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# Children's Graphic Literature: Celebration of Difference and Deference of Uniformity in Kamla Bhasin's *Rainbow Girls* and *Rainbow Boys*

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### Abstract

This paper is to study that children's literature celebrates difference and defers the norms of uniformity. The two graphic texts for children *Rainbow Girls* and *Rainbow Boys* by Kamla Bhasin, visualise unease over uniformity and juxtapose it with ease and happiness over differences among the girls and boys respectively. The two texts visualise the difference in terms of physical appearance, expression of emotions, activities of play, likes-dislikes, and behaviours of children in various situations. They also visualise that the differences are functionally dynamic as they increase relatability, action and variation in emotional affinity. Uniformity is shown as cumbersome and enforced from the outside. The books also juxtapose difference and uniformity and incline towards the former by echoing the acceptance in affirmative narrations along with the visuals of differences. I intend to show that these two texts assert multiple childhoods, that the visual difference complements the momentum in childhood, the differences become the characteristics of equality of childhood, and they defer uniformity. I intend to use the method of juxtaposition in comic art to discuss how the juxtaposition of affects, abilities, pursuits, behaviours, and associations of colours and spaces create a feeling of acceptance in children about the differences among themselves and others.

**Keywords:** Children's graphic literature, differences, juxtaposition in comics art, multiple childhoods, affirmative narration

### Multiple Childhoods

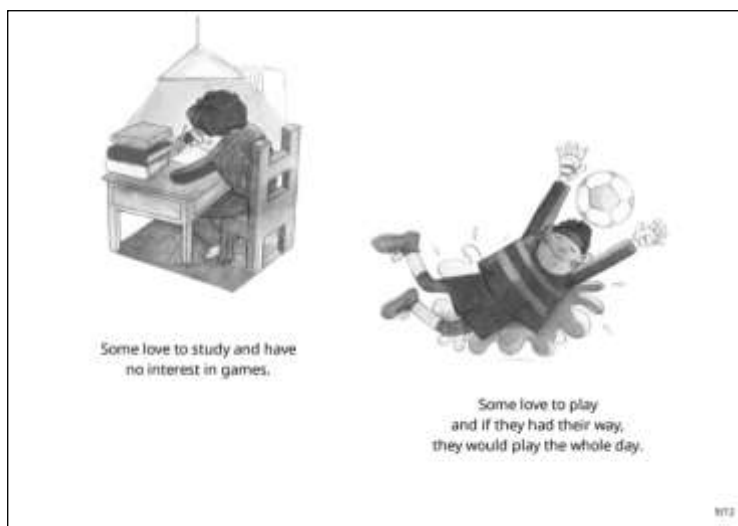
Childhood is not a singular, homogenous, and identical concept. American psychologist Erik Erikson divides childhood into five

stages according to the age-group they belong to (Erikson<sup>222-247</sup>). It also entails multiple childhoods based on conditions of birth, methods of raising children informally or formally, and the attitudinal and temperamental development of children during childhood. These conditions are complexly related to one another. Conditions of birth such as location, class, race, caste, and disabilities create different childhoods in terms of exposure, abilities, and limitations. Cultural aspects such as languages, rituals, methods of raising children—informal or formal, play, and imitation of roles develop different cultural relativity among children. The attitudes and habits developed among children will depend upon the two factors mentioned above. This also means not only there are differences among children and experiences in childhood but also entails diverse approaches to understanding different childhoods. Representation of differences among children in Kamla Bhasin's *Rainbow Girls* and *Rainbow Boyshas* lessons not only for children but the adult readers. The realities of multiple childhoods often lead to the problematic representation and reception of difference. Some of these realities could be manifested visually whereas some of them are in the form of latency and yet to be realised and manifested externally. Representation of manifest and latent (invisible) realities of childhoods and complex relationship with each other is crucial in the analysis and understanding of the different beings. Universalisation of attributes of childhood would be harmful to the adaptation and reconciliation with the different in childhoods. Comics art, which fundamentally depends on the juxtaposition and complementarity of the different—words and images, has been used by Kamla Bhasin and the illustrator Priya Kurian in the texts to draw the readers' attention to differences and help them learn to deal with the different by treating the difference natural, essential, and complementary. The next section explains how graphic drawings in the two texts juxtapose the differences among children.

### **The Juxtaposition of Difference**

Image 1 from *Rainbow Boys* shows two diametrically opposite pursuits; at least until recent time the adults perceived the two pursuits—studies and games quite the opposite. Although the words stress difference and stretch the difference to two extremes, “[s]ome

love to study and have no interest in games” and “[s]ome love to play if they had their way, they would play the whole day”(Bhasin, *Rainbow Boys*9), the children pursuing two different activities show temperamental similarities. Both the children have been completely immersed in the activity according to their choice. Whereas one is focused towards the book and is highlighted by the focus of the headlamp complementing the focused child, the other child is engaged in skills which could defy the gravitational laws. Both are determined to excel and seem to love their activity. However, for adults these two activities have different referential value. The examples of these boys would be used by adults to encourage the activity of the first kind and to issue a caution to them for refraining from the second activity.



**Figure 1 from *Rainbow Boys* by Kamla Bhasin and Priya Kurian © Pratham Books, 2019**

Image 2 from *Rainbow Girls* stresses on the difference not only among the girls about how they like to appear but also intends juxtaposition with expectations from them and stereotypes about gender appearance. Similar to examples of a studious child the girl loving dressing-up would be preferred by adults over the untidy girl to encourage children to love doing things according to gender.



Figure 2 from *Rainbow Girls* by Kamla Bhasin and Priya Kurian © Pratham Books, 2019

Similarly, on all other pages of both books, different emotional responses, pursuits, likes and dislikes, abilities and attitudes of children are juxtaposed. Adults' attitude towards these is both manifest and latent. In the image with a boy cross-dressing as a girl the posture of a shocked mother manifests a homophobic adult response. The books attempt to reenact the two kinds of performances by children in juxtaposition and invite adults to respond to the difference. Conventionally adults would disapprove of disturbing or subversive differences as we have been trained to look at and accept conforming behaviours, pursuits and likes and dislikes. This takes us to the question of what these differences among children are. Further sections of the paper analyse and reason the different among children.

### **The functionality of Difference**

Differences among children are functional, kinetic/dynamic, and instinctive (creative). Childhood is a highly functional stage in which the mind, body, and objects constantly work together to create new combinations in play, work or studies. Objects attract minds; the mind creates the functional possibility for the body to engage with the objects and the body follows the mind to actualise those possibilities. The objects of attractions keep changing their forms—

material objects to conceptual ideas such as desires, love, dreams and pursuits. The engagements with new objects or ideas often realise new experiences which have never been imagined by the body. This tempts children further to make new combinations of objects and functions. It gives rise to excitement and momentum for a new experiment. This whole process is unending.

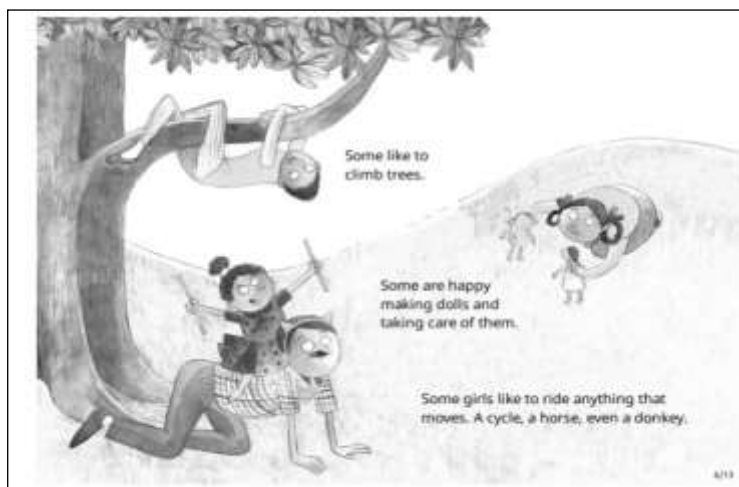


Figure 3 from *Rainbow Girls* by Kamla Bhasin and Priya Kurian © Pratham Books, 2019

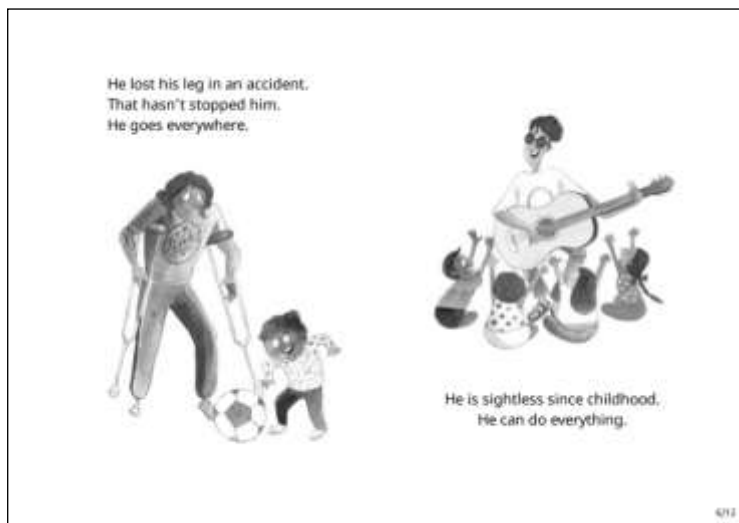


Figure 4 from *Rainbow Boys* by Kamla Bhasin and Priya Kurian © Pratham Books, 2019

Children are attracted towards objects in their surrounding. Shapes, sizes, colours of objects are their primary attractions. However, soon they start engaging the objects by modifying them as partners in their activities. Depending upon the objects available to them, their ability to handle the objects and their imaginative faculty in modifying them their engagement with objects become dynamic. Different things require different skills and capacities, physical or imaginative, and prompt them to perform those skills. As children move from object to object, they keep performing various skills and capacities. This makes the exercise functionally diverse and kinetic. The initial superficial attraction turns into a functional realisation of the situation or objects which keeps acquiring new dimensions depending upon the evolution of the creativity of children. Images 3 and 4 show that children are attracted to different objects based on the functional variety in engagement—climbing upon the tree requires working on the tree from below whereas riding a 'horse' is from above and requires horizontal balancing; playing football with an amputated leg or doing activities by compensating the absence of eyesight. The juxtaposition of the different objects or related activities against one another actually highlights multiple possibilities these objects could create depending upon the time, mood, energy and abilities of children. At any other given moment with a given mood and energy levels these objects could be used by children in different formations—tree for hiding; imagining the adult body as a fish or a co-player, and dolls could be replaced by toy animals to change the domestic scene to a forest one.

Each engagement of a child is an event involving a set of functions by the mind and body over a period of time. It is about sequencing and synchronising the functions, tiredness and method to deal with it, self-analysis and lessons learnt. Let's take the example of the child studying the book and the other child playing with a ball in image 1. Both the children must have meditated and chosen what to read and play; they must have prepared for the performance of the act of reading and play. Both activities have temporal dimensions of experiences which involve intellectual, emotional, physical energies. They would also display sensations of emotions, anger, frustrations, triumph and failures in learning while reading and winning or losing while playing. With recognisable variations these two events will

create a pattern of experiences for them. Children perform a series of acts; display a series of emotions while performing the acts and a set of realisations which are the outcomes of those events. Such events are essential for making children understand the nature of events, similarities between these events and incidents and situations in real life. They are exercises to train them to coordinate among the skills, existing and found ones, emotional responses to situations, conduct during events and to prepare them to deal with failures. Encounter similar situations all over life are neither possible nor desirable. Training in exclusively one kind of event will harm the overall development of children. The two events just show the variety of events in the life of children and the possibilities of using a variety of skills to learn to accommodate themselves to various situations. The skills learnt in one kind of event could also be used in other events when children are clueless to deal with new situations. The experimental applications of skills learnt from events of different kinds would change the outcomes of situations. The skills and abilities gained through different events could be used interchangeably for their benefit. The events need not be seen as divided into good and desirable and bad and undesirable events as entailed by adults in their prescriptions of books and warnings for play to children.

### **Difference and Relatability**

Functional engagement with different objects and people over a period of time develops a bonding between children and them. The objects or people start becoming part of their life. The bonding could be temporary or permanent, however what is crucial is the ability to relate, emote and form affinities towards them on the basis of difference in them. In the process of forming the bonds of affinity the differences are not seen doubtfully, rather they become a source of attraction and interest. Their view of the immediate environment is accommodative of these variations.

Children's attraction towards the apparent differences among each other is actually a reason to move, imitate, adventure, romance and feel an affinity. Since the early stages of childhood children are attentive to sensory perceptions. Apparent visual differences attract them. Such attractions are non-normative. Children are yet to learn

adults' method of othering while relating to the differences. Adults normalise the different based on their experience, cultural upbringing, and morality and choose not to relate to the *wrong* aspect of the different. Adults prefer and value study over play, calm over noise, neatness over untidiness, orderliness over unruliness, obedience over disobedience, gender norms over genderlessness, productive engagement over selflessness and so on. In all such situations the difference is normalised and kept at bay by the adults. As children are yet to learn these norms, their relativity towards the different is just an act of instinctive exploration. The juxtaposition of different bodies, objects, and acts in the two texts portrays multiple possibilities of relationships by children with the difference. As children are yet to learn to relate based on the norms or values of adults, they can easily embrace the different.

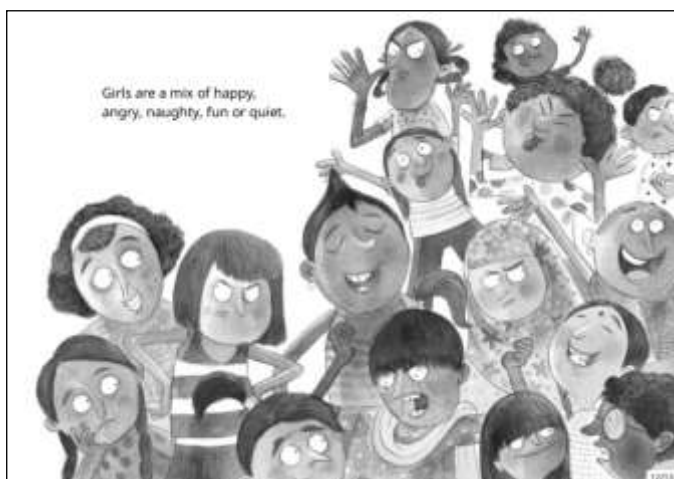
## **Juxtaposition and the Meaning**

### *Juxtaposing the Affect*

Children's enthusiasm, interest, and excitement are indicators of how they engage with the difference and uniformity. Their reactions to the different are reflected through various affects. Affect is composed of "specific facial expressions, patterns of breathing, muscle contractions, vocalisations, and movements" (Shmurak 8). Silvan Tomkins illustrates nine affects—interest-excitement; enjoyment-joy; surprise-startle; distress-anguish; anger-rage; fear-terror; shame-humiliation; disgust; and dissmell to sum up younger children's reactions to various situations. Children's responses to their situations or activities of people around them are crystalised in affects. They are instinctive, bodily and "non-conscious experience of intensity" (Shouse). By way of the juxtaposition of different affects the two books indicate the range of emotions children are capable of as well as the necessity of variety in emotional engagement with the situations they are in. It also means that the circumstances they are in also need to be varied to evoke varied responses to train them to prepare to deal with a variety of situations, from exciting to traumatic, in real life. Affects also indicate that children are appreciative of difference in people, objects, activities, and situations. Images 5 and 6 from the two texts also demonstrate that children do not express similar affects but affects keep changing depending on



the changes in situations they are in or activities they are performing. It is a reason for the organic reflexes, mobility and action in all directions and towards all kinds of objects and people around them.



**Figure 5**from *Rainbow Girls* by Kamla Bhasin and Priya Kurian © Pratham Books, 2019



**Figure 6**from *Rainbow Boys* by Kamla Bhasin and Priya Kurian © Pratham Books, 2019

Affects release the load of emotions they keep on compiling in them due to consistent exposure to a variety of situations. The situations not only vary in nature—such as learning different subjects with levels of difficulties under different tutors, modes of transport, foods, playtime, parental gaze—but also have bearings upon their life. Affects absorbs and accommodates the stress of dealing with

incomprehensible situations without the compulsions of formal modes of response. Consistent patterns in affects in relations to situations and people around them also help adults gauge children according to the status of emotions and adapt their method accordingly. The exchange between children and adults on the basis of affects is to accommodate differences between both the children and the adults.

*Juxtaposition of Narration and its Echo*

*Rainbow Girls* has narrations such as “Tell me, are all girls the same? Should all girls be the same? It would be boring if they were” and “[g]irls can be calm. They can also be naughty” juxtaposed with the images of girls identical with one another (2, 10). Similarly, images of boys looking exactly like one another are juxtaposed by the narration “Who says all boys should be the same? They are not photocopies of one another. They are individuals” in *Rainbow Boys* (4). Narrations such as these in the two texts echo the internal monologue of children about the duality in relation to the difference they see among others. They also express their fears about being different from others and being judged for their difference. The narrations echo their doubts and fears but answer them in the next lines. The narration is a key element in expressing internal affirmation while they see images of children differing from each other. Children readers will corroborate the differences in images of children with the changes in their perspective towards them. The narrations would help them accommodate the differences among others. Both the texts appear to be “picture-specific,” however, the narration and the graphic are in an “additive combination where words amplify or elaborate on an image or vice versa” (McCloud 154). The narrations are also an expression of acceptance, assurance, and consolation which could be taken as an antidote to what children usually listen in real life from parents, peers, or teachers about the difference between them. The child readers who have doubts and the possibility of feeling inferior due to difference get an answer in the narrations. The two texts could also have a bibliotherapeutic influence on children who face similar circumstances. While explaining the healing nature of stories for children Hugh Crago mentions that,

(...) the reading of books can provide the comfort of knowing that one is not alone, and thus function as a 'safer', more private version of a psychotherapy or self-help group... reading can provide vicarious insight into one's problems, and even a measure of the integration of previously disowned feelings. (171)

It also answers the doubts of those children who find it difficult to deal with the difference in other children due to their conditioning about gender and stereotypes of appearance and behavior as well as differences of other kinds.

### *Juxtaposition as Equalisation of Difference*

Although the images of children displaying variations in appearances, likes and dislikes, pursuits, capacities and interests, which at times are interpreted as contrasting to each other, are juxtaposed, instead of highlighting the opposite characteristics among them they are portrayed in terms of possibilities of seamlessness and interchangeability. Adults often tend to normalise differences. The appearances of children are divided into the binaries of serious, decent, and acceptable vs flamboyant, subversive and offensive. Likewise, the pursuits of children are divided between higher and lower or productive and non-productive. Adults also judge children by overrating certain abilities and capacities over other set of abilities. These terms of judgments of children on the basis of qualities often lead to discrimination against children who do not possess the positive attributes of the binaries mentioned above. *Rainbow Girls* and *Rainbow Boys* juxtapose the differences only to equalise and celebrate them. It also constantly hints at the possibilities of fluidity and interchangeability of attributes among children over a given period of time. While equalising the differences it prevents the readers from consolidating an observation into a norm on the static possession of attributes at any given point of time. Children who like to study may attempt and display the fundamentals of activities of play in the study as well as those who like to play may display passion in their engagements to make it a serious profession and earn a living, respect and fame. The possibility that they may switch their engagements in future cannot be ruled out.

At another level the two texts also juxtapose the gender stereotypes of appearance and behavior. *Rainbow Boys* show a boy crying, another boy wearing a frock, a boy having long hair, and two boys engaged in knitting (2). Similarly, *Rainbow Girls* shows girls wearing a short, another girl having no hair, and a girl with “shabby clothes and flying hair” (9). These juxtapositions entail the deliberate prick in the stereotyping of gendered appearance and behaviour which we have been accustomed to and practicing unconsciously. At a glance children may find these appearances and behaviours odd because they have been trained to see gendered alignment in appearance and behaviours. Gendered conditioning of children has a long-term impact on them. Shivananjana Rathore, in her review of these two books comments on the effect of these norms on children:

(...) the wonder of play is often marred early on when children find themselves rejected, bullied, mocked, shamed or abandoned for not falling in line with gendered norms of existence, often leaving scars well into adulthood.

But the assuring narrations such as “Who says all boys should be the same? They are not photocopies of one another” (Bhasin, *Rainbow Boys* 4) and “Girls are a mix of happy, angry, naughty, fun or quiet” (Bhasin, *Rainbow Girls* 12) help children to deal with fears in themselves for liking and doing things which are attributed to the other gender.

### **Pedagogy of the Difference**

In order to communicate with the world around them, children require a language which is semantically substitutive for the formal language of adults. The reason for this is that the language homogenises for convenience. It tends to invisibilise and discourages differences. Adult language is equivalent to formality, orderliness, status quo, and seriousness. Children, especially those who are concerned about the treatment by other children and adults on the basis of differences among them, feel a little wary to express their fears and concerns. The long term impact of these fears would mean harm to their exposure to others. The language of comics not only accommodates their differences but also argues the differences without being clichés. It foregrounds the differences, juxtaposes the difference in bodies, capacities, desires, likes and dislikes, choices,

attitudes and temperaments and shows the inherence of difference in the reality of children's life. The reader cannot but notice, remember, and prioritise the difference while approaching children. It has meanings for children and adult readers. It trains children to recognise the terms of differences among themselves and others, to learn to search for meanings of the differences, to learn to deal with the differences among themselves and with the differences among others, understand the relatability and usefulness of differences, develop reception of differences among others and learn the modes of representations of differences. Although the two texts show images of differences among children in isolation or juxtaposed with distance from each other on each of the pages, the two images with congregations of children—one with identity and the other one with different children—highlight the aspects of relativity among themselves on the basis of identity and difference. The previous image of similarity between boys and girls shows their apprehension, confusion and anxiety which could easily be traced to the problem of identification, competition and monotony. The challenge to find an appropriate answer for choosing between similarity and difference is always difficult. Children will always be made conscious of how their choice will be evaluated by others and especially by adults. Children are aware that adults would prefer similarity rather than difference because similarity would entail conformity and difference would mean subversion. However, while they attempt to conform by being similar to others, they are skeptical internally. In contrast, when they demonstrate the difference, they are free internally and demonstrate loyalty to themselves.

### **Deferring the Uniformity**

*Rainbow Girls* and *Rainbow Boys* show problematic nature of uniformity in children's world and its probable impact on children. Children are baffled by the apparent similarities among themselves compared to the coolness among children who engage with the difference in all other panels in both books. A partial reason for their bafflement is the problem of relating to others and identifying others. The fear that all the children will be a copy of each other in all respect is evident. Further consequences of exposing to differences are common attractions, modes and intensities of engagements,

expression of emotions and relatability. However, when allowed to pursue these attractions, they would be socialising with a difference with varying degree. What is problematic with the desire for uniformity is that it will neutralise the instinctive variations among children while socialising. Differences have material and situational aspects. Children growing up in a village or a farm will have a different set of objects to deal with and will acquire skills accordingly. Their situation is different from children growing up in a city going to school. It is difficult to imagine both of them possessing and displaying one another's skills across all spaces and situations. It is only but natural and logical that their performance will vary in kind and degree if they move to new spaces requiring different skills. In a situation like this it is critical to understand how agencies of spaces accommodate their differences and help them learn a new set of skills or use the present skills. Even when new skills are acquired by the children, the pattern of those skills will be varied which, in a classroom situation, actually contributes to the heterogeneity of classrooms. It is imperative for the instructors to engage with the heterogeneity with creativity rather than frowning upon it.

Uniformity is an adult norm. It comes from the desire to order, conformity and convenience. It is more technical than instinctive in its observance. Uniformity is a useful tool in managing and controlling a huge number of children adult instructors have to deal with in spaces such as schools. While completing their curricular assignment, overseeing the progress of children according to the expectations of parents, maintaining protocols of regulatory bodies and preparing students according to the needs of recruiting agencies dealing with a uniform mass of children is convenient for the instructors. Maintaining uniformity is also technical. From wearing the uniform and shoes to carrying similar school bags and from learning the same curriculum to learning the same lessons in morality and other values children are expected to follow uniformity that is quite visible. The fruitfulness of uniformity for disciplinary reasons gradually becomes a norm in all other aspects of the process of learning. Children are expected to be uniform in conduct, abilities, and performance. With the stringent pedagogic pressure with the advancement in grades (classes they are in) children also tend to

follow uniformity to avoid penalties coming with deviations in behavior. With a lesser degree of encouragement to difference and creativity instinctive thinking and its application get beating. The extra-curricular activities, which are supposed to be encouraging creativity among children based on the inherent heterogeneity, are also not free from the role models of excellence to be followed by them. This will again lead them towards likeness with the role models. The force exerted by the agencies at home or school towards uniformity of appearance, behaviour and pursuit would be directly proportional to the degree of uniformity in these respects among children. *Rainbow Girls* and *Rainbow Boys* express the wish to defer the thought of uniformity by visually juxtaposing children's feelings of anxiousness towards uniformity with the feelings of happiness and fulfillment in difference in themselves and others. The two graphic texts also hint at the imminent loss of individuality if children are pushed towards uniformity.

### Conclusion

*Rainbow Girls* and *Rainbow Boys* essentially argue that differences among children have functional and creative relevance. By visually juxtaposing the differences among them, the texts highlight functional similarity and complementarity of differences. Internal doubts raised by different appearances, aspirations, and actions are also answered by the affirmative narrations they read simultaneously while they see. Visuals of differences echoed by affirmations imprint on the minds of children that it is okay to be different. Eileen Colwell, the distinguished British storyteller mentions that, "[t]here are particular people in a community who need stories" (qtd in Hunt 11). The two texts reaffirm the fact that children confronted by the difference in them and others *need* stories explaining the meaning of differences and acquainting with them.

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