



RESEARCH PAPER

Visual Mediation Across Publishing Contexts: A Comparative Multimodal Analysis of the Book Covers of *Water*

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ABSTRACT

The study analyses the publishing contexts of two book cover designs of the novel *Water*, written by Bapsi Sidhwa. The book covers are published by Milkweed Editions in USA and by Readings in Pakistan. The book covers act as paratexts that a reader comes in contact with before engaging with the text itself and they become particularly significant in transnational literary circulation and in the representation of South Asian women's socio-cultural experiences. The study uses a qualitative comparative methodology which is rooted in multimodal discourse analysis and social semiotics by applying Kress and Leeuwen's visual grammar to examine representational, interactive, and compositional meanings of two covers. The findings show that western cover edition emphasizes abstraction and thematic universality, whereas the local edition foregrounds embodied experience and social specificity, and it makes gendered narratives varying across the transnational publishing contexts.

KEYWORDS Multimodal Analysis, Book Cover Design, Social Semiotics, Paratextuality

Introduction

Book covers have been used for various purposes, they are used for education purposes as well as for gaining insight to more entertainment purposes too. The first thing that a reader tends to see while reading a book is the book cover design, thus a book is being judged by its cover. As a result, it has been acknowledged as a fact that the book cover is the key aspect to promote the sale of a book and is also taken as a determining factor of the book's success regardless of the quality of the content (Yampbell, 2005). The present study is set to analyse book cover designs of the novel, *Water* written by Bapsi Sidhwa. Publishers and authors pay special attention to book covers due to the fact that they contribute significantly towards attracting the readers irrespective of the quality of the content.

Water was originally a film by Deepa Mehta, who later asked Bapsi Sidhwa, one of the finest Pakistani authors, to write a novel on the basis of the story and fill in the gaps left in the screenplay. Sidhwa's *Water* was first published in 2006 by Milkweed Press, in America. While Pakistani version of the novel was published by Readings in 2013. There are other publishing versions available too (Key Porters Books) but for the sake of this study only the comparison of these two covers will be discussed here.

The analysis is set to be performed by using Kress and Leeuwen's (2006) framework of visual grammar, which based on Halliday's three metafunctions i.e., representational, interactive and compositional. This approach has been used by many researchers on various genres including children's literature, political memoirs and postcolonial studies

but the application of this approach on comparison of transnational book cover design has been scarce.

Water is the story set in 1938's rural India, when it was still a British colony, delves into pathos and agonies faced by widows in the ashram. It focuses on the life of a 8 year old child bride, Chuiya, whose old husband dies and she has to live in the ashram along with other widows, where she sees the harsh realities of widowhood in India and here, she is forced to live out a life of penitence until death. Unwilling to accept her fate, Chuyia becomes a catalyst for change in the lives of the widows. The ashram, a religious sanctuary house where these widows live, is situated on the bank of river Ganges, and water from the river serves several metaphoric functions during the development of the story.

Book covers often serve the purpose of meaning-making rather than merely presenting a decorative surface by publishing houses and authors. The study of these meaning-making artefacts is crucial to be studied by an appropriate theory which is being served by Kress and Leeuwen's visual grammar method, which help to identify the context and purpose of these covers. Book cover act as paratexts in multimodality and they are multimodal in their own nature. Their images, layout, typography and colour act semiotically and this study aims to uncover these social semiotic dynamics through the analysis of book cover designs of *Water* which is being published across different publishing contexts.

Literature Review

With the increase of multimodal communication the research trends for multimodal analysis are also propagating and book covers are one of the most important multimedial artefacts that a reader interacts with. Kress and Leeuwen's Multimodal discourse analysis is a methodological approach which supports examination of meaning which is being constructed by using different modes of communication such as text, images, design, colour, and style. Multimodal discourse analysis is highly useful in book cover designs as they are the first impressions of a book which compels or repels a reading from approaching a book. Thus, it is important for the publisher and the author to design it considering respective market.

There are number of types of multimodal analysis and systematic functional multimodal discourse analysis is one of them which is a combination of systemic functional linguistics by Halliday and multimodal framework by Kress and Van Leeuwen. Systematic functional linguistics' metafunctions are used to apply on different contexts to understand how multiple modes work together to create cohesive meaning. This set of frameworks allows to observe that images are functionally similar to language and they can be assigned with three metafunctions: representational, interpersonal, and compositional functions (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Multimodality is thought to be concerned with a variety of communicational forms or modes that people use in their daily life and the relationships between them (Jewitt, 2009). This further leads to the proposition that visual images can represent the world while determining the interpersonal interaction and constitute a recognizable kind of text which is its composition (Binji & Huiyou, 2023). The representational meaning is based on the inference that how the participants of the image are being represented in it and interactive meaning is supposed to show the interaction between the image and its viewer while the compositional meaning explores how elements are combined in coherent whole. It is interesting to note that visual grammar provides ample room for systematic comparison of texts which makes its suitable for present comparison between the two book cover designs.

The essence of multimodal analysis lies among the interaction that takes place with different elements as a single modality cannot produce the meaning which is being developed by using their relationship with each other in a multimodal text (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2000). Existing scholarship on multimodality emphasises on the exploration of the relationship between the image and text as they are regarded as dialogic which leads to a complex result while studying (Guizarro, 2014). Thus, it is crucial to take book covers as multimodal whole for examination because they define how literary meaning is constructed before the reader even engages with the text itself.

Genette (1997) explores on the communicative purposes of the book cover and regards them as paratexts because they act as a medium which is being surrounded by the text which shapes its presentation, distribution and reception by the readers as the colour, typography and layout in it construct the meaning (Lirola, 2012). Book covers lead the reader to frame his perception by using a certain set of images, colour, font, and composition by the publisher.

In postcolonial literature, when a text is being published across the borders, it allows the researcher to observe the variation in differing publishing context. Thompson (2012) asserts that the publishing context of the books influence the presentation of their cover according to target readership and geographical placement. While considering the audience of a certain region, the transnational publication of Pakistani novels is set according to the cultural requirements which can lead to a variety of versions in its meaning (Hashmi, 2010). Ultimately, this variation has its impact on book cover designs which are set to attract their local readership. Imansari (2023) reiterates this phenomenon by deducing that mostly international versions are more realistic and show direct emotions while the local versions usually use symbolic or understated visual strategies. Mujahid (2025) asserts in her study that women from postcolonial literature appear to be marginalized under multiple layers as in there the gender oppression combines with cultural, religious and racial hierarchies. The novel under study, *Water*, has been previously dealt by existing scholars for its themes, ideology, and narrative dimensions. There are a number of studies which have already explored issues such as gender oppression, religious orthodoxy, and colonial power structures within the novel, and analysed them within the framework of feminist and postcolonial literary theory. Other studies have focused on Deepa Mehta's film adaptation, while discussing issues of representation, censorship, and visual politics within the film context. These studies offer valuable insights into the narrative and ideological aspects of *Water*, and they primarily focus on textual or film analysis, omitting the paratextual dimension. In multimodal analysis of book cover designs, it is common to use one literary text to use this theory, however, despite their methodological rigor, such studies often overlook how the same literary work is visually reinterpreted in different publishing contexts. Thus, there is a lack of scholarship on comparative cross-cultural analysis of the book covers of *Water*, which examine how publishers in different socio-cultural contexts visually design the book for their respective audiences. It is noteworthy that despite Pakistan's crucial role in Sidhwa's literary identity and readership, the Pakistani edition of *Water* has received little academic attention. This study fills this research gap by conducting a multimodal comparative analysis of the edition published by Milkweed Editions in the United States and the edition published by Readings in Pakistan.

Material and Methods

Present study is based on a multimodal approach to social semiotics and it conceptualizes meaning as the result of the use of various semiotic resources in social contexts. From this perspective, visual texts are not neutral representations but rather

products shaped by culture and ideology (van Leeuwen 2005; Jewitt 2009). Kress and Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar have been used in this study to explore how transnational book covers function as carriers of meaning in different publishing contexts. They act as a set of tools which investigate integration of paratextual theory to examine the mediating role of cover design in the literary cycle. The core of the analysis is Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar model, which applies Halliday's systemic functional linguistics to visual communication. The study has used qualitative comparative research design which is embedded with Kress and Leeuwen's visual grammar framework. By using this theory, the study explores the meaning making capacity of book cover designs under varied publishing contexts, and for that purpose book covers of *Water*'s Milkweed Editions and Readings are the samples of the data. Both of these versions are based on the same texts by the same author but they are published under different contextual and geographical backgrounds. The three metafunctions that are used to analyse the book covers are as follows.

Representational Meaning

In this metafunction the relationship among Participants is explored whereas they are the objects and elements of the text. Participants are further divided into two, namely interactive and represented participants. In this study interactive participants are supposed to be the reader and the represented participants are people, things or objects in the image.

Interactive Meaning

In interactive meaning dimension, the interaction between the participants is analysed through which the designer usually puts social meanings into the text by using the gaze, social distance, perspective/point of view, and modality.

Compositional Meaning

Compositional meaning deals with the whole composition of the text, and it explores how symbolic and interactive features are related to each other and how they are amalgamated to make a meaningful picture.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of visual grammar in Milkweed Press

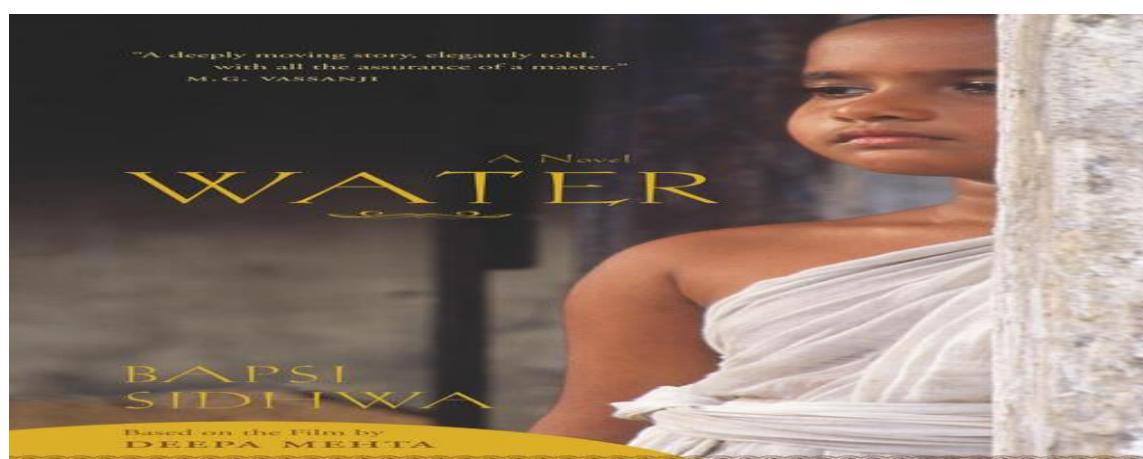


Figure 1. Milkweed Editions book cover of *Water* (USA)

Representational Meaning of the Book Cover

The image used on the book cover design is taken from the film, upon which the novel is based. In Fig. 1, the participant of the book cover, a reactor, is looking at an indefinite point, avoiding direct contact with the reader. The vector is emanating from the face of the reactor making it reactional process but the *goal* is not seen in the picture. The action observed here is non-transactional action. Representationally, the main character Chuiya, is added as a human participant on the cover, driving the whole attention of the reader. Her get up is depictive of her misery, an eight years old child, with a shaved head, and wrapping white piece of cloth, as stitched and colored garment is forbidden for Hindu widows, standing tall, with her chin up as a sign of resistance and courage to fight for the rights of her and other females of all the ages who were destined to live in the Ashram which has grey, dirty walls and absorbs the sighs of all these women. The plain expressions of the reactor are representative of her long-forgotten desires of wearing colourful saris and flaunting her long, silky hair, and eating delicious sweet and spicy foods.

Interactive Meaning of the Book Cover

In Figure 1 the interaction between the participant and the reader can be observed by focusing the following functions.

Gaze

Firstly, gaze is viewed from the eye-line. The gaze is present with the vector, however, with the absence of goal the contact is seemed to be indirect with reader. And the expressions with the gaze are quite cold, with plainness as if the continuous torture and agony has perished her inner self at the ashram at such a young age that her ability to feel has perished.

Social distance

The participant is at closer shot, and according to Hall (2015), the shorter the distance is the more intimate and closer the relationship between the participant and the readers. This offers the readers to see Chuiya's situation more closely and more empathetically.

Point of view

The view can be seen by angle to suggest a 'subjective attitude' to the participants. Kress and Van Leeuwen described this as the "socially determined attitudes". Horizontally the oblique angle in Fig 1 shows detachment of the participant with the readers, especially when a part of her face is hidden behind a white wall and vertically, an eye-level angle connotes equal power between the presented participants and the readers.

Modality

It refers to how readers see the "realness" of the text. Modality judgments are social, and dependent on what is considered real in the social group for which the representation is primarily intended. Due to the presence of human face in the cover, it gives high modality, the background contains a wall of the ashram again giving realness in the text as monochrome image is most prevalent in book cover.

Interactively, the strong gaze of the participant, Chuiya, is depictive of her emotions, but the gaze does not have goal present in the cover, which connotes that it is

the set of customs and so-called social and religious norms against which her fight is. She does not have to deal with a person or group of people but the society itself.

Compositional Meaning of Book Cover

Compositional meaning is related to the whole composition of the text, how symbolic and interactive features relate to each other and are integrated to make a meaningful whole. This metafunction can be explored through informative value, salience, and framing.

Information value

The layout of the cover is in vertical axis, title and the testimonial are given on the upper part, as ideal and the more detailed and real information is on the bottom along with author's name.

Salience

It refers to elements of the book that are made more visible and vital than the others. It can be seen by size, placement, contrast color, etc. Any aspects can be salience depending on the designer's view as significant for their purpose. Many elements on the cover are made visible. The reading path begins with the testimonial given by M.G. Vassanji, then the title, which is also second most prominent element on the book due to its font size and color along with the information of the genre, and on the bottom is the name of the author along with background detail of the novel with the name of the director. The color of the written text is only color used on this cover, everything else is been given a monochrome look with greyish background. The child reactor is the most prominent element on the book cover taking up $\frac{1}{2}$ space vertically.

Framing

It is about the connection and disconnection between the elements. It can be drawn by solid lines of the frame, white spaces between one piece and another, shaped by colors, etc. There is no specific framing is being used in the visual text, the child, the front wall and wall behind are not being disconnected but give a sense of belonging among the elements present in the book cover. The only contrast that is seen on the book cover is the font color that is being used for the writing.

Compositionally the book cover follows ideal information on the top, with the testimonial to intrigue the readers and the real information on the bottom. All the fonts used in the cover are colored to attract the attention of the reader and distinguishes them from the rest of the cover, which is dull, monochrome setting. The testimonial by M.G. Vassanji is the ideological selling point of the book, which tells that story is "deeply moving", with visual representation of the image of child widow draped in white cloth in a grey background.

Analysis of Visual Grammar in Readings Edition

In this section the study explores the Readings' edition book cover design as shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Readings book cover of *Water* (Pakistan)

Representational Meaning of the Book Cover

The representational meanings of Readings book cover design are quite distinct from that of Milkweed's. It shows a clear narrative and human participant in the picture which makes it more explicit from the former one. The participant is shown to be a child widow and her figure occupies most prominent place in the cover. A vector emanating from the participant and it is her hand touching the water which is making the process narrative. But this action is slow, non-transactional and more contemplative rather than dynamic. The cover does not narrate an event but it only stages a symbolic interaction with an element. Along with this, the water that is being touched by the hand of the actor is called as goal in this image which occupies the most prominent position in this cover as it is also the title of the novel. The action shown in this image is symbolic interaction rather than a dynamic process. Representationally, Figure 2 shows the pathos of child widow Chuiya by portraying her image which is crouched down to touch the water in front of her that functions as both a ritual element and a central symbolic motif of the novel. Her pose shows her vulnerability yet her endurance and constraint. Thus, participant is not presented merely as an individual figure but as a representative body through which collective female experience is articulated.

Interactive Meaning of the Book Cover

In interactive dimension of book cover design the study explore the interaction that happens among the participant and the viewer in the image.

The Gaze

There is no gaze which emancipating from the participant towards the reader. However, there is gaze from the girl towards the water which makes it an offer image than the demand image. The indirect gaze makes the child widow an object that has to be interpreted rather than addressed, and shows her emotional restraint and overt identification.

Social distance

The shot in this book cover is shown to be medium close and it covers the whole body of the participant and this distance establishes a moderately intimate relation between participant and viewer, closer than a long shot but not fully closed. The proximity

between the viewer and the participant allows the viewer to perceive physical helplessness and gesture while also maintaining respectful separation. This distance allows empathetic observation without collapsing the boundary between observer and represented subject.

Perspective or Point of View

While viewing from the horizontal angle the point of view is frontal and it suggests involvement rather than detachment. On vertical view the image is taken at eye level which depicts a position of balance rather than authority or submission.

Modality

The most prominent color of water in the image makes the modality relatively high in the book cover as the monochrome saturated color increases perceptual vividness while also maintaining chromatic control. Along with this the image describes differentiation, medium brightness and illumination and in terms of the image's realness, it has a standard modality because it does not have a clear face, although it still gives the shape of human being. The designer may aim it to be relatable enough but still conform to the fiction genre.

When observing Figure 2, interactively, the absence of gaze places the reader as a witness rather than an interlocutor in there. Vector emancipating from the participant and bodily orientation shows emotional restraint and contemplative engagement. Rather than demanding sympathy through facial expression, the image constructs meaning through action and ritual gesture, thereby situating suffering within a culturally legible framework.

Compositional Meaning of Book Cover

Information Value

The layout of the book cover is vertically oriented where the upper region contains the name of the author whereas the lower part of the cover consists of title of the novel and testimonial of the book. The function can be regarded as *ideal*. The middle and the most prominent space on the cover is occupied by the human figure with water all around her.

Salience

Salience in this cover is achieved through a combination of size, placement, color, and contrast. The represented participant occupies a central vertical position and commands immediate visual attention due to her scale and bodily prominence. The most salient chromatic element is the blue water, whose saturated hue contrasts sharply with the muted tones of skin, cloth, and background. An intersemiotic coherence can be observed in this cover which starts from the bodily image of a young girl and then moves towards the water around her which gives the contrast to the title of the novel and name of the author to make it resilient in the cover.

Framing

Connection and disconnection between the elements on the cover is known as framing. In Figure 2 the framing is on minimal level as there is no explicit division between the participant and water which makes it a continuous field. This weak framing leads to strong cohesion in the cover and shows that the body, environment and ritual elements are inseparable from each other which leads to child widow's inability to detach from the societal ruthlessness.

Compositionally, the cover combines title, body, and symbolic element into a unified visual field. In vertical organization the upper zone has been used as thematic orientation, while the lower zone offers visual realization through the participant and the water. The saturated blue color in the cover acts as a salient feature which highlights the visual symbolism in the cover. Overall, the composition suggests its reinforcement on ideological meanings of the book cover of the novel.

Comparative discussion of Milkweed Edition and Readings Edition

This section explores the way in which same text is perceived semiotically divergent in each of its edition due to its cultural, social and geographical place. Both of the book covers offer distinct features in their representational, interactive and compositional functions despite sharing a common figure in them which is child widow, Chuiya.

Conceptual abstraction is prevalent in Milkweed book cover which represents the participant as a symbolic embodiment of suffering, silence, and moral endurance, allowing the narrative to be read as universally human rather than culturally situated. Stillness is the main component of this book cover. On the other hand, in Readings book cover the participant is shown to be touching the water which leads the reader to the concept that she is entangled in a ritual context. Social regulation and ritual exploitation shown through this cover.

Interactively, Milkweed edition with lack of gaze and body orientation, shows emotional detachment. Western humanitarian mode is prevalent in American version which invites the reader to respond ethically rather than effectively. On the other hand, despite the absence of direct gaze in Readings edition, effective reflection is invited by showing the vector towards the water and frontal orientation. Thus, a separation from the participant is observable in Milkweed edition while more empathy and effectiveness is required by Pakistani cover.

Compositional distinction between the two covers also shows the publishing contextualization during book cover design. In Milkweed cover, the information is sorted hierarchically, privileging testimonial authority and typographic prominence in the upper zone. This setting places the participant within a subdued monochrome field. Salience is directed toward institutional validation and literary seriousness, and framing integrates elements smoothly to sustain aesthetic restraint. On the other hand, the Readings cover's salience is shown through chromatic emphasis with saturated blue colored water and embodied centrality of the participant. The saturated blue of the water functions as the principal visual anchor, binding image and title into a cohesive symbolic field. Framing of the cover is minimal which allows the body, surface, and liquid to merge into a continuous ritual space. Here, meaning is guided less by testimonial discourse than by visual symbolism and corporeal presence.

All in all, the analysis of Milkweed and Readings editions shows that the book cover design is highly dependent on publishing contexts and target readership which varies across the geographical. In Milkweed edition, abstraction, restraint and moral reflection is prevalent which is suited to global literary market scope as it aestheticizes the suffering into symbolic distance. On the contrary, Readings edition portrays the novel in cultural context of ritual and religious constraint. The book cover design is not only a visual packaging but it also is an interpretation of literary texts that reshapes its meaning across transnational publishing contexts.

Conclusion

This study has explored that the function of the book cover is not only to present it aesthetically but also to act as paratexts by altering the meanings across publishing contexts. In the western cover, abstraction, social suffering and emotional restraint is visible on the other hand the local cover situates child's suffering internally, by using chromatic symbolism, ritual action and cultural specificity. Thus, by analysing the book designs of the novel, study advances current discussions in multimodal discourse analysis and postcolonial publishing studies.

Recommendations

The study recommends for future researchers to conduct research on broader corpus of transnational editions of South Asian novels in order to identify recurring visual patterns across publishing contexts. More genres can be added to comparative studies which would further clarify how gender, culture, and market expectations shape paratextual design strategies. In addition to this, multimodal analysis can be integrated with reader reception study to provide empirical insight into how different cover designs influence interpretation and affective response. Such approaches would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of visual mediation in postcolonial literary circulation.

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