

A visual Analysis of Pakistani Authored Children Picture Books

Sobia Rehmat*

Abstract

Children's books are a significant source of transmitting social values and play a decisive role in developing gender identities. This study focuses on pictorial representation of gender in children's picture books. Total of five picture books written by Pakistani authors were chosen for the purpose of analysis. Qualitative content analysis method was employed to uncover the pictorial depiction of male and female participants in the selected picture books. Kress and Van Leeuwen theory of visual grammar (2016) has been adopted as a theoretical lens for the analysis of images. Analysis of pictorial depiction of characters in the selected books reveals that male characters exceed females in illustrations. Male outnumber females especially in roles which are traditionally associated with male gender like cricket, cycling and football. Although pictorial depiction of females has improved both in in-story and front-page visuals still their representation is lacking in professions which are considered as masculine. Both parents and teachers need to be vigilant in selecting books for children. Additionally, authors of children's picture books need to be mindful in their content selection and ensure that they treat gender equally.

Keywords: children literature, pictorial analysis, gender construction

Introduction

Children's literature helps children in comprehending the world and constructing their ideological framework. As a vital source of imparting cultural knowledge books assist children to comprehend customs and values of society. Also, as an avid observer, children are inclined to incorporate values and customs presented to them in literature (Jackson, 2007). Children's literature is a vital medium for creating an ideological framework that aligns with society social, political or moral beliefs. Gender identity is often a product of social interaction and environmental factors. From an early age, children form opinions about gender by observing their environment and associating toys and activities with specific gender. Studies have shown that picture books, being an introductory literature in children's life, have an impact on the development of gender roles. Underrepresentation and stereotypical depiction of sexes can lead to the formation of negative personality traits in children. As a result,

*Lecturer in English at Government Girls Degree College Higher Education Department Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

children limit their career choices by perceiving gender in fixed roles (Hamilton, Anderson & Broaddus, 2006).

Books are a fundamental source for the transmission of societal values from one generation to the next (Arbuthnot, 1947). Picture books are an effective tool to impart cultural values to children. Their primary function is to introduce children to the outside world and to give them representation of real-life experiences. Picture books assist children to know about the lives of those who are unfamiliar to them. Thus, picture books' reading harmonises children's existing ideas about gender identity. Hence, the manner in which characters are portrayed in children's literature endeavour to influence children's perception of gender role identities. Through underrepresentation or stereotypical representation of gender in picture books, children form a distorted image of the world in their mind. Consequently, they expect each gender to act according to the set roles assigned for them by the society. And it also limits their career choices and abilities. Therefore, parents, teachers and adults need to be watchful in their selection of books for children. Because beyond recreational purposes books have an enduring impact on children.

Just like verbal language, visual language in picture books is of utmost significance. Illustration is an essential part of picture books as it helps to bring the story to life. Illustrations are added not only to embellish the text rather it adds on to the meaning of the narrative. Both verbal and visual language goes hand in hand to give the text meaning. Children who are incapable of comprehending the words in books by themselves look at pictures and make sense of the story. According to Stephan (1992), socialisation of the targeted audience is the basic aim of picture books. Picture books influence children's gender development. Visual language, non-verbal language, is the soul of picture books. Gender identities of pre-schoolers are formed at a time when they are looking at their favourite book. So, stereotypical portrayal of gender in books has a significant influence on children's identity formation.

A wide variety of studies have been conducted on children picture books. Mostly those studies are on award winning children picture books by foreign authors. One of the landmark studies in this regard is by Weitzman et al. (1972) they found that women in award winning children's picture books are illustrated as immobile, dependent and passive while male as dominant, active and leader. Overall males are portrayed more often than females in illustration and were given higher occupations than females in children's picture books (Gooden, 2001). Over the years many diverse kinds of researches have been conducted on gender stereotyping in Pakistan as well. However,

most of these works are on text books or curriculum books. There is no such study on children picture books by Pakistani authors written originally in English. So, with the purpose in view five Pakistani authored children picture books are chosen by researcher. The purpose of researcher is to analyse the visuals in particular children picture books and to see whether Pakistani authors are mindful of gender stereotyping or they following the same vicious cycle.

This study aims to evaluate the visual depiction of gender in children's picture and what message through portraiture it disseminates about gender to children. It is significant for both parents and educators to consider the message that is being conveyed through the books that children are exposed to. By selecting books that offer diverse and non-stereotypical representations of gender roles and identities, children are given the opportunity to explore and understand different perspectives and experiences, and to develop their own understanding of gender. Furthermore, by intentionally selecting books that challenge traditional gender stereotypes, educators and parents can help promote a society that is all embracing where individuality of person is celebrated, instead of limited by societal expectations based on their gender. This is particularly important for children who are developing their gender identity.

Research Question

1. How are male and female characters portrayed visually in the selected picture books?

Literature Review

Children's literature

Literature that is particularly created for children and is read by them comes under the category of children's literature. Although the genre has its audience specified still it is equally liked and admired by adults. 'Alice in the wonderland' and 'sleeping beauty' is the books composed exclusively for children but are liked by adults as well. Similarly, books written for adults like, 'Robinson Crusoe' and 'Gulliver's travel' are equally appreciated by children (M.d Sidin, 2005). The purpose of children's literature is to entertain, educate, and inspire young readers. It can help children to develop a love for reading and learning, as well as foster their imagination, creativity, and critical thinking skills.

Children's picture books are a unique form of literature that combines both written text and visual images to create meaning. According to Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson (2005), the words and

images in picture books work together to convey the story's meaning. The renowned scholar Nodelman (1988) is considered an authority in the world of picture books, and his book '*The Language of Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children's Picture Book World*' provides a comprehensive framework for analysing picture books. Nodelman emphasised the significance of illustrations in picture books and demonstrated how pictures and words interact to create complete narrative. He argues that the picture is not the story itself, but rather a mode of communication that complements the verbal narrative. In this study, the researcher has examined illustration in children's picture books to identify instances of gender stereotyping.

Picture Books Analysis

Intentionally or unintentionally children picture books perpetuated gender stereotype ideas to young children. Research spanning several decades, conducted both nationally and internationally, has consistently shown that male characters are more frequently represented in children's literature. This representation reinforces the notion that belonging to the predominant class of society, i.e., male, is more desirable (Singh, 1998). The paragraphs that follow delve into several significant studies and their corresponding findings.

The research conducted by Weitzman et al. (1972) and Gooden and Gooden (2001) highlight the issue of gender representation in children's literature. The findings of both studies indicate that gender stereotype is prevalent in children's books, with male characters being given more diverse and active roles, while female characters are confined to traditional gender roles. Although Gooden and Gooden (2001) found that female depiction in books' titles was equal to male representation, the less portrayal of female participants in illustrations suggests that there is still a long way to go in achieving gender equality in children's literature. It is important for children's books to portray a diverse range of gender roles and to challenge gender stereotypes, in order to provide children with a more inclusive view of the world.

Studies conducted by local researchers such as Ullah and Skeleton (2012), Ali and Hussain (2019), and Shahnaz et al. (2020) highlight the pervasive nature of gender bias and stereotyping in Pakistani literature, particularly in school text books and popular magazines. The findings of these studies suggest that the portrayal of gender roles in literature reflects and bespeaks of a long-established patriarchal system of our society, where male dominance and female subordination are normalised. Such portrayal of gender roles can

negatively impact female self-image and dignity, and perpetuate gender-based inequalities and discrimination. Therefore, there is a need for the government, publishers, and educators to address this issue and promote gender equality and diversity in literature to create a more inclusive and equitable society.

Almost all the researchers conducted until now have revealed the fact that in one way or the other gender is represented in a stereotypical manner. Although female representation in titles and central roles has improved still, they are in traditional feminine roles. The present study is different from previous studies by focusing specifically on books written by Pakistani writers, rather than translated works or books from other countries. Here the focus of researchers is only on the illustration to decode the gender portrayal.

Research Methodology

Through purposive sampling technique a total of five picture books are chosen for the purpose of analysis. These include; (i) King for a day by Rukhsana Khan (ii) Rani, the beautiful Swan and (iii) A visit to the dentist by Maheen Zeeshan (iv) Mama goat and her kids and (v) Oddie's adventure by Roohi Haq. These are penned down for children of age group 3 to 8 years. This research paper is significant for several reasons. Firstly, the focus of research is on children's picture books authored by Pakistani authors in the English language. Secondly, they are not included in any school curriculum. Lastly, the age group that is focused here is critical for cognitive and social-emotional development and books play a significant role in this aspect.

Kress and Leeuwen theory of visual grammar (2006) is used for the pictorial analysis of the selected books. Taking Halliday's three meta-function for language as model Kress and Leeuwen put forward three meta functions for visual language i.e.; compositional, interactive and representational. To analyse the images in the picture books the focus is only on the representational meta-function. Within representational meta-function the represented participants are under consideration, which involves analysing the action they are performing and the setting in which they are performing them.

Data Analysis

For the analysis of illustration in the particular picture books focus is on the gender of the participants and representational depiction. The term representational can have two meanings: firstly, it refers to visual arts that aim to portray objects, scenes, or figures in a realistic manner, and secondly, it pertains to the act of representing something. In this section, the focus is on the representational aspect of actions in images,

which means understanding what the participants are doing and where the action is happening.

(i) Action

To see whether gender stereotyping has been done in the social, political and institutional category of action images in the selected picture books has been analysed. Analysis of illustration shows that the highest numbers of actions are being performed in the social category in all five books. Followed by relational and institutional, with no action being performed in the political and religious categories. Of all the categories, the social category has the highest number of males than female characters.

Social

Analysis of images highlights the presence of more male than female in social action. Certain activities in books are associated with male gender only. And in those activities females are either invisible or their ratio is less compared to male. Like in *king for a day* the most noticeable social action is kite flying. With an increased number of male characters being involved in kite flying on the rooftop of their houses, this activity (kite flying) is deemed as masculine activity. While females are there only to motivate them as can be seen in fig.1. Similarly, in *Rani, the beautiful Swan* playing football, cycling and running are associated with male children. Whereas females are portrayed as passive and assigned more feminine tasks like babysitting and serving family members as depicted in fig.2. Distribution of male and female characters in social action in *A visit to the Dentist* is equal. But still then, the roles specified for them are stereotypical roles like receptionist and nurse is female while the dentist is male character (fig.3). Likewise, tints of stereotyping are visible in *Mama Goat and her Kids* where the shoe maker is male non-human character. Also, male characters are depicted as clever, cunning and females as helpless in front of clever tiger. Such role distribution according to gender type can perpetuate these beliefs and hinder progress towards gender equality.



Fig.1



Fig.2



Fig.3

Relational

Illustrations that depict actions among family members are termed as relational actions. In all five books the majority of actions are among family members. Like, in *king for a day* majority of actions are depicted between brothers and sister. The task of taking care of paralyzed child, Malik, is assigned to his sister while Malik's brother is helping him (Malik) in outdoor tasks. This shows that outdoor activities are to be performed by male. The image.4 from *A visit to the dentist* depicts a scene between father, son and daughter where father is acquainting children with the dentist and about cavities. In this image the son and father are sitting on the sofa and a girl on the floor playing with a doll. This demonstrates how we ascribe certain objects and toys to specific gender. Dolls are traditionally associated with girls to cultivate nurturing skills in them, while boys are often directed towards playing with trucks and cars. This division of toys according to gender creates segregation and indirectly instructs children about their gender identity, and also teaches them how to behave based on their gender. In book *Oddie's adventure* the highest number of actions are illustrated in the relational category. The image.5 below illustrates a scene where Mr. and Mrs. Mule hosted a dinner for Mr. and Mrs. Bear at their home. The segregated seating of male and female characters in the image reflects the conventional thinking of our society. In Pakistani society mixed gender conversation is not

promoted and is considered as undesirable. Only People with the same gender can play, talk and sit together.



Fig.4



Fig.5

Institutional

The most common activity described from institutional perspective is a day trip of school children to a park. The image (fig.6) below from *Rani, the beautiful Swan* illustrates school trip of children where male children outnumber female. This bespeak of an orthodox belief system of our society that girls are not permitted to go on trips without family member. This bias is reflected in the number of girls versus boys in the images, as well as in the actions depicted, with boys being the one actively involved in playing football. While girls on the other hand are standing and observing them not actively participating in activity. Limited and restricted depiction of women in illustration gives children a very different role model.

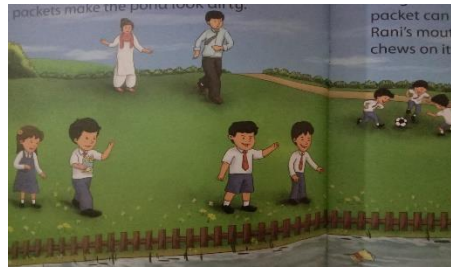


Fig.6

2. Character

The second category to be addressed under representational meaning is the character involved in performing action. It is further expatiated under subcategories i.e.; character type and ethnicity. The action illustrated in images is analysed to see the type (human/non-human) and ethnicity of participants.

Character type

General analysis of illustrations in all five books depicts more male than female characters. Even the images with animals as

characters like in *Mama Goat and her kids* and *Oddie's adventure* male outnumber female characters. There is an indication of gender stereotype where females both human and non-human are assigned feminine tasks. Also, male is given a more dominant role and they are the head of their family like Malik in *King for a day* and Abuji in *A visit to the dentist*. As a matter of fact, Person of any gender whether male or female can be friends. However, in the selected picture books only persons of same gender are friends whether they are human or non-human. Like tiger(male) and fox(male) are good friends. Similarly in *Rani, the beautiful Swan*, only kids of the same gender are playing together.

Ethnicity

Cultural attributes such as headwear, dresses, physical and facial features are the markers to reveal the ethnicity of a person (Leeuwen & Jeewit, 2001). Name of an individual also helps in revealing the ethnicity of a person. From images in the selected picture books ethnicity of characters has been identified. Ethnicity of Malik and his sister in *King for a day* is revealed through their dresses. Malik's sister is wearing a shalwar kameez with a dupatta on head while he is wearing a cap. This is a common dress code of Muslim ethnicity. Similarly, names of characters like Malik, Rani, Aminah and Talha also give an indication about the ethnicity of characters. These are common Muslim names.

Likewise, the dresses and feminine markers assist in revealing/uncovering the gender of non-human characters. Mama goat and Mama Mule are wearing bright colour dresses, jewellery, holding bags and have put on makeup. While, non-human male characters are donning T-shirts and jeans and mostly light colour dresses which signify that they are male.

3. Setting

Setting is the last feature analysed under representational meaning. Setting refers to the location where the participants in the selected picture book perform their activities. Overall, findings of the study shows that actions are featured in two types of setting i.e., indoor and outdoor. In general, indoor settings feature more activities. Outdoor settings feature more male participants than female participants.

In *king for a day*, the rooftop makes most of the setting. Kite flying is considered as male oriented activity, so it features more male than female participants. Females are portrayed in the images but they are not actively participating in kite flying. The activity is performed

indoors on rooftop. Still male exceed in number because kite flying is associated with male gender. Similarly, doctor's clinic features most of the activity in *A visit to the dentist*, where females outnumber male because of the nature of their job.

As for outdoor settings, parks and farms feature most of the activities. In *Rani, the beautiful Swan*, activities are performed in parks where male figure exceeds the female. Similarly farms in a village make most of the setting in *Mama Goat and her kids*. Non-human male participants in *Mama Goat and her kids* dominate non-human females. There is only single female character and that is Mama goat



Discussion

This study aims to investigate gender construction patterns in children's picture books. It is unarguably a reality that books are a reflection of our social values and beliefs (Horesh, 2017). As active learners and readers children are immensely affected by books more than adults. Hence, it is crucial to design, write and choose a book that is gender inclusive. With a purpose to decode gender construction in illustration, findings of the selected picture books reveal that male characters outnumber female characters in pictures and assigned roles that are more challenging and demanding.

Pictorial analysis of children's picture books reveals that male and female characters were assigned traditional masculine and feminine tasks. Gender imbalance was found with respect to female depiction. Female participants are assigned roles in the private sphere while male is represented in outdoor activities. Females are depicted either as mother, sister or wife in all five books. They are relegated roles inside the four walls of home. They have no individual identity of their own. Like in *Mama Goat and her kids* there is only one female

character and that is Mama Goat. Everyone in the village calls her Mama goat, her individuality as a working woman is foregrounded in front of her motherhood. This validates the finding of Yasin et al. (2012); women in Malaysian textbooks are illustrated more often than male participants. Females are relegated to a limited range of tasks and typical settings. They are portrayed either in the kitchen cooking something or doing gardening in the garden. Also, boys in classroom settings are depicted as dominant, decisive and taking leadership roles while girls on the other hand are portrayed as submissive, shy and not very confident.

Compared to previous studies on visual depiction of gender in children picture books, female depiction in illustration has been improved. In these selected picture books women have been given more space in front page pictorial and in-story pictorial. However, illustrations which depict outdoor settings, there women are either invisible or they are less in number. This limited depiction of women in outdoor settings and traditional role assignment represents the distorted image of Pakistani society. While women in Pakistani society are engaging in various professions and establishing their reputations. This also has negative impacts on children's perception of what it means to be a boy and a girl.

Conclusion

Through qualitative content analysis method illustrations of selected picture books are analysed. For in depth analysis of visuals Kress and Leeuwen theory for visual images is employed. In that only representational meta-function is the focus of researcher for this particular study. Representation of male and female characters in social, institutional, religion and political action is looked at.

Findings of the study show that in social roles male outnumber females. Social roles that are considered as masculine in nature have more males than females. Like kite flying, football, cricket and cycling are stereotypically associated with males. Therefore, in such illustrations and stories the frequency of male gender is greater. Like in *King for a day* where kite flying is the major activity, there is only one female character and she too is helping her brother (Malik) not flying kites. Similarly, in *Rani, the beautiful swan* boys are playing football and cycling while girls on the other hand in the same illustration are observing them only and not actively involved. Social roles that are typically associated with females have been assigned to females in the picture books. Like in *A visit to the dentist* the roles of receptionist and nurse are accorded to females. Mostly women are

given the roles of mother, sister and caregivers. Such stereotypical depiction of characters along a gender line restricts the children's sense of perception and worldview.

One of the deviations from previous studies that are observable in these books is that female characters are shown as strong and able to fight back. In *Mama Goat and her kids*, Mama Goat is seen fighting with a tiger in one of the illustrations. This highlights the fact that women are no longer a princess in jeopardy waiting for their prince charming but are able to defend and fight for themselves. Such real-life pictures need to be incorporated in literature to break the stereotype. And present reality to our children that is how their world view would be broadened. Therefore, it is incumbent on parents, teachers and educators to be mindful in the selection of books for their children. Equal responsibility falls on the shoulders of Pakistani writers and publishers; they need to be cognizant in their selection of content for text and treating gender in books.

References

- Ali, R. & Hussain, L. (2019). Gender representation in primary level English and Urdu textbooks in Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 10, 83-100.
- Angela Gooden, Mark Gooden, Gender Representation in Notable Children's Picture Books: 1995-1999. *Sex Roles*, 45(1/2), 89-101, 2001.
- Arbuthnot, M. H., Children and books. Chicago, Scott Foresman & Company, USA, 1984.
- Gooden, A. M., & Gooden, M. A. (2001). Gender representation in notable children's picture books: 1995–1999. *Sex roles*, 45(1-2), 89-101. doi: 10.1023/a: 1013064418674
- Hamilton, M. C., Anderson, D., Broaddus, M., & Young, K. (2006). Gender stereotyping and under-representation of female characters in 200 popular children's picture books: A twenty-first century update. *Sex Roles*, 55(11–12), 757–765.
- Haq, R. (2017). *Mama Goat and her kids*. Karachi, Pakistan: Paramount books.
- Haq, R. (2015). *Oddie's adventure*. Karachi, Pakistan: Paramount books.
- Jackson, S. (2007). 'She might not have the right tools . . . and her does': Children's sense-making of gender, work and abilities in early school readers. *Gender and Education*, 19(1), 61–77.
- Khan, R. (2014). *King for a day*. US. Lee and Low publication.
- Kress, G. & Leeuwen, T. V. (2006). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design (2nd ed.)*. Taylor & Francis e-library.

- Lynch-Brown, C. & Tomlinson, C. M. (2005). *Essential of children literature*. US
- Mahmood, Z. (2018). *Tinga's Car*. Karachi, Pakistan: Oxford publications.
- Md Sidin Ahmad Ishak. (2005). *Per Kembangan sastera Kanak di Malaysia: Buku Melayu mencari nafas baru*. Kuala Lumpur. Cerdik Publications Sdn Bhd.
- Nodelman, P. (1988). *Words about pictures: The narrative art of children's picture books*. University of Georgia Press
- Shahnaz, A., Fatima. S. T., & Qadir, S. A. (2020). The myth that children can be anything they want: gender construction in Pakistani Children literature. *Journal of gender studies*, 29(4), 470482. <https://www.researchgate.net/deref/https%3A%2F%2Fdoi.org%2F10.1080%2F09589236.2020.1736529>
- Stephens, J. *Language and ideology in children's fiction*, Longman, UK, 1992.
- Turner-Bowker, D. M. (1996). Gender stereotyped descriptors in children's picture books: Does "curious Jane" exist in the literature? *Sex roles*, 35(7-8), 461-488.
- Van Leewen. T. J. & Jeewitt, C. (2001). *Handbook of visual analysis*. London: Sage Publication.
- Ullah, H, & Skelton. C. (2012). Gender representation in the public sector school textbooks of Pakistan. *Education studies* 39(2): 1-12. doi: [10.1080/03055698.2012.702892](https://doi.org/10.1080/03055698.2012.702892)
- Weitzman, L. J., Eifler, D., Hokada, E., & Ross, C. (1972). Sex-role socialization in picture books for preschool children. *American Journal of Sociology*, 77(6), 1125- 11.
- Yasin, S.M., Hamid, A. B., Othman, Z., Abu Bakar, K. (2012). A visual analysis of a Malaysian English Textbooks: Gender matters. *Social and behavioural sciences* 69(12), 1871-1880.
- Zeeshan, M. (2018). *A visit to a dentist*. Karachi, Pakistan: Oxford University Press.
- Zeeshan, M. (2019). *Rani: The beautiful Swan*. Karachi, Pakistan: Oxford University Press