

BOOK REVIEW: Guthli Can Fly

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Every teacher, parent and those interested in working with or on young children must read *Guthli Can Fly*, at least once. The book is written and illustrated by Kanak Shashi. It is a famous book and has won several awards, including White Ravens, International Youth Library and Germany Award in 2020, to name a few. The book, first written in Hindi, was titled *Guthli Toh Pari Hai*. It was published by Eklavya Publication. Later, it was translated into English by Rinchin and published as a story for the anthology *Being Boys* by Tulika Books in 2010. Tulika Books also published it as a picture book. The book was also printed by Muskaan Books as part of its English reader set.

Guthli Can Fly is the story of a young boy (age is not mentioned) who desires to be a fairy. He does not feel like a boy. Instead, he and wants to dress up like a girl and play with dolls. One day, Guthli asks his mother, "Why do you keep saying I'm a boy when I'm a girl?" His mother admonishes her (him) for being 'unreasonable' and asks to behave like a boy. She tells Guthli to wear clothes meant for boys and play with toys like his brother—"Don't be stubborn. You are a boy. Now, go and change your frock." Guthli pulls herself (himself) away from her (his) mother's arms. Over the days, Guthli, who feels like a girl, is seen losing interest in the activities that she (he) used to enjoy previously. She (he) goes into a shell. Guthli's mother notices that her child is feeling depressed. Finally, one day, she comes to Guthli and gives her (not, him) a dress and says, "Live the way you want!"

The readers empathise with Guthli's struggles despite the revelation that Guthli is not born a girl but a boy. The author has used several linguistic and literary devices to depict Guthli's emotions, and successfully strikes a chord with the readers. The book begins by introducing Guthli as a girl through illustrations. Although Guthli is depicted wearing pants, her unkempt long hair confuses her identity. Secondly, pronouns like she and her have been used for Guthli. Activities, including cycling, that Guthli is shown doing can be identified as masculine, but the fact that she is shown carrying chicks on the handlebar and the seat of her cycle; and the colour of cycle tyres, peddle and seat in purple associate her closely with the female gender. Lastly, she is described as a 'chatterbox', which is a common trait to describe girls in literature. In the first couple of pages, the character of Guthli is established in the minds of the readers as a happy, talkative and carefree young girl. So, when she is scolded by her family members, including her mother, the readers take Guthli's side.

The name Guthli aptly locates the heart of the gender's fluid identity. Like the seed of a mango, which has an outer body and an inner core, Guthli has the body of a boy but feels and desires like a girl. The relationship between the body and affinity, in terms of feelings, towards a particular identity is brought out beautifully through the metaphor of guthli in the book. One is not born into a certain gender identity but becomes and

inhabits a gender. It is achieved through gender performances by repetitive acts over a period of time. It is done through the means of linguistics (such as the use of pronouns and in some languages like Hindi through the use of gender appropriate verbs as well); dressing (such as frocks for girls and pants for boys or jewellery suits girls but not boys); activities (such as dance styles, particularly those that require delicate movements and facial expressions, e.g., Kathak or ballet, that are appropriate for girls; and sports like football and cricket where it requires the player to stand the weather suits boys better). The gender roles and identities circumscribe a person's everyday activities, as well as ambitions, dreams and desires.

When gender norms are not followed, there are severe consequences, including physical and emotional violence. Guthli breaks down when her sister rebukes her, her brother jeers at her and her father gives angry looks for breaking the gender appropriate dress code when she comes wearing her sister's frock. As she cannot express herself fully through her body and the choices that govern the everydayness of her existence, she loses interest in everything she enjoyed. It is only when she is given the freedom to exercise her choice that she comes back to life.

Through the metaphor of flying, —doing, wearing, thinking and more so feeling the way one desires, Guthli can realise her personality. She can be whatever she wants, instead of being controlled, muted and silenced for not fitting in well within the social and patriarchal norms of heteronormative bodies.

A couple of years ago, I attended a conference on the thematics of children and childhoods, organised by the department of education in one of the colleges. After the session on representation in children's literature, one of the early grade teachers working in a reputed private school in Delhi raised concern about the book *Guthli Can Fly*. She acknowledged that the book is interesting

and transforming. But her question was, "What is the pedagogy to engage with such a book in the early grades?" She added that the parents of children of her class had also raised concern over the book. The question of appropriateness of the book for young children takes one step closer to the dual role of children's literature which is literary and pedagogic. I acknowledge that picture books of this kind bring out the challenge one (an adult) faces while negotiating the literary and pedagogic aspects of children's literature. On the other hand, the question itself suggests that the teacher was herself uncomfortable to engage with. The discomfort may be due to several reasons. It may be due to little or no knowledge of the subject concerned, lack of exploration of her own sexuality, lack of pedagogic training to explore such subjects, but more importantly, her notions of childhood which is based on children as innocent, pure and asexual beings. It is necessary that teachers, librarians and parents question their own notions and understandings about their own sexuality and childhood.

Guthli Can Fly is an essential addition to the collection for children whether in the class, school or public library. Teachers, librarians and parents must be ready to receive questions from children, and more importantly to acknowledge that they do not have all the answers but are ready to explore some of the questions along with them. Guthli can start a conversation about gender norms, gender pronouns and gender identity with a little higher grades. With the lower grades, the focus can probably be on feelings, and through the conversation on feelings, social and gender norms may be explored.

There is another book titled *Soda and Bonda*, published by Tulika Books, which explores a similar theme but in a slightly humorous way—a dog who feels like a dog, and a cat who feels like a dog. Such books teach the readers to become kind and compassionate.