

It's Not Just An Adult Thing! Transgender Children's Literature Leaves A Shadow

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the representation of transgender sexuality in children as depicted in literature in general and with special attention to *George* by Alex Gino, a transgender novelist and *I Am Jazz* by Jessica Herthel.

“Transgender Children's Books Fill a Void and Break a Taboo” was the title of a touching report by Alexandra Alter in The New York Times on 6th June 2015. The report was an experience of Sam Martin, an emerging transgender author who writes children's literature with a hope of filling the void he felt as a young reader. He says that as a trans-kid he was never aware of the existence of other kids in the world who struggles with their ‘complicated’ sexuality. The report was all about the life of Transgender children unveiled through literature.

I am Jazz is story based on the real life of Jazz Jennings, a celebrity from the transgender community. *George* is the story of Melissa who was George for everyone in the beginning. Now there are plenty of works that throw light on the growing up of trans-kids. Going through them we will realize the fact that either knowingly or unknowingly they are facing the challenges of their sexuality. They are not comfortable with the gender identity that was attributed to them. So they are choosing the most suitable one and it is a daring task. The acceptance of their choice in the society is also a matter of concern. The list of books deals with this issue includes stories, novels, biographies, memoir and so on. The popularity of these works is a great relief for the up coming generation, facing the same crisis. They won't feel alienated; instead the works help to inspire them to be successful in their life with the queer identity.

Key words: transgender, sexuality, trans-kids, children's literature

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'Transgender sexuality' had become a very commonly heard term nowadays and its waves had reached in all the circles of life; especially when it comes to humanitarian studies. Literature being a reflection of life can never keep its eyes blinded towards this minority. So literature speaks; speaks for the dumb muted subalterns. Listens to their drumbeats and answers them with a graceful step. Even though it's a bit late. So is the same about children's literature too.

Before going for an in depth analysis of transgender sexuality in children's literature, let's have a quick glance on Queer theory in general. What is the meaning of Queer? The word queer was originally used as a derogatory term to denote male and female same sex love as something unnatural. But now people belongs to LGBT community identify themselves as Queer. Queer theory came to be popular in 1990's. Though it is so recently innovated it contributed much to various fields of thoughts in cultural studies and academic disciplines. The intention of queer theorists in the early stage was to question the production of the distinct normative categories of sexuality. The Queer theoretical projects can be easily described with Michael Warner's phrase 'resistance to heteronormativity'. The works on the early decades were seemingly mere attempts to establish this heteronormativity in the society.

Depiction of transgender sexuality in children's literature appeared only in the last decade. The world was keeping it as an adult thing of which the children are not supposed to know. While doing so we are forgetting the fact there are trans-kids too. Every transgender person had passed through that stage as a child with a 'problematic sexuality' that they don't want to disclose; which made them alienated among friends, letting them to have mysterious childhood. The present generation trans-kids are lucky in a way that they are already identified as 'them' in the society. They even have literatures, which tell them there are many other kids like them.

An article appeared in The New York Times a few years back with a title "Transgender children's books fill a void and break a taboo". It was about an experience of Sam Martin a member of a group of emerging transgender writers who works on children's literature that centers on transgender characters, with an intention fill the empty space they felt as young readers. He says that as a trans-kid he was never aware of the existence of other kids in the world who also struggles with their 'complicated' sexuality. The report was spreading light on so many children's literature works with this theme.

The remark Mr. Martin made "When I was growing up. I never saw people like me in movies or book". He said, himself and his friends are trying to write stories that would have helped them feel less alone at that age.

In the old times gender discussions were not a part of children's or Young Adult (YA) fiction. Breaking this tradition so many children's books are now published with this theme and most of are worth reading even for the adult readers. But even in the age of advanced thinking these books were not welcomed whole-heartedly. People are approaching them with a prejudice that they may contain unwanted descriptions about sexuality, which may affect the moral values of our generation. There were people who strongly strike a blow against the indoctrinating of young kids about trans.

Jessica Herthel's *I Am Jazz* is one such book that faced so much harsh criticism. *I Am Jazz* is picture book, which tells the life of Jazz a girl born with boy's body. It is the real life portrayal of Jazz Jennings' life. She is the co-author of the book and the co-founder of the Trans-kids Purple Rainbow Foundation. It is all about how the transformation had occurred from a boy who liked pink to the present Jazz.

I Am Jazz; the book with attractive drawings tells the gradual transformation of Jazz, from the little boy with the full support of her family. The initial attempts to dress up her as a boy and her parents' final decision to let her be the girl. It is such an inspirational book that every trans-kid should read and the other kids too. They should also be aware of these kinds of things around them. It helps them to develop compassion in their mind towards the trans-kids and that will be great relief for them.

The most prominent work in the children's literature, which tells about the trans-kids life, is *George* by Alex Gino. Alex Gino is a transgender writer and winner of many awards and recognition as the author of children's literature. *George* is novel about a boy named George who transforms into Melissa at the end. The protagonist George knows she is a girl but doesn't want to reveal this even to her parents or to her friends. For the readers it won't appear as leap. But we can feel the presence of an omniscient narrator who refers George as 'she' and the other characters use the male pronouns to address George.

The author Alex Gino identifies the self as a GenderQueer, a gender identity that falls outside the male female binary, and goes by the pronoun 'they'. Alex Gino says, "I wrote it because it was the book I wanted to read". He added, "I wanted trans voices telling trans stories". In the first draft of the book Alex never used the term transgender. He said that he wrote it with the mind of a ten year old, who never comes across that word. The release of the book aroused so many questions such as whether the ten year olds are ready for such a discussion? Is that necessary to be discussed? Like so and so goes the list.

George begins with some hints about her secret that she keeps. The name George and the pronoun 'She' gives some confusions and a hint towards the transgender identity that she hides. On the growth of the story we can understand George is a boy for others and a girl, Melissa for herself. In the beginning even her family was not able to identify her problems. Actually she kept it as a secret.

George is a close observation of even the minute aspects of trans-girl's life. Her passion for girl's dresses and cosmetics, collection of girl magazines and imagined conversation with the girls in the magazine everything reveals how she is wishing to be a girl. Her reluctance to use the boys' washroom in the school and her wish to be in the friend circle of girls are evident in the first two chapters. She had faced so much of ridicules from the boys in the class for being compassionate and cried after reading *Charlotte's Web* in the class.

George's revelation to Kelly that she wishes to enact the role of Charlotte in *Charlotte's Web* shows her wish be dressed up as a girl at least on stage. Being Melissa at the end, we get the happiest picture of her who enjoys the fulfillment of the dream.

At the back of the book Alex Gino discusses a lot of things he would like to communicate with the readers. The purpose of his work, the time taken for composing, its overall acceptance in the society and a lot other things that readers are curious to know. *George* became a grand success and won the Stonewall Book

Award, the Lambda Literary Award and the E.B. White Honor. Moreover it is a milestone in children's literature that deals with the trans-people and their childhood. It helped a lot of trans-kids to feel proud of their identity. It was a nice beginning and a good venture. Transgender sexuality is not just an adult thing. It starts right in the childhood. The trans-kids they couldn't even figure out that they are trans-kids and they suffer a bulk of tension turmoil in their little hearts. These kind of books and their popularity will help them a lot to avoid the feeling of loneliness.

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