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### About the Article

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# LGBT Themes in Children's Media and Literature: Mirroring the Contemporary Culture and Society

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## Abstract

Queer theory in the context of cultural studies looks at a variety of cultural structures of the gay or lesbian as divergent, and prompts us to question the traditions in which an entire variety of sexuality has been omitted by the 'politics of identity', a politics that informs and polices popular cultural representations of the Queer. Moreover, it focuses on the limiting nature of identity and has primarily functioned as denaturalizing discourses. Culture is related to questions of collective social connotations, i.e., the many ways we make meaning of the ways of the world. However, meanings are not merely floating, rather they are produced. While watching cartoons might seem an innocent pastime, it has a lot more to do with the child's psychology. Compared with other genres, cartoons can potentially trivialize and bring humor to adult themes and contribute to an atmosphere in which children view these depictions as normative and acceptable. Television shows, books, and movies with sexually-confusing messages introduce children to falsehoods and immorality and create insecurity among them. A general belief exists in the conventional heterosexual society that children are not equipped to handle these adult themes. The present paper tries to unfold the LGBT representation in children's media, its impact on the child's psychology and how it mirrors the contemporary culture & society. This study will also investigate the need and appropriateness of the LGBT themes in children's media along with their role in depicting the culture and society. The texts and media under study in the paper are *Steven Universe*, *Danger & Eggs*, *Incredibles 2*, *The Legend of Korra* and *In A Heartbeat*, *Heather Has Two Mommies*, *Uncle Bobby's Wedding*, *Mommy, Mama, and Me*, *and Daddy, Papa, and Me*, *King & King* and *Daddy's Roommate*.

**Keywords:** LGBT, queer, culture, society, cartoons, anime, children's literature, transnormativity, homosexual, bisexuality, heterosexual, dequeer, heteronormative discourse

Queer theory is largely concerned with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered persons and societal concerns derived from LGBT and Feminist perspectives. However, it is a slippery slope since the inclusion of all identities that conflict with normative constructs is advocated. Classifying everything as Queer certainly fails to create meaningful understandings of individuals who, in their daily lives, are prejudiced against assuming positions of authority. Traditionally, in the heterosexual society, the existence of a kid who is openly LGBTQ is denied. It has been a long tradition in the study of children's literature to examine the relationship between the real child reader and the imagined or inferred child reader, and adults present from the text's invention through its reception. Just because we mirror and absorb our surroundings, external influences may have an impact on our personalities (Gecas and Schwalbe, 1983). This applies to children as well as adults. Symbolic representations and characters in children's books serve as points of

identification and sources of motivation for good deeds (Tetenbaum and Pearson, 1989). Children's books provide a window into the cultural norms via the words and imagery they use (Fox, 1993). It's crucial to know what messages and pictures children's books with 'gay' or 'same-sex' oriented characters convey since they reveal an early understanding of their sexual orientation. Children's literature is an important part of socialization. The children's literature market is now flourishing (Brugel et al., 2002). When it comes to a child's psychology, viewing cartoons may appear like an innocent pleasure. Children's cartoons can trivialize and bring comedy to adult subjects, creating an environment where these representations are seen as normal and appropriate.

In recent times, young-adult works have endeavoured to fiercely handle subjects that bother youngsters. Consequently, the necessity to keep queer characters behind the curtains hidden from the interfering gazes of adults has dissipated to some extent. Media role models supposedly affect personality traits as well as the values of an individual by the way of identification. There are two kinds of identification. Similarity identification is defined as finding similarities with or idealizing a media figure and living vicariously through his or her activities. Wishful identification, on the other hand, occurs when an individual desires to resemble a media figure due to the media figure's appealing qualities (Matthews, 2018).

Television and books communicate and mirror culture in a variety of ways. The imageries of childhood T.V. programs persist within children as dominant parts of their memories (Anderson et al., 2001). In this manner, T.V. outlines generational subcategories in the culture. The characters and the way they are portrayed in picture books or other children's books have an everlasting impact on children's psychology. Whether considering animated series or animated films, the more the young ones are exposed to a mediated message, the more they are expected to observe that message as reflecting reality.

"Childhood has been recognized as a crucial emblematic function in neoliberal sexual politics, and it has been duly regularized as a central queer concern: an arguable crucible or ground zero of all sexual politics. This especially pertains to the child's implication in regimes of categorization that are to govern complex coordinations of subjectivity across class, race, gender, maturational, and sexual fault lines (coordinations often related to what anthropologists used to call the incest taboo). At the same time, the child may be considered to harbour potential for resilience in the face of these overarching forms of containment." (Janssen, 2020)

Impressions of media models made on child audiences affect their beliefs of the culture. Cartoons are more expected to sustain cultural norms despite challenging them. The same can be analysed in cartoons like *Steven Universe*, *Danger and Eggs*, *Incredibles 2*, and *The Legend of Korra*.

*Steven Universe* is one of the progressive shows which displays a range of diverse gender creative and queer characters. The series destabilizes gender by deconstructing the pre-established binaries. Love is handled inclusively, and is not restricted to romances which are heterosexual.

"The show is radically revolutionizing trans representation in media by being willing to give voice to less often represented gender identities. It provides us with a framework with which to investigate how agender and genderqueer identities and experiences can

not only function but thrive within the genre boundaries of the fantasy cartoon. This genre, and here *Steven Universe* serves as an exemplar, tends to embrace a particular reliance on "magic" to define its set of narrative rules, images, and possibilities." (Dunn, 2016)

*Steven Universe*, although not flawless, is an agreeable illustration of how cartoons can teach future generations what it is to go ahead of labels and defy expectations. One way in which *Steven Universe* depicts LGBT relations is by "fusion," i.e. when two "gems" fall in love with each other and merge into one. For example, in the episode named: "Alone Together," we see Steven and Connie "fuse" into Stevonnie who is a non-binary character and employs gender-neutral pronouns: they/them. In the episode: "Jail Break," we discovered that Garnet, who is Steven's guardian, is the creation formed out of a fusion between Ruby and Sapphire. Garnet is the living embodiment of a normalized lesbian romance, as her song goes, "I'm made of love."

The idea of a chosen family is introduced in the show. For example: "Connie Maheswaran is not related biologically to anyone in the rest of the family, and lives with her own (biological, nuclear) family, but has been accepted by the Gems, Greg, and Steven into their extended, chosen family unit, and has been taught aspects of Gem ways." (Ondricka, 2017)

A chosen family is a set of people who intentionally 'choose' each other to assume important roles. One description of 'chosen family' is a set of people with whom you are not biologically connected yet emotionally attached and account for as 'family'. There are several explanations why such a concept holds significance in various queer communities. Many queers simply fail to secure a way into the traditional ways of family building. Chosen families also frequently come into existence due to need. Several queer people do not depend upon their biologically determined families just like other (so-called normal) persons would probably be able to. In this cartoon, the concept of 'chosen family', 'lesbianism' and 'gender-neutral pronouns' are introduced. It communicates to the young viewers the ever-prevalent concept of the social institution called family along with introducing new dimensions to the same conventional concept. This new aspect is functioning to teach the children about the viability of less imagined/ never thought of options. The prevalent cultural norms are not hindered, but new possibilities are introduced.

*Danger and Eggs*, aired on Amazon Prime, has won Daytime Emmy Award, with its intriguing, colourful, unusual style of animation and assemblage of appealingly unconventional characters fits into the similar sort of "alternate universe" as related animated series *Steven Universe* and *Adventure Time*. Moreover, it is filled with queer and trans characters, whose voices are given by queer and trans actors. Its episodes contain central leitmotifs such as Pride celebrations and chosen families. Moreover, because it is a series having young children as its target audience, all themes are tackled in a pleasingly entertaining and unobjectionable manner. *Danger & Eggs* is a pleasant dive into LGBT family entertainment. There are also a lot of inordinate themes and messages that are significant for all children, those who belong to LGBT families and even those who don't. But may have a distinct connotation for queer children, like discovering their identity, interrogating rulebooks and being keen to change their minds. In one of the episodes, two characters Phillip and DD Danger form a band along with a child called Milo who makes use of they/them pronouns. Rest of the characters on no occasion question that, there

is no awkward discussion elucidating non-binary pronouns, rather all simply call them either by using "they" or "them" pronouns or by their name. This highlights transnormativity in children's media. (transnormativity is the normalizing of transgender people's existence and their experiences.)

Its first season clocks in at a respectable 13 half-hour episodes mostly comprised of two stories each. It's a joy to watch, but the real power and importance of this show are hidden behind the laughs. The sunny side-up brilliance of *Danger and Eggs* can be highlighted through its theme song which goes like this: "It's about a kid, an egg, a park, they do stuff. There's more to it than that. It's kind of hard to explain." *Danger and Eggs* stars DD Danger and Phillip. DD Danger is the turquoise-haired girl who is the last in the line of the Daring Dangers – a family of stunt performers. Given her family history, she too dedicates her life to sweet stunts and dangerous action. Her best friend Phillip, an anthropomorphic egg, still lives inside his mother – a giant chicken that has taken roost in the centre of the aptly named Chickenpaw Park. In the show, neither of the main characters discredits the other, which promotes the culture of acceptance and assimilation. Both the characters are open to change, they seek to be the best they can be as they grow along the way. They face their fears, adapt to change, find forgiveness, fight injustice, and question rules, all while having fun and being genuinely happy. *Danger and Eggs* deftly dances between the perilous path of teaching complex morals and lessons without coming across as preachy, cloying, or pandering. There are many progressive ideas that the show advocates, as in the episode named Pennies, they explain the complicated concept of 'confirmation bias'. Confirmation bias is the propensity to understand new evidence as validation of one's prevailing biases, opinions or concepts. When Phillip donates the pennies from the wishing fountain to buy cat wheelchairs, the locals freak out fearing their wishes have been stolen and undone. This forces Phillip and DD to explain why that's wrong as they face mob persecution. This is pretty heavy stuff for a children's show. The show also tackles lessons like the importance of breaking traditions that make anyone unhappy, learning not to discredit people based on their appearance, the importance of political activism in the face of apathy, and the knowledge that family doesn't begin and end with those you are directly related to. The show proudly and confidently pushes a message of progressive LGBTQ inclusiveness in every episode. And that comes from the DNA of the creative team heading the project.

While mainstream shows like *Steven Universe*, *Loud House*, and *Star vs The Forces of Evil* have dipped their toes into exploring queer subtext, *Danger and Eggs* simply makes it text and does so in a way that makes it look effortless. The show does not stereotype the LGBTQ community. It never takes the time to hold the audience by the hand or create othering qualifiers that allow its LGBTQ characters to be pushed into subtext. It never calls attention to any of its inclusive elements. It simply shows these things as normal. And that's really the greatest lesson *Danger and Eggs* subversively teaches its young audience that this is normal, that there's nothing strange or awkward or wrong about using they/ them pronouns, or having two fathers, or celebrating pride day, or cheering on a young trans girl who recently transitioned. By presenting these elements as normal, it eliminates the shame and stigma LGBTQ people face.

Other such cartoons like *Bugs Bunny* and *The Simpsons* also have trans and homosexual characters that just like the formerly discussed series make children aware of the LGBT culture that

runs parallel to the mainstream culture. Consequently, the children are able to identify, accept and assimilate LGBTQ individuals and their culture from beginning, which prevents them from facing a cultural shock later in life.

“...the scenes of trickstering in Rabbit Fire require that Bugs Bunny’s agency be located somewhere outside conventional economies of desire: indeed, his persistent ability to queer the pitch of signification suggests that the rabbit is always already queer.” (Savoy, 1995)

In *Incredibles 2*, the characters Elastigirl and Evelyn though did not explicitly unveil their sexuality but are interpreted as queer by the audience. It makes a subversive social commentary and allegory. The new character Voyd, a queer stan, acts as ‘lesbian metaphor’. She worships Elastigirl for smoothening the road for other females as she makes women more visible by being the example of a successful breadwinner of the family. Voyd mentions that she is “out and proud” of herself despite the preconceptions of society. These subtle clues hint at the probability of Voyd being a homosexual.

The concluding section in the final episode of *The Legend of Korra* aired on Nickelodeon explored the likelihood of a romantic relationship between two female characters, Korra and Asami. The two eventually choose to go on a private vacation together and enter a new magical realm, with fingers interlocked and beholding lovingly into each other’s eyes. The scene is a ‘sequence of actions’ that ‘change the perceptions of its viewers. This is a rhetorical scene and is eventually up to the viewers to infer signs such as holding hands as indicating romantic tension between both the women.

“When it came to the final scenes of the episode in which Korra and Asami’s relationship moves from platonic to romantic, creator Bryan Konietzko asked himself, ‘How do I know we can’t openly depict that?’” (Banks, 2021)

Though inclusivity of the LGBTQ people is occasional but upgraded in media now, visibility of bisexuality precisely is very low. Shows like *The Legend of Korra* could serve as an encouraging depiction of bisexuality as it is effortlessly incorporated instead of using it as a device or joke in the plot. The graphic novel series creatively demonstrated the friendship evolved into a relationship between the two female lead characters. Initially, the readers showed surprise at the shift in the love interests but the overall response was positive and enthusiastic implying a certain degree of acceptance of the concept of bisexuality. The intention that the author tried to portray through the series included smoothening the ride of the LGBTQ in their constant battle with the world. The duo went through challenges, a love triangle but found romance in the most unexpected of places. The series ended with the two protagonists intimately holding each other while fading away into the beautiful sunset. The diverse approach towards representing the queers through the undeniable power of media has had a great impact on our culture as the viewers were emotionally forced to lay down their traditional views and sympathize with the repressed community and their struggles. A similar message is conveyed through the short anime-based film created by students- *In A Heartbeat* (2017), which showcased a love story of two boys. This stands uniquely as a queer representation of sharing something rare and genuine is not often seen. The creators of this short four-minute six-second film, shed light on the fact that the aim of the film is to decrease the confusion amongst kids as they grow up.

*Heather Has Two Mommies*, written by Leslea Newman helps in making children more culturally competent. It is an iconic children's picture book that tells a tale of a little girl who happens to be a child of a lesbian couple, Mama Kate, a doctor, and Mama Jane, a carpenter. Life was normal until the first day of school when she comes face to face with the reality that she doesn't have a daddy. A classmate of hers, David, enquires about the occupation of her daddy, a question that leaves her in confusion and she wonders if she is the only one who doesn't have a daddy. It was her teacher who helped everyone understand and accept that each family is unique and special in their own way:

"It doesn't matter how many mommies or how many daddies your family has. It doesn't matter if your family has sisters or brothers or cousins or grandmas or grandpas or uncles or aunts. Each family is special. The most important thing about a family is that all the people in love each other." (Newman, 2009, p. 14-15)

The piece of literature faced a lot of criticism, and judgements and was put under the ban. As long as the literature is portrayed accurately and appropriately, it has all rights to be published and placed in libraries. Heather has two mommies 'dequeers' lesbian families by holding them equivalent to heterosexual or so-called normal families. The book takes a step ahead in an endeavour to inform the people that LGBT households are just like other or normal households while at the same time handling the unique problems they encounter. Concludingly, we can say that Leslea Newman's book didn't contain any superficial romance and the story presented life as it truly is- plain and simple. On similar grounds, Leslea Newman has penned the books *Mommy, Mama and Me* and *Daddy, Papa and Me*. These rhythmic illustrations/books similarly reinforce the notion of a happy and normal family of a homosexual couple. The couple in *Mommy, Mama and Me* tucks the kid in bed and kisses the child goodnight in a way a heterosexual couple would do: "Now I am tucked in nice and tight. Mommy and Mama kiss me goodnight." The child in *Daddy, Papa and Me* kisses his father goodnight:

"Now Daddy and Papa are tucked in tight. I kiss them both and say night-night!"

There are believable families in both the books, with nothing extravagant or abnormal. These brightly illustrated books introduce the concept of LGBT culture in a light-hearted and lyrical manner. It shows that it shouldn't matter if the families are straight or not, what truly matters is the love they share.

In the book written by Sarah S. Brannen named *Uncle Bobby's Wedding*, an anthropomorphic young guinea pig Chloe is bothered by the idea of her uncle's marriage to his boyfriend Jamie, as she thinks he will not have fun with her anymore. Chloe can be seen as the personification of the conventional society that we have been living in and an embodiment of the apprehensions that the traditional society and culture hold for the idea of homosexual marriages. Just as Chloe is afraid of family relations and change, the society is also a way unaccepting of changes and alterations in the prevailing cultures. Unlike the other LGBT-themed children's books, this book doesn't depict a child's struggle against the negative views, it suggests that same-sex relationships can normally exist and there is not any need to defend them. The final scene features Bobby and Jamie with Chloe between them and the light of the full moon shining upon them suggests that

even the homosexual couples are complete in themselves and do not need the opposite gender to complete them.

*King & King* authored by Stern Nijland, presents Bertie, a prince of marriageable age for whom a princess is being searched. The book disrupts the conventional formula of a boy falling in love with a girl. The queen invites princesses from all over the world to meet her son but none could interest the prince. Princess Madeleine accompanied by her brother Prince Lee also visits. Both Bertie and Lee fall in love at first sight and they get married. The entire ceremony concludes smoothly and the kingdom gets another king as the two princes are declared 'King and King'. The ending scene of the story shows the kings kissing and embracing each other. This story was claimed to be inappropriate by many parents and a lawsuit was filed against it. There exist multiple orientations based on culture, sex and gender all around us. It is unfair to exclude them within the walls of a classroom therefore such books play an important role.

Another incredible example of the contemporary LGBT culture is the book *Daddy's Roommate* written by Willhoite, M. (1990) which presents the homosexuality concept to be normal and acceptable. The book is reinforcing the idea of a gay couple being as happy, responsible and functional as a straight couple. Moreover, the book is informative rather than persuasive. The main character is a boy whose parents are divorced so he lives alternatively with both his parents. The boy's father has a roommate who is his love interest. The boy is taught that

"being gay is just another type of love. And love is the best kind of happiness".

The book is one of the first to provide a positive portrayal of the homosexual community and is aimed at amending the discrimination that they face. The book endeavours to present the idea of gender roles and sexuality in a new way.

As highlighted in the books: *Heather Has Two Mommies and Uncle Bobby's Wedding*, *Mommy, Mama, and me*, and *Daddy, Papa, and me*, *King & King* and *Daddy's Roommate*, in children's literature, the theme of homonormativity is clearly evident.

"...because this sub-genre of children's literature is still developing, evidence suggests that there is also a small but important number of contemporary texts that have the potential to expand the ways in which LGBTIQ?+?families are depicted." (Hedberg, 2020)

Effective social justice movements, including those at the level of children's literature, address the ways different forms of oppression intersect and affect the experiences of diverse queer identities. Children's literature can help combat heteronormative discourse by instilling at a young age the inherent value of all people. Inclusive children's literature can help combat socialized aspects of heteronormativity and other forms of oppression.

Children's books reinforce heteronormativity through the nearly exclusive celebration of homonormative and nonthreatening LGBT characters. A subgenre of children's literature is referred to as new queer children's literature. The authors represent queer youth as they negotiate various social institutions, especially the family and society. It is suggested that an ambivalent reading of these images—one neither committed to anti-normativity nor assimilation—can help us understand the queer present at its most affirmative and, by extension, aid us in beginning to theorize possible queer futures. As stated by Dr. Gayle E. Pitman, a professor of psychology at



Sacramento City College in California and author of several LGBT -themed books designed for kids:

"There's a concept called symbolic annihilation in psychology and sociology, which is the idea that if you don't see yourself represented or reflected in society or in media (television, movies, books), you essentially don't exist. That's why it's so important to have L.G.B.T. representations in children's books." (Pitman, 2018)

Considering the formerly discussed cartoons and books addressing LGBT themes, children's media/books shouldn't simply be asexual, just as children aren't asexual. This points to the fact that gender identity and sexual orientation do not in any way point at children being sexual in the same way as adults but rather signify the perceptibility of such concepts at an early stage of life. This can clearly be seen in a girl child marrying her doll to the prince charming, a little boy racing his car. So, it can be noticed in queer children when they couple their dolls differently or play roles in child games according to where they think they fit perfectly, irrespective of the sex that they were born with.

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