



# Identity: Intersectionality of Queer and Postcoloniality in Selected 21<sup>st</sup> Century Indian Children's Fiction

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**Abstract**— *The intersection of Postcolonial and Queer theory can be directed towards their sustained interaction with contemporary politics of identity, including reflection on the categories and institutions, as well as the knowledge(s) and power plays through which social dynamics and people are structured and regulated, and how such dimensions impacted literature. Beyond this, and especially in its intersection with postcolonial studies, the destabilising effect of Queer theory, which subverts self-evident notions of power and marginality, centre and periphery, can be explored. A number of key connections between Queer and Postcolonial theory include epistemological and hermeneutical considerations; difference; marginality; agency; mimicry; and the quest for a new world order. As such Queer and Postcolonial theories both resist the tendency to think of identity as a collection of distinct categories (meaning they don't affect other identities) to which you either belong or don't. Rather, they concentrate on the intersectionality of identities to better understand how race is sexualized or gendered, or how disability is racialized or classed. Both theories argue that these identity categories are not inherent, universal, or "natural," instead critique state, national, and imperial powers, as well as colonial histories of dominance, for their construction while maintaining that they were a priori to colonial or state interventions, discourses, violence, and ideologies. The search for the texts yielded in few results as the resources were very scarce in the area of Indian Children's literature with specific focus on the intersectionality of Queer and Post Coloniality. This paper thus aims to understand Postcolonial and Queer theory's concern with identity and reject binaries against marginalised bodies and cultures in Indian Children's Literature before concluding with the importance of how literature on these issues include diversity.*



**Keywords**— *Intersectionality, Binaries, Identity, Queer, Post coloniality*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The origins of queer theory can be found in LGBT studies, which focus on sexuality and gender. But the Queer theory quickly distanced itself from those approaches because it disagreed with the stable identities suggested by LGBT studies. Queer theory emphasises the fluid and performative nature of sexuality – or, more accurately, sexualities. It challenges socially established norms and dualistic categories, with a particular emphasis on sexual (heterosexual/homosexual), gender (male/female), class (rich/poor), and racial (white/non-white) classifications. It goes beyond these so-called "binaries" to challenge general political (private/public) and international binary orders

(democratic/authoritarian). Queer theory analyses and critiques societal and political norms, particularly as they relate to sexuality and gender experience. Queer theorists argue about sexuality and gender expression in the same way that feminists argue about gender as a socially constructed public and political affair. It provides an important avenue for deconstructing and then reconstructing established concepts and theories.

## Post-Colonial and Queer Theory Intersections –An Overview

Postcolonial criticism is about a different focus and purpose, rather than a different hermeneutical method,

and it prioritizes ideology criticism and suspicion of hermeneutics (cf Punt 2003). The goal of this contribution is to juxtapose the postcolonial and the queer in order to explore specific theoretical convergences and divergences, as well as possible interaction between the two theoretical paradigms, building on earlier, preliminary work (Punt 2005) on the investigation of postcolonial and queer intersections. In short, Postcolonial theory alerts and assists Queer theory to move away from and to desist from either homogenizing same-sex love in a White, Western, capitalist and male gay model, and from its inverse, of Orientalizing which is exoticizing and othering, 'that blandly translates the "other" and obliterates all difference' (Hawley).

## II. METHODOLOGY

A number of (often partially overlapping) categories can be used to analyze theoretical intersections, but in this paper Identity as a concept found in postcolonialism is briefly examined as a point of contact with Queer theory in selected 21st century Indian children's fiction. The texts that are taken up for discussion were:

*The Boy & The Bindi* (2016) by Vivek Shraya

Guthli Has Wings (2019) by Kanak Shashi

*The Best at It* (2020) by Maulik Pancholy

Ritu Weds Chandini (2020) by Ameya Narvankar

*The Boy in the Cupboard* (2021) by Harshala Gupta

The above texts were analyzed to investigate and challenge heteronormative assumptions about childhood. Further this paper also makes an attempt to look into how these assumptions influence the literature published and made available to young readers, as well as how overtly queer texts are frequently unavailable to young readers. Such omissions force young readers, particularly those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered (LGBTQI+), to look for depictions of queerness in subtexts beneath seemingly "straight" texts. While these queer subtexts can be identified by readers through the use of culturally and historically significant markers associated with queerness, even a text with a widely recognized queer subtext does not preclude straight readings. Similarly, a queer subtext can exist solely for the benefit of the reader, with no intentional work done on the part of the creators. Finally, queer subtexts work in subtle ways to subvert heteronormative assumptions while also creating recognizable representations of queerness.

## III. DISCUSSION

*Being brown has room for queerness in ways that Western culture does not.*

### - *The Boy and the Bindi*

*The Boy & The Bindi* is a lighthearted picture book about a young boy's fascination with the mother's bindi, a dot worn on the foreheads of South Asian women that has religious and marital roots but is commonly worn as an accessory. This text explores difference and self-acceptance, as well as the subversion of gender expectations. The boy discovers, with his mother's help, that wearing a bindi allows him to joyfully explore and express his differences—and that even a small "spot" can be meaningful and magical. The author, a transgender woman, wanted to use the bindi to complicate and investigate ideas about gender expression in South Asian children.

"When I first started wearing a bindi in public a few years ago, I noticed how many people stared. I found it strange and fascinating that even a dot on the forehead is gendered and thus uncomfortable when worn by someone who appears to be the wrong gender . . . it has been my experience that being brown allows for queerness in ways that Western culture does not (Shraya)."

She hopes that gender creative children will recognise themselves and their identities in the pages of *The Boy & The Bindi*, and that the book will inspire all children to "treasure and celebrate their own symbols and feelings of difference" (Shraya)."

This book's plot is similar to Julian is a Mermaid (2018), but with a significant difference. When the boy openly expresses his gender and cultural identity to his peers, he encounters some difficulties. There are no names in the book; the mother is referred to as Ammi's, which is the same as mother; I will therefore only refer to Ammi's as mother and the boy. The young boy is fascinated by his mother's dot on her forehead, just as Julian is by mermaids. The mother explains to her son why the bindi is so valuable. His mother later gives him a bindi, which he proudly wears. His classmates, on the other hand, have made some derogatory remarks. They are afraid of the reaction of others. The boy with the bindi, on the other hand, is unaware of the backlash that will be directed at him. He is unable to respond to the bullies, but he, like his mother, finds comfort and strength in wearing the bindi. The picture book educates us on Hindu culture. As the mother explains to her son, "the bindi keeps me safe and true" (Shraya).

The mother and son share a strong bond by pressing their foreheads against each other and touching their bindis. The bindi takes on a life of its own, providing

strength in difficult situations for both the boy and his mother. Throughout the book, there are various types of bindis with varying colours, designs, and shapes which represent that each bindi is unique and can be tailored to each individual's personality and gender. The story does an excellent job of normalising gender creative children in today's societies where they are greeted with joy and are treated as an equal. There are no comments on why he wants to dress up or what gender he identifies with. It is important to address an issue or stereotype like this to create an awareness among students to act in a strange way in the future.

*Why do you keep saying I'm a boy when I'm a girl?" Guthli asks her mother.*

#### **- Guthli Has Wings**

The next book for the discussion is *Guthli Has Wings* (2019) by Kanak Shashi. The main protagonist in the book, Guthli challenges societal norms. This book sends a beautiful message about loving yourself and doing what your heart desires. I believe that humans are far too complex to be confined to a binary gender division.

Understanding and acceptance of the LGBTQA+ community are still uncommon in our society. This book beautifully conveys the idea that the most important thing for that child is love and acceptance from his or her family, and society. The topic that adults refuse to understand is beautifully explained to children by subtly underlining the fact that there are many gender options, not just one, two, or three, but our social structure does not allow it. Guthli's story inspires the reader to imagine a world free of patriarchy's strict binaries and power structures, as well as the violence it causes.

Thus, *Guthli Has Wings* not only helps parents understand the simplicity of accepting their child, but it also helps children understand that there is nothing wrong with their trans identity. It is also critical to introduce cisgendered children to trans children in a way that allows them to accept trans children as they would any other child who conforms to the gender binary. Children learn to be compassionate and kind from a young age, and this book is a hope that children will grow up with trans children as their new normal.

*Find one thing you're really good at and become The Best at It.*

#### **- The Best at It**

Pancholy, as an LGBTQ child, never saw himself in the books he read. As a result, while it is a work of fiction, it is also a highly personal novel that reflects his own struggles with having to cope with his LGBTQ identity, as

well as the joy of discovering how to be the best version of oneself.

*The Best at It*, is about Rahul Kapoor, a 12-year-old Indian American boy who is only now realising he might be gay. He's anxious about it, and he's also being bullied at school for multiple layers of his identity, one of which is his queer identity. Rahul's perfectionism and need to win are all about proving his self-worth in a world where being different makes him feel inferior. Bhai tells him a story that convinces him that if he just excels at one thing, all of his other problems will vanish. So, accompanied by his best friend Chelsea, he embarks on a journey to prove his self-worth.

This is a story about friendship, family, and the courage it takes to live your truth. It's funny, charming, and incredibly touching. The new middle grade novel depicts Rahul, a 12-year-old boy, as he searches for something he excels at while dealing with OCD, racism (when he finally discovers his true talent and joins his school's Mathletes' team after many trials and tribulations, including football team auditions (which he fails miserably at) and professional acting auditions (where he faces racial discrimination). Finally, Rahul discovers that being the best entails finding something you enjoy doing and practising it until you master it, and trying to make sense of his feelings for his neighbour, Justin. What struck me the most about the book was Rahul's best friend, parents, and grandfather's acceptance of him for who he is. This novel stands out in offering a realistic possibility by demonstrating how an Indian family can be supportive of an LGBTQI+ child.

But what is wrong with that? Why shouldn't she marry Chandni *didi*?

#### **-Ritu Weds Chandini**

This innocent question is sufficient to sow the seed of questioning in the minds of aspiring readers about the nature of queer acceptance in Indian society. *Ritu Weds Chandni* is a children's book about Ayesha, a young girl who is eager to dance in her cousin Ritu's baarat. Ritu is marrying her girlfriend Chandni, but not everyone approves of the celebration, some relatives, neighbors, and even strangers object by literally 'raining' on their parade.

According to the author, this book was written for a better representation of the LGBTQ+ in Indian society. Weddings are a grand and obvious sign of acceptance in Indian society, with the *baraat* being a "very recognizable symbol" of North Indian weddings. Because the premise of *Ritu weds Chandni* is set in such a common Indian setting, it contributes to the positive visibility of same-sex love and leaves readers rooting for the couple.

The most important message from the novel being Intersectionality, the foundation of all social movements. Queer women's status is even more marginalised in patriarchal Indian society. I hope that by focusing on two women in this story, the conversation surrounding this book will be multifaceted and nuanced in its discussion of human rights.

This book also raises awareness of non-heteronormative love and aids in reducing the stigma associated with the subject. Parents who believe that introducing their children to queer love and acceptance will be difficult. As a result, *Ritu Weds Chandni* is an important piece of children's literature that will help children realise on their own that everyone, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, has the right to live a life of dignity and freedom. Instead of reprimanding readers for their homophobia, this book welcomes them into the world of queer love and it is a lovely celebration of love, as well as South Asian and LGBTQ+ cultures.

*Darling, why don't you come out and play?*

*I wonder what you do in there all day?*

*They sneer at my pink bat, they laugh at my kitchen set...*

#### **- *The Boy in the Cupboard***

*The Boy in the Cupboard* is a heartfelt story about a boy named Karan, trying to understand himself and his place in the world. It is for anyone who has ever questioned something they were told they had to believe in. Children require stories in order to challenge themselves. This story used a real-life story to deliver a simple yet powerful message about gender inclusivity in a queer affirmative world. The protagonist feels safe by staying in his comfort zone, but he misses his friends and his daily playtime. Until one day, when Ma and Pa knock on the door, saying, 'Will you come out if I tell you that boys can be queens and anyone who says otherwise is plain mean?' Karan was aware that he was loved, and that was all that mattered to him. There was no stopping him from then on.

Harshala wanted a topic of smoothness and sensitivity to be handled without much resistance from the family, keeping the age of the readers in mind. It is reflected in Karan and his family's friendly exchange of dialogues. "As adults, we must develop an inclusive language." Prior to sexual orientation, children must be educated on gender roles and intersectional inclusivity. The title of the book is an attempt to develop that language. "It borrows from the metaphor of 'being in a closet,' but 'closet' is not a part of colloquial English in India," Harshala suggests.

## **IV. CONCLUSION**

From the above discussion of the 5 texts, we can see that contemporary literature is making a move in terms of Identity representation; for example, when I was looking for books to analyse with gender creative characters, there were options to consider, which is a positive move. It is easy to forget that representation comes in many forms, and is not only separated topic by topic, in the analysis of the three contemporary books. Each of the 5 books challenged gender norms in their own unique way. The boy with the bindi demonstrates how one can be safe from within and stand up to negative comments while remaining true to their gender identity the other 4 texts emphasized the importance of the acceptance of the family, awareness of non-heteronormative love, accepting trans identity and as a result, neither queer spaces nor heteronormativity can be considered normal or standard. The plurality of voices can be justified by the expression of their own voice rather than the other's representation of the self.

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