



RESEARCH PAPER

Multimodal Storytelling: Exploring the Semiotic Patterns of
Narration and Focalization in "Pakistan Girl"

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ABSTRACT

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In the digital era, the use of multimodal semiotic resources has remarkably changed the narrative experiences of the readers. The writer-reader engagement in interactive media has opened new possibilities for narrative meaning construction. Focalization in digital narratives is characterized by innovative multimodal approaches that construct the narrative voice and perspectives. Focalization is also a medium of ideological meaning-making and discursive construction of identities. The current study explores how comic writers position themselves ideologically by employing the textual and visual elements in Pakistan Girl. The insights drawn from Genette's (1980) framework for narrative structure have guided the study to identify different strategies used for developing Focalization in Pakistan Girl. The narratological approach of focalization is realized in The Pakistan Girl by using verbal and non-verbal cues like frames, gutters, panels, speech, thought balloons, and other fundamental features. The findings of the study demonstrate that the fleeting time and space among panels and gutters is an extremely complex phenomenon in comic narratives. Furthermore, there are numerous strategies of narration, like narrative rhythm and the configuration of temporality, that the comic writers have used to generate cognitive and perceptual focalization in Pakistani Girl. The current study is expected to encourage future scholars to explore the use of focalization in other medium-specific typologies.

Introduction

Many comics have humorous content, and most comic strips present their characters in a funny and entertaining manner. Nevertheless, there is a common misunderstanding that all comics necessarily have comical content and humour. About the aesthetic meaning produced by comics, McCloud (1993) claims that comics are "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer". Similarly, Oxford English Dictionary defines Comics as a publication with serialized comic strips, especially for

children. Comics typically use text and images, and the integration of the two is how they are typically structured. It is impossible to create a comic book entirely composed of graphics, yet certain graphic novels offer a singular illustration of this idea.

Even though many comic books have been published worldwide, relatively little work in the area of iconical language has been done in the Pakistani context. The current research focuses on "Pakistan Girl," a comic book about superwomen inspired by European, English, and American comic novels like Wonder Lady. Pakistan Girl by Hassan Siddiqui is the first book to be produced in Pakistan, where, arguably, patriarchal ideologies resist the discourses of strong women. This is why superwomen like Malala Yousufzai, filmmaker Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy, and Muniba Mazari have received global attention abroad for their amazing work, but they are not duly recognized and appreciated by their society. Therefore, Pakistan Girl challenges the narratives of male dominance and hegemony by stylizing the emancipated version of Pakistani women.

Sara is presented in Pakistan Girl as a superwoman with abilities and covert identities similar to the superheroes. As a normal Pakistani girl, she lives an everyday life focused on her family, literature, cat, and friends. However, when she unintentionally finds her secret talents and uses them for the convenience of others, her life suddenly takes on a fresh perspective. At the beginning of the novel, Sara is living a typical life. Later, though, she feels something strange happening to her, and this is when she finds her power. She consistently helps the oppressed, poor, and helpless and tries to restore law and order in her locality.

Graphic novels and comics are considered 'flout comics' with the main focus on the word-image relation. According to Florian (2013, pg. 197), in comics, we have to rely mostly on means which are primarily based on visual narratives. Nonetheless, the multimodal storytelling method utilizes written and visual resources to make narration. Because occasionally visual panels are more significant than text and vice versa, it is impossible to balance the importance of visuals and text in comics (McCloud 1993). Siddiqui's narrative use of visuals and speech through balloons makes his book a true multimodal storytelling comic. Key features of comics such as panels, gutters, frames, speech, thought balloons, specific colors, and texture all function as the narrative economy of the Pakistan Girl. In this study, our focus will remain on exploring multimodal strategies used in Pakistan Girl for focalization in narrative discourse and how the narrative time is projected in the comics.

Literature Review

The study of comics starts formally with the well-known compositions of McCloud (1993) and Eisner (1985, 1996, 2008) for a better understanding and analysis of comics. Most of the research on comics is theoretical and descriptive and very little research has been done on comics from the empirical perspective. In 2001, Varnum and Gibbons (2001) published their essays on "The Language of Comics: Word and Image," which laid the foundation for certain further studies. Another notable study in the same year was conducted by Khordoc (2001), who examined the sound effects of image production in Asterix's comics; where she argued that during the transformation of visuals into sound effects, a reader passes through an active function to explore the various type of sound effects. Later, Walker (2003) conducted

an investigative study on corpus data of Judge Dredd comics, and his results show that speech and thought balloons are prime means of text.

Herman (2010) analyzed the multimodal depiction of "The Incredible Hulk" comic, which is a graphic novel, and the story is narrated through visual and textual descriptions. He hits two cognitive aspects of cognition in storytelling, "semio logic and story logic", the transformation of visual characters into cognitive, colors, speech style, and other details such as the passing of time. Saraceni (2003), in his book, interprets two concepts, linguistic and metalanguage, in comics. He deals with coherence, consistency, interpretation, repetition, point of view, and speech and thought balloons at the linguistics level. At the metalingual level, the narration by the writer can also take place through the monologues or speech and thought balloons delivered by the characters so that the reader knows about the direction and facts of the comic.

Representation of characters from a specific angle in panels not only specifies the status of the character but also confirms the relation of the reader with the scene; it can be close, distant, or at the same level with the character to depict his inner condition and facial expressions (Saraceni 2003). Cohn (2013) examines the multimodal interference between visuals and text and describes its four kinds in detail. Through this procedure, a single piece of a comic can be produced with a cohesive interface of images and text. Tang (2016) investigated two linguistic models of narration, one is Fowler's (1986) internal and external narration model, and the second one is Simpson's (2004) narrative categories model. He also implemented speech and thought presentation scales proposed by Leech and Short (2007). All of these models offer a framework for prose narrative writing, but their use in comics demonstrates that they can also be used to analyze and understand any graphic or comic work.

Some multimodal scholars have also focused on the ideological dimension of the comics as well. For instance, Chute (2010) wrote an essay that mainly focuses on the narration of females in comics, although it is a very less researched area. Hence, the writer provides a brief review of those works which depict women, such as "Wonder Lady (1941), Birds of Prey, Fredric Wertham's Seduction of the Innocent (1954), Birds (2003), Good Neighbours (2008-9), and Jillian Tamaki's Skim (2008)" etc. All of the above comic books focus on the narrative representation of females and the development of their characters through textual and visual strategies. Smith and Duncan (2017) proposed in their book "Power of Comics" formal restrictions for comic books such as spatial limitations, reproduction technologies, unrealistic images, limited capacity to control the reader, etc. (see Smith and Duncan 2017). Namhata (2021) executed a study on comic strips produced by Shri Narayan Debnath in printed images; mainly, the study investigates the formal perspectives of stylistics in Indian comics; further, it explores the key aspects that have caught viewers' attraction for five decades. The researcher interprets that a suitable combination of creativity and informal devices in a specific narration provides extra attraction, challenge, advantage, and development of reading habits in upcoming generations.

Material and Methods

The current study applies the qualitative approach to describe the multimodal representation, focalization, and narrative time in 'Pakistan Girl'. This comic book by

Hassan Siddiqui (2017) is considered the first-ever Pakistani comic book about a superwoman. A purposive sampling technique was used to select the sample as the main focus of researchers is to bring into the limelight the comics and upcoming trends related to women's empowerment in the socio-cultural context of Pakistan. Data for the recent research is collected from that book; with time, Pakistan Girl versions are updated, but the current study deals with those panels which are included in the version of 2017.

Theoretical Framework

In the late 1960s, narratology was established as a proper discipline of narration and influenced by the structuralist linguistics approach to recognize the key aspects of narrative and its functioning. Gérard Genette, a French literary scholar, explored in his study *Narrative Discourse* ("Discours du récit: Essai de methode", 1972) and identified the narrative strategies that are mostly used for developing the narrative discourse. In Genette's (1980) structuralist model of narrative discourse, there are four narrative categories: narrative mood, narrative instance, narrative level, and narrative time which have many subcomponents and elements (see Marchand, 2021; Malik et al. 2020). Genette's (1980) model was not originally presented to explain the narrative discourses of multimodal comics. Considering the limitations of Genette's (1980) narrative model, Mikonnen (2015) has proposed his approach for analyzing focalization and time in multimodal media. Genette (1980), in his explanation of focalization, focuses on the visual connotation, cognitive, ideological, and emotive aspects of narration. On the other hand, Mikonnen (2015) believes that focalization has a cognitive dimension and considers that it allows the reader to evaluate the book from a specific perspective and angle. The current study draws insights from these two frameworks and dominantly follows Mikonnen's (2015) approach to achieve the research objectives. The current study explores two aspects of narrative structure, first is the representation of space as time through the shape and size of panels and gutters, and the second is focalization within the context of the basic techniques proposed for comic literature.

Results and Discussion

The form is a main systematic procedure of representation of "time as space" in a comic or any graphic piece of art (Chute & DeKoven 2006). So, the narratological approaches in comics, particularly transactions with the spatial organization of the pages in a comic book. For a better presentation of time, the primary units of a comic must be defined so that it can be further analyzed for narration. Usually, panels are considered the smallest unit of analysis (Groensteen 2007, pg. 24-25). According to Groensteen panel can be defined as "*In its habitual configuration, the panel is presented as a portion of space isolated by blank spaces and enclosed by a frame that ensures its integrity*".

Since comics are not simply made up of panels but also static images, each picture in a comic might represent a dream, an action, an idea, or a wish that is then depicted in various panels to compose a narrative. Further information provided by frames, gutters, and balloons functions as a fundamental content provider for narration because comics deal more with "*what is represented and what is not visible on the page*" (Chute 2008, pg. 455), so readers or viewers have to read between the panels to fill the gap of gutters for understanding the narration (Postema, 2013). According

to Lefèvre (2011), “the more distinct the content of adjacent panels, the more difficult it will be for readers to make sense of a panel sequence” (pg. 29). As scholars have observed that the fleeting time among panels is an extremely complex phenomenon and sometimes it becomes impossible to identify the vital position and functioning of ellipses in the narration of a story even though they are part of every panel and gutter. According to Genette (1980), ellipses hold two types, implicit deals with an indefinite period while explicit with a definite amount of time among scenes (pg.106).

As we consider Figure #1, which follows two scenes from Pakistan Girl and shows the implicit ellipsis because the amount of time is indefinite in these two scenes from the top left of the frame, the panel, which consists of an image of a plane cannot be linked with the bottom left panel showing the protagonist, Sara, of Pakistan Girl hitting the dacoits. Things further become ambiguous because the implicit ellipsis exposes that there is no hint or any sign which shows which scene occurred before or later. After all, both scenes are kept together due to the theme of resemblance, which is the heroism of ‘Pakistan Girl’.

On the other hand, the explicit ellipsis can also be noted in Figure #2, which is given on two pages, showing the sequence of two scenes with the progression of the story. Panels are given with ellipsis, and the reader must make an effort to understand the narrative progression. On the left page, the topmost panel shows Pakistan Girl taking her breakfast before leaving for school. The other panels on these pages represent a separate event in which we find how a common schoolgirl turns out to be a superwoman helping people and police in apprehending dacoits. These panels were also the part of the Figure # 1 as well. Genette (1980) considers this as a strategy of recapitulation that allows narrator to repeat an event, image, theme, or motif.



Figure # 01, Implicit Ellipsis in Pakistan Girl (2017)



Figure # 02, Explicit Ellipsis in Pakistan Girl (2017)

Furthermore, in the Figure # 2, the interdiscursivity of the identity of a school-girl and a superwoman is quite remarkably presented. This interdiscursive representation of Sara presents a counter-narrative to the normative role of women in Pakistani society. Notice that in the top panel on the left, the mother of Pakistan Girl is stereotypically presented as she is busy preparing food. Her role is sharply in contrast with Pakistan Girl as a superwoman.

Though there is an ellipsis, a reader can comprehensively understand the whole plot and story because all the panels are linked in a sequence and take place in a definite period. Furthermore, all the pages, gutters, panels, and frames are in colorful, attractive, and catchy, as in newly album type, to show the adventurous story and resemblance in the panel to represent various temporal and spatial perspectives of narration. Usually, in graphic and comic books, such textual resources are used minimally, and the cues for the spatio-temporal progression depend mostly on the images and the arrangement of panels; time is depicted through the single shifting of panels. It is not only the images that develop the focalization, but the sequences of the panels also direct the perspective in narration.

Panels can be displayed through various strategies because the degree of the narration is greatly influenced by the specific positioning of panels on pages. The bottom-left corner of the panel and the bottom-right corner is the most significant positions because these places bring forth the temporal dimensions of narration. As in Figure # 2, the bottom-line panels show the end of the scene because the robbers have been arrested. Gutters separate panels; sometimes, these gutters get more importance due to their narrative significance than panels. A single page or a double page are both units of comic books, but the double page is considered the “pertinent unit” in comics (Groensteen 2007, pg. 35). On a double page, readers can clearly look at the space given in panels. Therefore, writers in that position apply a spatiotemporal path.

Figure # 3 shows the protagonist of Pakistan Girl, Sara, helping a lady whom some people threaten. At the top left panel, Sara observes this event, and her

expressions change. Her eyes are shown in the three trimmed panels at the bottom left to represent her surprise and anger. All three panels express different emotions of Sara. This narrative approach produces dramatic tension in the upcoming panels and creates a sense of suspense at the end of a page which will be released with the turn of the page.

Variations in the size of panels can be observed in the full-page panels. Full-page panels are used at the beginning and the end to provide an overview of the story. Secondly, some pages follow many panels, which slows down the narrative rhythm. This strategy is called 'pause' by Genette (1980), and is quite common in fictional discourse. Pause is an effective technique in comics as it may slow the reading process and give the reader time to comprehend the narrative progression.



Figure # 03 Close Narrative Rhythm in the Pakistan Girl (2017)

The vectorization strategy has also been applied to Pakistan Girl, highlighting the narrative elements in Figure 3. Vectorization is usually employed to represent the forward motion by using objects, lines, and characters in panels for a specific direction for the notion of time passing. Although the comic narration consists of static images through paneling, zooming, and vectorization for time representation, these still visuals are not a proper way to tell a story because it is more suitable for the inducement of a story (Groensteen 2007; Postema 2013).

Configurations of Temporality

Paul Ricoeur (2004) defines "temporality to be that structure of existence that reaches language in narrativity and narrativity to be the language structure that has temporality as its ultimate referent" (pg. 327). According to Genette (1980), time is mostly not included in the narrative structure; readers have to develop the temporal dimensions through the narration of the story as it has been constructed into the text (pg. 33). And the plot is the main feature to achieve the configuration of temporality.

Usually, the plot organizes the events of the story in narration due to their causality (Forster 2005). Nevertheless, according to Ricoeur (2004), a narrative consists of two main aspects, i.e., chronological and non-chronological. The chronological dimension the 'episodic dimension' and the non-chronological dimension is the 'configurational dimension', which is responsible for connecting and

joining the dispersed events (pg. 335). According to this concept, in Pakistan Girl sequence of panels is applied to show the events in an episodic dimension, and the plot is the arrangement of these sequenced panels into series with the implementation of principles of braiding.

This technique is applied to convey to the reader that he refocuses on the last panel by repeating motifs, frames, angels, colors, and body postures to develop a link between presential and absentia. The book's opening and closing sequence provides a good example of the braiding effect and configurational dimension of narration in the plot (Figure 4). Both pages follow a full frame panel in the same sequence with the still image of heroin in the center. The first sequence opens with the opening of the book, where two panels can be identified with different backgrounds and colors representing the two identical identities of the protagonist. However, the other panel is shown at the end of the story, where only one identity is portrayed because her journey from an ordinary girl to Pakistan Girl has come to an end, and her transformation has been completed.

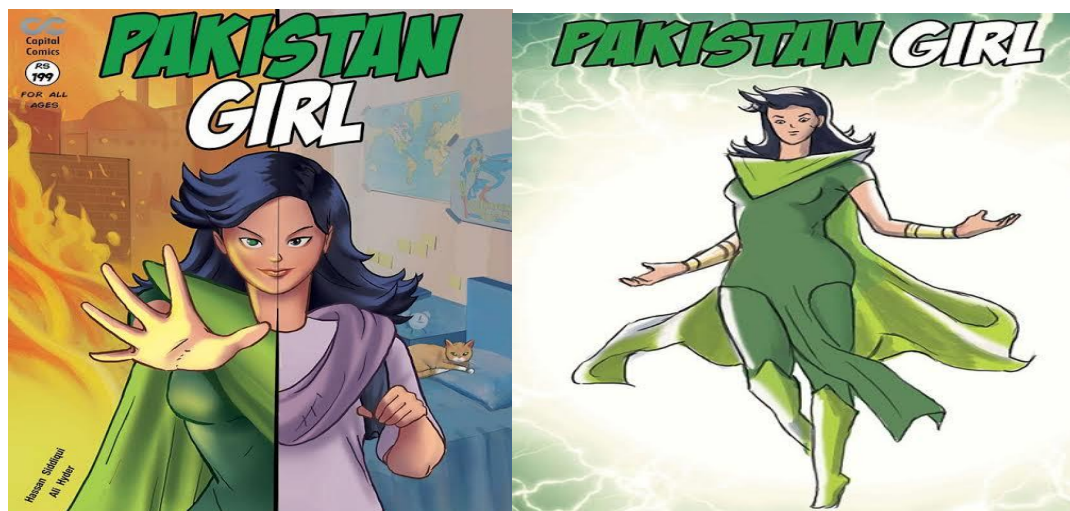


Figure # 04 Opening and Closing Sequence of the Pakistan Girl (2017)

Focalization

Gerard Genette (1980), in his book, guides his reader to not “*confuse the two instances of the focalizing and the narrating*” (pg. 246) while reading a narration because he considers the reader responsible for identifying “*who sees and who speaks*”. In comic or graphic books, it is usually not difficult to recognize the narrating stance because the narrator decides the selection and arrangement of panels in a series. Through the implementation of the configurational dimension narrator’s status becomes very explicit. According to Genette, focalization deals with the functions of visual experiences and excludes the meaning-making process from the narration (Horstkotte & Pedri 2011). Basically, focalization in comic and graphic novels is divided into two types, i.e., cognitive and perceptual focalization. Where cognitive focalization, according to Mikkonen (2015), refers to the cognitive access the viewer has to the perspective of the character in the image, and perceptual focalization is determined by the viewer’s interpretation of the spatial perception like distance, angle, etc., from the image (Groensteen 2010).

Character-bound Focalization (Internal Focalization)

In character-bound focalization, the reader or viewer visualizes the images from the actor or character's eyes through the lens of focalization. In the language of film, it is labeled as the first-person shot, and in *Pakistan Girl* it can be experienced in Figures 2 and 3. As in these figures, Sara is a focal person in the bottom left and top right panels, and in the upcoming panels, her cognitive inner self is depicted through her attitude and actions. As Horstkotte and Pedri (2011) consider that "*the focalizer does not have to coincide with the consciousness being presented*" (pg. 335). As in the scenes represented in Figures 2 and 3, all the panels' arrangements declare not only the cognition of heroin but also her caring attitude towards her family and the social settings.

Non-character-bound Focalization (External Focalization):

Non-character-bound focalization does not deal with or from the character's perspective. It deals with the cognitive focalization of the explicit narrator and brings it to the surface level, as in the first four top panels of Figure 1. But Mikkonen (2015) considers such focalization ambiguous and intrusion from an external focalization (pg. 313). It can be further observed in Figure 4 where the focalizer does not correspond with any character and the selection and shift of different colors in the background of the opening and closing sequence panels of the book function as narrative markers of focalization. In such cases, the viewer develops an understanding from the colors and depictions of the protagonist that these full frames disclose the journey from beginning to end.

Conclusion

Although the comics genre is quite popular in European countries, In South Asian contexts, especially in Pakistan, comics do not enjoy a large readership. Through the medium-specific approach, the current study performs the narratological analysis of the comic book *Pakistan Girl* (2017) to better understand focalization and ideological perspectives through multimodal storytelling. Scholars have claimed for the last two decades that comics and visual art can be comprehended through the representation of narrative time and focalization through these medium-specific devices (Mikkonen, 2008; pg. 319). Usually, the narration of time through space is a common device implemented in comics and graphic novels, as it has been adopted successfully in *Pakistan Girl*. Many verbal and visual resources used in *Pakistan Girl*, such as panels, frames, gutters, size, and colors, play their role in developing the story and focalization. The use of explicit ellipses in comics is an incredibly complex phenomenon, as understanding the shifting spatiotemporal features across panels and gutters is quite challenging. In *Pakistan Girl*, numerous narration techniques have been used, such as close narrative rhythm, temporal arrangement, and opening and closing sequences, to achieve the required identification of a woman from an ideological perspective. Ordering events in panels is suitable for creating desired emotive effects and narrative progression. The complete sequence of the actions can be widely seen through the implication of these images, which are the outcome of plot development and move toward the configurational dimension of narration. Through the implementation of this specific dimension, it becomes easy for the viewers to comprehend the story in a better way. The study discusses focalization from two perspectives, i.e., cognitive and persecutive

focalization. Multimodal storytelling paves the way for the advancement of multiple sorts of focalizations at the narrative level in *Pakistan Girl*, normally facilitated by various visual and verbal resources. Through its distinctive combination of visual and verbal tactics in narrative discourse, multimodal storytelling generates the focalization that authenticates the presence of medium-specific typology. *Pakistan Girl* is a comic of a unique combination of visual and verbal resources; however, due to the study's limited scope, the researchers have focused only on the representation of the focalization and narrative time in the said comic. Future research is expected to focus on the types of graphic genres to explore the possibilities of meaning-making in multimodal media.

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