compassionate and just" (33).

Conclusion

Chimamanda Adichie in her phenomenal video "The Danger of a Single Story" talks about how a single, absolute story is perilous: "The single story creates stereotypes. And the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story" (13:11-13:24). It is important to break through such stereotypes, and talk about experiences that are different, singular and unique. Children's books with queer characters or elements try to break the narrative of the single story, the single child. These books treat the child as a human being of worth – one whose childhood is not an excuse for deprivation anymore. Books like these give the children the perspective to become better human beings, and to believe that there are more like them. They also teach them to be more empathetic and sensitive towards individual differences. The books discussed in this paper, along with similar other books are contributing immensely towards the creation of an understanding of such differences. Books like these have been gaining more and more public attention since the last few years. Some of the books have also gained attention from award committees, with *The Boy and the Bindi* having received The South Asia Book Award among other accomplishments. Though they have still not been incorporated in any official school curricula yet, the positive feedback received can only garner hopes for a suitable change in the future.

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Notes

[1] Quoted from *The Prince and the Dressmaker* by Jen Wang.

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