

Challenging Heteronormativity: Disrupting the binary world in the children's novel *The Boy in the Dress*

¹Anitta Varghese, ²Radhika R

¹Christ Deemed to be University Bangalore, Karnataka

²Christ Deemed to be University Bangalore, Karnataka

Abstract: Children's book is a window through which the young one first see and understand the multifaceted world. When they read out a piece of work they try to connect themselves with the characters and form their own opinion. Since most of the books written reflect heteronormative mentality, children tend to imbibe society's binary attitude that excludes, all identities that fall short of normative gender standard. Those identities that do not fall into the heteronormative matrix, are often called unnatural or a deviation. The paper explores the constructed notion of child and childhood through the children's book *The Boy in the Dress* by David Walliams. The protagonist of the book is a twelve-year-old boy who likes to cross-dress. By analysing the non-conforming protagonist of the book, the paper looks at the inconsistency of gender and the non-existence of the gender binary. The paper challenges the stereotypical binary notion of gender and disrupts the universal meaning found within the category of male and female by analysing the children's novel *The Boy in the dress*. The paper also tries to reimagine the cultural binaries between natural and unnatural.

Keywords: Children's literature, heteronormative, gender, cross-dressing, binary, non-binary identities, non-conforming identities, natural, unnatural.

I. INTRODUCTION

Children's books are a medium that stimulates the imagination and helps the children to form their own identities. It is one such medium that profoundly influences children as it will be their first encounter with the world and its norms. By the time a child becomes five years old, they form their own opinions and internalize the stereotypes of society. As the foundation of an individual's character and their attitude towards society is built during their childhood, it is relevant to give them an inclusive learning atmosphere. The opinion and perspective that we imbibe as children have an everlasting impact on the individual's personality and the choices they make in their lives. So providing a creative, at the same time, unbiased and comprehensive environment is relevant to form rational decisions. Since children's books have a decisive impact on young ones, they can aid in the process of, character formation. Thus it can build the realities of the children, promote deeper thoughts, emotional intelligence, and build their interpersonal skills.

Parents and teachers use children's literature to teach, socialize and understand the world around them. But they usually provide children with a set of books which they think are best and understandable by children. They provide the children with certain narratives that consist of ideologies that are accepted and approved by society. If we look at children's books most themes deal with the concept of what childhood should be rather than representing real events. The mainstream narrative provided to the children may exclude some marginalised communities and mostly project the dominant ideas of the majority. This might result in the exclusion of certain relevant issues in society and reinforce certain dominant ideologies.

A much-discussed and relevant issue in contemporary society is the question of gender and sexuality. Even though we are living in the twenty-first century, our society has set very rigid rules regarding one's sexuality and gender roles. The world is built on binaries and has strictly categorised gender into male and female. Anything that does not adhere to these categories is considered unnatural and hence a threat. Children see this heteronormative world and internalize them. They grow up either unaware of or with misconceptions as they are provided with texts based on heteronormative assumptions. As they grow up, they reject everything that does not fall under this category. So to provide an inclusive environment, it is very relevant to address and normalize LGBTQ+ identities and provide insight into non-binary gender identities. As children's literature is a gateway through which the young one's first see the world and form their own opinion, introducing queer characters in children's books can help them to understand the multifaceted social world. This will help in normalizing LGBTQ+ identities and erase the dichotomy between natural and unnatural.

This paper looks at the constructed notion of child and childhood through the children's book *The Boy in the Dress* by David Williams. Through the framework of Gender schema theory developed by Sandra Bem in 1981, the paper challenges the stereotypical binary notion of gender and disrupts the universal meaning found within the category of male and female? The paper also tries to reimagine the cultural binaries between natural and unnatural.

Even though there are texts that depict LGBTQ+ experience, many of them adhere to the heteronormative standard that reinforces the longstanding stigmas and inequalities regarding gender, and sexuality. But when looked closely, stories and experiences of LGBTQ+ communities and people of other marginalized sects are poorly represented; especially in children's literature. This is mostly because people refuse to acknowledge that the child can have an LGBTQ+ identity or can belong to non-binary gender identities. In most of the children's book, they provide a heteronormative narrative for the child and refuse to accept that the child can be a part of the Queer community. The adults consciously produce books for the imagined child rather than the actual child. This arises from the constructed notion of childhood and the belief that children are without any sexual identities. But if children are without any sexual identities and desires, then how do the adults assume that the children are heterosexual? Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins, in their book, *The Heart has its Reason* says that:

That homosexuality was viewed by many as a social problem only exacerbated the tendency to regard literature with gay content as belonging in the 'problem novel' category which robbed homosexual individuality and perpetrated stereotypes. (18)

Society considers heterosexuality as natural and inherent and considers all other sexual identities as unnatural. This results in the exclusion of queer narratives from children's literature. Recently there is a surge in children's books that depicts queer experiences. These books tend to introduce non-binary characters into the world of children and thus challenge the social construction of childhood.

The 2008 children's novel *The Boy in the dress* by David Walliam and illustrated by Quentin Blake also challenges the constructed notion of childhood. The society that we live in has given certain meaning to the gender we are associated with. If you are a boy, he is supposed to wear certain kinds of clothes and behave in a certain way. In the book, we could see the protagonist, Dennis; a twelve-year-old boy who loves cross-dressing. The book to an extent tries to normalize this. In a world that is built on heteronormative rules, David Walliams's book opens more possibilities. It helps the children to unlearn and perhaps rethink the beliefs regarding their respective gender. While viewing the world from a heterosexual matrix, it is considered natural for a person to follow the dress code as per the universal meaning associated with their gender. Anything outside that matrix is ridiculed. By introducing a non-conforming character, *The boy in the dress* offers a space for children to realize that Dennis can be anyone amongst them. It encourages them to think beyond binary values and lead a life as per their own choice. Here cross-dressing is Dennis's personal choice and says that there is nothing unnatural about it.

II. UNLEARNING THE BINARY WORLD IN THE CHILDREN'S NOVEL THE BOY IN THE DRESS

From childhood, an individual is governed by gender-related norms and regulations. It is characterised as socially formed norms and ideologies that influence an individual's actions and behaviours. It is a social construct that humans build through their relationships with one another and their surroundings, but it is heavily based on biological distinctions between males and females. A person who does not belong to this binary world is neglected or they are made to believe

that there is something wrong with them. In the children's novel, *The Boy in the dress*, the protagonist, twelve-year-old Dennis is also facing the same dilemma. He is a non-conforming character. He loves to play football, but at the same time, he is fascinated by the world of fashion. But the society we live in does not allow an individual to behave in the way they wish, they have to follow the rules made by the society.

The heteronormative world that we live in visualize the world in binary. If your assigned gender is male at birth, the person is expected to follow a certain dressing code and is expected to behave in a certain way. People's minds have been imprinted with an idea of how society can bring out each gender's roles. There are two recognised categories of gender, man and woman. Society also imposes ideas about how one can act and behave based on one identity. If you are a boy, society expects him to be tough. In Dennis house no one was allowed to openly show their emotion there was a "Strict no hugging policy" (Walliams 21). Unlike his elder brother John, the protagonist of the book was emotional, he "miss being hugged" (Walliams 21).

As a child, one gets to see the world through the perspective of their parents and other immediate family members. Their opinions and behaviour deeply influence the child. In the novel, Dennis feels uncomfortable to tell that he likes to dress up like a girl. He hides his desires fearing the ridicule of society. He has internalized gender stereotypes. He felt embarrassed when he buys the Vogue magazine which is considered to be read by women. So along with Vogue, he also buys a Rude magazine which is considered to be read by boys, even though he was least interested in it. His tension is visible: "After he picked up a copy of vogue he felt a twinge of embarrassment. He knew it was usually women who bought it, so he also picked up a copy of the shoot on the way to the counter, hoping to hide the vogue underneath it" (Walliams 41). When the owner of the shop Raj saw the magazine, he gives Dennis a judgemental look. He says "Vogue is mainly read by ladies, and your drama teacher Mr Howard" (Walliams 41). To convince Raj, Dennis lie that it's a present for a friend for her birthday. Dennis doesn't exactly know why he should not read Vogue, but he is told that it is not normal for a boy to read a vogue. "Even though Dennis doesn't understand why he has to hide the vogue, he knew somehow that he will be ridiculed" (Walliams 49). Fearing the judgement of this heteronormative world, Dennis tries to hide his identity and desires.

Even though Dennis is a small boy, he has internalized the constructed notion of gender and gender performativity. According to the Gender Schema Theory developed by Sandra Bem, a psychologist in 1981, people become gendered from a very early age of their life and this binary categorization influences them throughout their life. Children generally gain knowledge from their environments, and then they express and construct connections that enable them to create their own world. She found that the gender difference between male and female has been one of the most fundamental systems of human culture. Children develop ideas about what it means to be masculine and feminine and construct and regulate their behaviour around this categorization. Children who learn from them will form a gender schema based on what they learn and through that schema, they will gain an understanding of what they should do as a male or female.

From our birth, we are tied to certain rigid social rules that limit our real potential. If someone tries to defy that rule, society belittles them. This is evident from Dennis's dad's behaviour when he finds a Vogue magazine from Dennis's bed. His dad says "I can see it's Vogue. What I want to know is why a son of mine wants to look at a fashion magazine?" (Walliams 51). According to gender-schema theory, the schema helps in the systematisation of collected information and expectations from the environment. They also influence how people look for and apply knowledge, as well as the kind of information they introduce into their thought process. Gender schemas are the perceptions and ideas that people develop about gender. From the earliest stage of children's social life, they change their behaviour according to the gender norms created by society. Dennis trying to hide his desire is also a result of this gender schema.

Here Dennis expresses an interest in the things that are considered feminine and hence it is regarded as a problem. Dennis replies that "I just like it. It's only pictures and things about dresses and that" (Walliams 52). When asked the reason, his dad said "It's just not right, Dresses. It's weird" (Walliams 53). He says "I'm sorry. It's just not right. A boy of your age reading vogue magazine" (Walliams 54). Even the adults don't know why a Vogue should not be read by a boy, but they just say that it is not right. It is not natural.

Here arises the question of what does it mean by natural? In the article Heteronormativity without Nature: Towards a Queer Ecology, 2017, Jonathan M. Gray argues how heteronormativity assumes superiority by assuming what is natural and what is unnatural? Often homosexuality and other non-binary identities in our society are considered unnatural or deviation mainly on the assumption that heteronormativity is natural or the order. Social creation often associates nature

with harmony and balance, and downplay the other side of ecology like predation. So we often hear statements that say homosexuality is unacceptable because it is unnatural. Nature is considered a category that is unbiased and hence cannot be questioned. Even the space of nature is based on the cultural and ideological apparatus that reinforce heteronormativity. The heteronormative world uses the term nature to erase all the non-conforming identities. In the book, Dennis is a non-conforming character and is challenging the binary code. Hence he became abnormal and his behaviour became unnatural.

In her book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butlers suggests that when a person redefines their gender roles and identities, such as “drag, cross-dressing and sexual stylisation of butch/femme identities” (Butler 187) the victim of parody is the original gender. Here John is making fun of Dennis and calling him effeminate. John ridiculed Dennis for reading a magazine that is culturally accepted for the girls to read. He says “Morning, Dennis, or should I say Denise!” (Walliams 56). He further added, “Magazines like that are for girls! And woofers!” (Walliams 57). We can see how deeply gender binary is internalized even in the children’s mind. Society has constructed certain norms and rules that exclude those people who do not adhere to the gender rules. They are considered unnatural. The stigmatisation of these communities has resulted in a series of problems that have marginalised this group of people and generated a separation within society.

Gender Identity refers to a person's perception of himself as male or female; how a person defines his gender regardless of the sex given at birth. It is an individual's inner being; whether he or she is male or female, or somewhere in between. The harsh binary rules have restricted Dennis from doing what he always wanted. When he got the *Vogue*, “Dennis pored over every page, mesmerised by the dresses- their colour, their length, their cut. He could lose himself in the pages forever” (Walliams 49). His excitement on seeing the glamorous world of fashion demonstrates his desire to dress up without being judged and ridiculed. He felt emotional when he dressed up for the first time. “Dennis gazed at himself. For a moment he was shocked by what he saw. Then the shock turned to wonder, and he laughed. He felt so happy he wanted to dance” (Walliams 102). Fear of the binary world has always been a barrier that restricts people with non-binary identities. Since Dennis is living in a society that believes in absolute boundaries, he is forced to do what he wants in the shadows.

In gender studies, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* clearly distinguishes between sex and gender. According to Beauvoir, sex is a biological category, and gender is the social understanding of sex. The difference between sex and gender is a social construct. Many social theorists believe that gender identity is one of the most important ways that people are understood, both by others and by themselves. Gender is typically thought of in binary terms: male or female. However, not all men and women fall into these divisions. Non- binary people believe that their gender varies from the one they were assigned at birth.

In the book, Dennis likes to cross-dress. The term "cross-dressing" refers to a practice or behaviour that does not attribute or suggest any specific reasons for that behaviour. It is believed that the meaning is specifically linked to the transgender identity or homosexual behaviour, but the word does not mean such motivations and is not associated with one's gender identity. Cross-dressing has been performed in many cultures for many centuries. In the novel, Dennis is a boy who likes to dress up. His dressing is his choice. The world of fashion fascinates him.

The novel tries to disrupt the binary notion of gender and challenges the universal meaning given to gender. The author tries to challenge all the dressing code through Dennis’s friend Liza, “Well, I think all those rules are boring. About what people can and can’t wear. Surely everyone should be able to wear whatever they like?” (Walliams 84). She further adds “dresses can be beautiful, and dressing up is fun. I love putting on pretty dresses. I bet some boys would like it too. It’s not a big deal.”(Walliams 84) “Dennis, you can be whoever you want to be!”(Walliams 106). Through Liza, the author is trying to normalize cross-dressing and emphasises that dressing is one’s personal choice. In a society obsessed with the question of what are you? Cross-dresser act as a disruptive force, resisting the binary space and heteronormative practices.

Heterosexuality is considered as the norm defining what a legitimate way of expressing sexuality is. In the book, when people came to know that Dennis dressed up as a girl he gets expelled from the school. The principal of the school Mr Hawtrey asks Dennis “Dressing up like that in make-up and high heels. It’s disgusting” (Walliams 163) and further adds “I hope you are utterly ashamed of yourself” (Walliams163). In her book *Queer Theory, Gender theory*, Riki Wilchins argues that:

The physical appearance of all males as men and all females as women is so compelling that it feels inevitable- a fact of nature. Men and women look like the “real” genders. Anything else- male femininity, female masculinity, or something off the binary altogether appears as a king of gender failure, bad copies or Knockoffs that didn’t quite work. (134)

The people who fit into the gender binary view the non-binary gender identities as a challenge to the traditional gender role and they refuse to accept them. Dennis is also viewed as a 'Gender failure'. He never felt ashamed for dressing up as girls. But felt guilty when his principal shouted at him and felt that he did something wrong. Such judgemental behaviour forced people with non-conforming gender identities to manage their sexualities and behaviour in their private sphere.

David Williams through the children's novel *The Boy in the dress* has tried to erase the gender binaries and to normalize the non-conforming gender behaviour. It has given a positive outlook towards non-binary identities and also gave hope for acceptance. The shop-keeper Raj says "I must say you have fooled me though! Very good you looked, Denise!" (Walliams 177). Dennis's best friend Darvish also supports him "It's so unfair. It's only dressing up. It doesn't bother me you know. You're still Dennis, my mate, with or without the dress" (Walliams 179). The book ends with everyone accepting Dennis's choice of cross-dressing and wears dresses in a football match to show their support to Dennis. The book has subverted the norms of conforming and has challenged the heteronormative mentality of society.

III. CONCLUSION

Childhood is perceived as the most innocent phase in one's life and hence the topic of sexuality and gender identities are excluded from the books for children. The opinions and beliefs formed as a child will have an everlasting influence on the attitude toward life and other fellow beings. Therefore an inclusive environment is important for the child to form rational decisions. Since children's books are a medium through which child first see the world, they should be more inclusive to instil a more positive attitude in children towards the marginalized and non-binary communities. The binary world that we live in had always promoted heteronormativity and any behaviour outside the heteronormative matrix is termed unnatural. David Williams's children's novel *The Boy in the Dress* has brought in the concept of cross-dressing to the world of children. The culture and society have placed strict rules regarding one's gender and sexuality. The way one behaves and dress are governed by the gender that is assigned to them at birth. By introducing a non-conforming character like Dennis, David William has confronted the stereotypical binary notion of gender and the universal meaning assigned to them. By blurring the boundaries between natural and unnatural, the book has shown that dressing is a personal choice, a dynamic process. By introducing the concept of cross-dressing, the novel has tried to normalize non-binary behaviours.

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