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# **Reimagining Gender: A Study of Evolving Gender Representations in Contemporary Children's Books — *Is That for a Boy or a Girl?, Sadiq Wants to Stitch and The Weightlifting Princess***

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## **Abstract**

*Children's books play a crucial role in the development of children, as they serve as a readily accessible cultural resource. These books provide young children with numerous opportunities to acquire knowledge, become acquainted with printed images and entertainment, and gain exposure to different perspectives. Children's books have been imbued with socially constructed gender roles and identities. As a result, these stereotypes have become an integral and inseparable component of our future as well. We should redefine gender roles and expression to encourage positive character development and cultivate a thriving society. Modern texts are starting to reflect these sentiments in themes and characterisations. In this paper, we will analyse the portrayal of evolving gender dynamics in the selected children's texts: "Is That for a Boy or a Girl?" "Sadiq Wants to Stitch" and "The Weightlifting Princess." We will also examine the cultural and universal themes of gender retained or deconstructed in the works. The research wants to examine how contemporary children's literature challenges conventional gender norms and promotes a more comprehensive understanding of gender for kids through content analysis. The study aims to trace several ways of expressing gender, encompassing the subversion of traditional roles as well as the introduction of non-binary and fluid identities.*

**Keywords:** Children's Literature, Gender Roles, Gender Identity, Content Analysis, Gender Diversity.

## **Introduction**

Children's literature, effective as a source of entertainment and information, is presented to the young audience as an interplay of textual and visual storytelling. It plays a fundamental role in shaping the cognitive, social, and emotional development of young readers. Children's books offer a unique platform as a popular cultural medium for early learning, exposing children to various forms of knowledge and diverse worldviews. Symbolic representations and characters in children's books serve as points of identification and motivation (Tetenbaum and Pearson 381). However, the very definition of "child" remains fluid, varying significantly across generations, classes, and communities. Consequently, the child as depicted in literature

becomes a carefully constructed figure, shaped by the adults, built with deliberate thought, ideologies, and cultural contexts. Thus, these texts are not naïve, apolitical, or neutral just because of their target audiences; they are often ingrained with socially constructed norms, including gender roles, experiences, and identities. Children's stories provide a window into the cultural norms through the words and imagery they use (Fox 18). Through the presentation of characters, themes, illustrations, and storylines, children's books in the past communicated societal expectations regarding gender, thus influencing children's understanding of their identities and the world around them. This study aims to explore the changing portrayal of gender norms, roles, and experiences in contemporary children's texts. *Is That for a Boy or a Girl? Sadiq Wants to Stitch* and *The Weightlifting Princess*.

### **A Brief History of Heteronormativity in Children's Literature**

Children's fiction was supposed to prepare youthful readers to enter a society where strict, even unforgiving, codes governed male and female conduct and to influence their outlooks in ways that would be conducive to a better society in the future. (Simons 204)

Started off as didactic symbols to impart morals and cultural codes of conduct, children's fiction built up clear distinctions between fictional worlds of boys and girls; as remarked by the literary critic Edward Salmon, "Boy's literature of a sound kind ought to help build up men, and girl's literature ought to help build up women" (Simons 201). So, the children's fiction had internal laws and territories prescribing desired gendered roles as a means to engage readers in the narrative.

The expectations and responsibilities imposed on the content and themes in children's literature also reflect the innocence and purity associated with childhood. Straying from the assigned gender norms is considered inappropriate content for children by the standards of mainstream society in order to maintain the designated order. In order to shield the young readers from the unforgivable aberrations, censorship was carried out in the themes of children's stories.

'Childhood' framed by the accepted mainstream visions of the adults used to be an unchanging, standardised view that was too narrow to accommodate sociocultural differences as well as individualities experienced by the adults. This deprived any space to explore a child's identity, aspirations and needs despite the gender, rather than the romanticised notion projected by the adult. The heteronormative order, adhering to the socially accepted gender norms of male and female, divides the fictional world drawn for the children into strict binary boxes. These rigid boxes assert gendered stereotypes, curtailing the opportunity for the child to explore and identify with their preferred gender identity and expression.

There is no direct equivalent of the word 'tomboy' for boys who behave like girls, or at least no equivalent that is not very pejorative. Such an observation may be taken as an indication that the properties of gender roles have been more rigidly enforced for boys than for girls (certainly it has taken longer for non-boyish boy readers to find sympathetic portraits of themselves in children's books) (Simons 211).

Just like the attempts from society to repress a child's understanding of anything that is not normative, appealing to the generally accepted perspectives of right and wrong, the counter-narratives that carry alternate visions of childhood in terms of gendered experiences started to appear as a result of changes in the society. Initially the attempts were covert, like tomboy protagonists among a group, but later the borders of gender were deconstructed through different gendered experiences being narrated through children. The change was not easy, as it was easier to accept tomboy girls than it was to provide space for a boy who did not conform to the societal expectations even in literature.

The covert dispositions in the gendered experiences seen until the twentieth century changed into an overt expression by the twenty-first century. The calls for diversity demanded in the recent

decade gave more voice and visibility to expanding gendered norms in children's books challenging heteronormativity (Masad). The 'protogay' child in the children's literature noted by Moon and Sedgwick also marks the space for the boys breaking the gendered shackles. But these concepts were considered Western, and similar explorations of expanding gender boundaries and redefining doings of gender became more popular among Indian children's literature after 2010. This is also an approach instigated by the adults who want to deconstruct the binary notions of gender against the norms set by earlier generations. Since it's not a dominant narrative, the growth of the genre is slow yet steady in close observation. This study aims to contribute to the changes they bring to light against the heteronormative foundations in children's literature.

### Contemporary Picture Books as Carriers of Shifting Perspectives

Children's literature is witnessing an evolution of competing narratives that feature inclusivity, challenging the earlier didactic nature. These narratives particularly address the polarity between viewing children as passive subjects shaped by adult agendas and as active participants constructing their own literary meanings. Contemporary works question the notion of an "essential" child whose needs and nature can be definitively known, suggesting instead that the child is a hybrid figure, shaped by cultural, social, and textual forces. This perspective leads to the discussion of the constructed nature of children's literature, which is seen not just as texts written for children but as understanding it as a cultural practice that involves ongoing dialogues between children and adults. We describe this interaction as a hybrid space where children and adults negotiate meanings, challenge fixed boundaries, and explore new possibilities in literature. Thus, children's literature acts as a hybrid space where children are both subjects and objects of discourse, influenced by and influencing the literature created for them.

Nodelman believes picture books are a paradox; they are often the young child's province—silly, casual, and funny—but also simultaneously polyphonic, absorbing and using many codes, styles, and textual devices, which frequently push the boundaries of convention (*Understanding Children's Literature* 69).

Picture books facilitate young readers' active engagement, interpretation, and contextualisation of their experiences, along with guiding them in the development of critical thinking skills by merging visual and textual experience. This kind of literature is self-reflexive as it encourages the child not only to "read" in the traditional way but also to engage with texts on psychological and emotional levels through images as well as text by grabbing their attention effectively. This engagement later extends to children, who relate it to the world around them on a material level. They recognise themselves with the pictures in the book to project the same identification to the outside world.

The familiarity generated through this sequential art promotes crucial skills in interpreting and contextualising to navigate their cultural and social environments. This dynamic interaction is especially pronounced in the realm of illustrated texts like picture books, offering a more immersive and multi-dimensional experience. The pictures and the complementing writings open room for the readers, especially helpful in the case of children, to read, interpret, question, and understand their broader culture and social framework. While familiarising oneself with these frameworks, they can both convey the dominant as well as sidelined representations, creating a space to constructively communicate the politics of representation. Thereby these books become a space and setting for a child reader to explore the subject position in the text from the standpoint of their own subjectivity.

### Contextualising the Evolving Gender-Expansive Narratives

Gender can be experienced, identified and expressed in diverse ways, depending on many

external as well as internal factors, making it a complicated yet personalised subject matter. While the cultural norms provide a framework for acceptable gender roles, gender is constantly influenced by localised factors as well, like communities and institutions people belong to, their interpersonal relationships, and the families in which they were raised. Thus, a unique combination of societal, relational, and personal factors shapes an individual's gender, resulting in a diverse lived experience. This diversity in gendered experience shows the interaction between broader cultural expectations and personal contexts, which is reflected in gender identity and expression being a deeply individualised and socially mediated aspect of human life.

Historically, the roles, expressions, and behaviours associated with masculinity and femininity were never unchanging; they have always evolved according to socially approved codes, depending on historical and cultural context. It is recorded that women in the early Judaic society actively took part in work and trade, accessing the public sphere while providing a chance for men to renounce worldly matters and focus on religious study (Wenger 18). Looking at this from contemporary social codes, this notion defies patriarchal normality and highlights the fluidity of gender roles. This is also an example of how gendered expectations and expressions can evolve depending on the time period and place, providing a vague understanding of the dynamic and culturally constructed nature of gender. While considering the dynamic nature of gender, it is important to approach the concept as multifaceted, encompassing biological, psychological, and social dimensions. It is crucial to understand how these dimensions interact with each other, shaping gender for an individual. The unique factors influencing the complex formation of gender in terms of identity, roles and expression.

On a biological level, right from infancy, the shape and size of the bodies of each individual, along with their temperament, play a role in developing outgoingness or caution, which in essence later translates to the available forms of masculinity and femininity for that person. The choice made from the available forms of masculinity or femininity builds into gendered expectations and experiences, leading to preferences and engagement in physical activities later. These activities affect the development of their bodies and brains, as well as the socialisation of emotional responses. This illustrates the connection between gendered experiences and biological peculiarities. The cultural norms tend to dictate the acceptable in terms of engagement in specific activities or willingness to express the range of certain emotions, solidifying how the gendered identities are set.

From a psychological perspective, cultural norms can be altered by influencing the societal mindset by sharing personal experiences of gender. The unified voices raised by feminists, transgender individuals, and gender-diverse organisations have significantly influenced the evolution of social perceptions of gender across time and place. Psychological studies note that individuals subjected to gender stereotypes experience cognitive impairments (Ellemers 277). It is observed that when a person is prompted to consider their gender, they tend to perform better on tasks traditionally approved with it while worse on tasks carrying notions that they are less capable. This is a real-life extension of the effect of gender norms on self-perception and performance, which reflects the psychological impact of gender on individual experiences.

In terms of familiarity, the social dimension of gender is more evident, as it is an everyday reality that gender is being performed and understood through social norms and expectations. The gender norms are imprinted into each individual's body and mind through repeated behaviours and thought patterns, which play a significant impact on how they present themselves and how they are perceived by others. Wider cultural norms tend to create a pattern in the expectations regarding what to feel, how to behave and how to present themselves, associating all this specifically with each gender. This pattern also spills over to dictate the kinds of work, family and social roles given to each perceived gender, leaving little to no room for individuality, trading it for acceptance from

the community.

All these elements point to how gender is not a static experience but a complicated blend of varied factors, including social norms, roles, identity, expression, and experience. Gender involves social norms, in which society expects certain behaviours from specific genders, assigning roles in the social system related to work and family duties based on these expectations. It also considers gender identity, where individuals may identify as a girl, non-binary person, or boy. In addition to these aspects, gender also encompasses personal experiences and expressions. The experience embedded in the gender deals with how the individual functions in life depending on their assigned gender at birth and their identified gender, how it makes them feel, and whether they feel more androgynous, feminine, masculine, or somewhere along the gender spectrum. Gender expression is the outward display of gender, which includes choices in clothing, body language, and behaviour. This integrated understanding of gender opens the potential of diversity it holds beyond the restricted definitions society has applied to gender. Gender in this study is assumed as a personalised combination of biological, psychological, and social influences, while their individual experiences and identity also contribute to its evolution. Thus, it is not a binary construct but a dynamical aspect of human life, where individual as well as cultural factors contribute at every step.

This perspective is applied to the study of children's literature, as it opens possibilities for how the texts accessed by children engage with, reflect on, and perpetuate the nuanced understanding of gender. Literature can communicate the evolving social perception of gender by offering alternate visions of gender roles, expressions, and expectations by challenging the traditional norms associated with identity. This study aims to explore this through the narratives and characters in the selected children's books, by which young readers are familiarised with the evolving nature of gender. This could help them in being empathetic with themselves as well as others in their attempt to navigate the complex gendered frameworks.

## Methodology

The methodology intends to conduct a content analysis of selected works of children's literature, the texts being *Is That for A Boy or A Girl?*, *Sadiq Wants to Stitch* and *The Weightlifting Princess*, to explore how these texts serve as potential examples of "changing dimensions of gender". The study explores the presence of key themes in the text, including questioning the status quo, engaging with roles, exploring experience and identity, examining social norms, and presenting alternative worldviews, associated with gender. This qualitative approach will analyse specific texts using thematic coding and interpretation. The selection includes texts with their own treatments of gender, non-normative behaviours, or diverse social roles. The texts chosen represent a spectrum of subversive narratives.

### Undoing Gender in *Is That for a Boy or a Girl?*

The children's book *Is That for a Boy or a Girl?* by S. Bear Bergman, illustrated by Rachel Dougherty, presents a progressive and inclusive exploration of gender identity, roles, and expression. The book attempts to redefine the predefined choices around gender without factoring in the individuality of the child through various children's opinions in the book.

They say some things are for girls and some for boys:

Activities, clothes, colours and toys.

The shows on your TV? The stuff at the mall?

They make sure these ideas are heard by all.

Lots of kids don't fit in a box

(though you'd think we all did, the way most people talk).

So please meet my friends, with their own likes and ways

You might meet them—or be them! – one of these days. (Bergman and Dougherty 1-2)

The book actively critiques the rigid binary gender norms that society imposes on children through activities, clothing, toys, and even behaviour in the voices of child characters who express themselves. It encourages readers to move beyond these socially constructed ideas by presenting characters who defy these conventions. The children describe their lack of options for the choices they crave, like ‘clothes without kittens and flowers on vines for girls who want hot pink jungle cats instead’. The author keeps asking for room for options instead of preconceived notions regarding likes, needs and wants for children.

I'm sometimes a princess; I don't mind pink.

What bothers me more is the stuff people think.

My twin brother runs wild and its “boys will be boys”

I'm scolded if I even bang on my toys...

I could rescue myself from a dragon and tower (Bergman and Dougherty 20)

For example, the book highlights children who enjoy a mixture of traditionally “boy” and “girl” activities, such as liking both trucks and sparkles. This perspective promotes an alternative worldview where gender is not a limiting factor in personal expression, encouraging children to embrace a more fluid understanding of their identity that transcends the option of one or the other. The repeated questioning of whether certain things are “for a boy or a girl” invites readers to critically examine these societal constructs themselves by engaging with the book.

The text actively resists normative expectations around gender, including the homonormative as well as the heteronormative framework that still adheres to traditional gender binaries. It introduces a cast of children who engage in activities and behaviours outside of gendered expectations, such as a boy who likes ballet or a girl who enjoys playing with bugs.

The narrative pushes against the notion that gender determines what children can or should do, advocating for the idea that these categories are arbitrary and fluid. The characters in the book also question the societal expectations rooted in their experience related to clothing, toys, and physical activities, proposing an inclusive and open construing of gender. The unfamiliar juxtaposition of traditionally gendered activities chosen by a child in the text, where he describes his weekly schedule of playing football on one day and taking ballet classes on the next, leading to reading, baking, and even snowboarding as he “likes to do everything, mixing all kinds of play” (Bergman and Dougherty 16) encourages readers to rethink the ways in which they categorise certain interests or activities, relating them to gender.

For graduation, we make our procession

And celebrate all that we have done!

All the boys get a tie, girls get a rose,

They're forgotten as soon as we are done with the show.

Everyone's asking me which one I'd wear.

That's awfully nice, and I'm glad they care.

But why separate people by gender at all?

Just give us all hats, and let us all stand tall. (Bergman and Dougherty 25-26)

The narrative also delightfully mixes storytelling with reflective social critique, encouraging young readers to be curious and open-minded about gender possibilities. The illustrations acted throughout as an extension that highlights the various choices taken by the children defying norms, roles, and expectations as well as experiences, and interestingly the last line of the book asking to give everyone a hat instead of segregating kids based on gender shows the intrusion of choice

where it is not necessary, making it ironic and a critique of adult imagination of childhood. The children in the book assert their identity, showcasing an alternate vision of childhood where they have space to explore and assert their identity.

### **Asserting Individuality to Redefine Gendered Lines: Through *Sadiq Wants to Stitch* and *The Weightlifting Princess***

Mamta Nainy's *Sadiq Wants to Stitch*, with illustrations by Niloufer Wadia, is a touching and empowering story that challenges traditional gender norms while bringing attention to the fading craft of rug stitching done by women of the Kashmiri shepherd community. The picture book delicately balances the themes of individual passion, societal expectations, and cultural heritage while visually and narratively enriching the representation of a boy defying conventional gender roles while being a part of the Bakarwal community.

Sadiq too loved to embroider. He was  
happiest when his long needle danced  
through a maze of multicoloured threads  
and wondrous patterns came alive  
under his fingers.

Ammi sometimes guided him on how to  
move his fingers to his stitches nice  
and neat. However, Sadiq could tell that  
she wasn't too happy when he stitched. (Nainy and Wadia 6)

The story opens with Sadiq's love for stitching, a traditionally female activity in his community. His passion for this craft is immediately met with resistance from his mother, who reminds him that boys are expected to tend to livestock rather than engage in domestic activities like stitching. This early conflict introduces the theme of gendered expectations and societal norms, setting up a critique of the status quo. Despite his passion, the environment he grows up in shapes his gendered experience. The individuality is met with resistance because of the normative idea of an assigned role for any boy from the community who didn't want to be challenged by his mother.

Despite the demotivating factors, the protagonist Sadiq remains resolute with his interest in stitching and tries to pursue it, suggesting an alternative worldview where a person's talents and passions need not be restricted or defined by their gender. The act of stitching is significant in the text, as in the Bakarwal community, known for their culture of nomadic life and livestock rearing, men and boys are asked to be providers looking after the goats, while women stitch and maintain the household, making his interest inaccessible to him by the traditional norms. His sustained pursuit in stitching becomes a powerful symbol of self-expression and talent, crossing the imposed limits set by gender. Thereby the story rejects the idea that certain activities are inherently masculine or feminine while presenting the act of stitching as an art form that can be pursued by anyone despite their gender. The protagonist being a boy child, determined to master and practice the art typically considered a woman's task, poses a statement subverting the disregard associated with tasks related to women by the societal norms.

The story of Sadiq reflects the route of persistence by challenging the societal norms to create a free space for him to explore his choices. His determination against the resistance he faced from his mother, rooted in their community culture, led to his acceptance, which becomes the key takeaway from the story. His mother's eventual acknowledgement of his talent and work marks a significant shift, suggesting the potential for skill, passion, and dedication to subvert the restrictions set by traditional expectations. In doing so, the book gives an instance on how personal interests and abilities can be a defining aspect of gender according to the societal norms. The resolution of the

story, where Sadiq's mother and uncle approve and take pride in his work and resourcefulness, demonstrates the shifting boundaries of gendered norms in the circumstances that demand it. Sadiq's resourcefulness when his mother fell ill, not just the protagonist's ability and dedication, led to the smooth acceptance of his deviation from gendered expectations. Yet the mother, who initially reprimands him, demonstrates a shift from normative thinking to a more accepting attitude towards non-traditional gender roles by proudly showing off his work to the community, revealing the potential of an alternate worldview where societal norms can be transcended.

*The Weightlifting Princess* by Sowmya Rajendran is a modern princess tale that subverts traditional gender roles and expectations, offering young readers a strong female protagonist with attributes of determination, strength, and autonomy differing from the patriarchal norms usually found in princess stories. The Weightlifting Princess challenges the traditional narrative associated with princesses through the protagonist from the beginning to the end of the tale. Princess Nila, who is the protagonist, is depicted as a person determined by her passion for weightlifting rather than the tropes of romance, beauty, or passive roles in court life. It is shown as a part of her identity, where an instance of passion playing a role in defining a person's gender is again revealed to the readers. Weightlifting is considered a domain traditionally associated with masculinity even in the contemporary real world, while in the story it signifies the physical activity and strength associated with males. Thus, her participation in the Surya Championship in the text marks not only an unusual event for a princess but also puts forth an alternative worldview where girls can pursue strength-based physical activities if they would like to, even though it may not align with the traditional female roles.

Nila demonstrates challenging the status quo of a princess in the minds of readers as well as her parents' by refusing to indulge in the princess trope expectations of marrying a prince. She does not subscribe to her father's view that her accomplishments make her "worthy of being a champion's wife". Nila asserts her worth and independence by declaring, "Now I am the champion" (Rajendran and Dasgupta 16). The story also compares the internalised norms of previous generations to the emerging contemporary one by showing the contrast between the queen's reflections and Nila's dreams. The queen's reflections reveal her as someone who had love for athleticism but ultimately conformed to the traditional gender roles. This is also an instance of passion being defined by gender to follow the designated path and leave behind dreams to fit into the society. However, the queen encouraging Nila to pursue her passion for weightlifting against the system denotes a shift in societal attitudes, suggesting that change is possible and that traditional gender roles can be challenged and redefined.

## Conclusion

This study analysed chosen picture books through the lens of gender norms and queer futurism, focusing on texts that challenge traditional gender roles and expectations while tracing and redefining experiences and identity. Works such as *Sadiq Wants to Stitch* and *Is It for A Boy or Girl?* revealed the emerging shift in redefining binary gender expectations through contemporary children's literature. These deviations from the dominant narratives and representations of heteronormativity as a norm indicate the changing needs of society, where the child characters define their identities by being faithful to their choices and passions. While these books are set in a contemporary realistic setting, *The Weightlifting Princess* engages with the same theme set in a fictional kingdom. All three chosen texts demonstrate the contemporary ideals of gender, adding diverse representation of gender in the category children's books, encouraging self-expression, inclusion, and empowerment. The study intends to contribute to the question of how children's literature can convey ideas for social change, influencing young readers to think critically about

gender, identity, and societal norms while pushing the rigid boundaries practiced around gender.

In the “The Danger of a Single Story”, Chimamanda Adichie mentions,

“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” (Adichie 13:11-13:24).

All three texts showcase how their gendered experiences and norms were expected to be predefined by their immediate surroundings as the ideological apparatus mentioned by Althusser. These texts break the pressure of a single story by portraying unique depictions of gender, challenging stereotypes about uniform and singular narratives concerning gender and childhood. But as the protagonists push their individualities, their passion becomes part of their gendered identity, making gender a unique experience for them and breaking the shackles of control. The alternate future asserted through the texts makes it an example of how queer futuristic views hold a place for each gendered experience, suggesting an expansive and inclusive world for young readers to identify as their own.

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