

Lines, Shapes, and Colours Can Alter the Feel of A Story: A Reading of “The Heart and the Bottle” And “The Why-Why Girl”

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Abstract

Picturebooks are a powerful genre within children's literature, as they combine text and visuals, which deeply impact young readers. These books not only provide pleasure and aesthetic experiences but also help to expand children's imaginations. Molly Bang in her seminal text ‘Picture This: How Pictures Work’ (1991) delves into the intricacies of how we interpret visual elements like shape, colour, size, and composition, and the emotional impact they carry. This paper is a brief attempt to explore the application of Bang’s insights along with Moebius’s ideas in picturebooks like “The Why-Why Girl” (2003) by Mahasweta Devi (and illustrated by Kanyaka Kini) and “The Heart and the Bottle” (2010) by Oliver Jeffers.

Keywords: children, colours, meaning-making, picturebooks.

Introduction

Picturebooks are a powerful genre within children's literature, as they combine text and visuals, which deeply impact young readers. These books not only provide pleasure and aesthetic experiences but also help to expand children's imaginations. By engaging with picturebooks, young readers learn to interpret and make sense of the world around them, while also gaining awareness of power dynamics, equity, and social justice issues.

One of the key strengths of picturebooks is their ability to present alternative childhoods and perspectives. Through the visual representation of diverse characters and settings, children are encouraged to think critically about societal norms and values. This process of (re)imagining allows young readers to envision a more just and equitable world, where everyone is valued and respected.

In essence, picturebooks act as a sliding door for young readers, opening up new possibilities and ways of thinking. By engaging with these books, children are empowered to challenge existing narratives and envision a world where fairness and equality are at the forefront. Overall, picturebooks play a crucial role in shaping the minds of young readers and inspiring them to strive for a better future.

However, to fully recognise the transformative power of picturebooks it is important to explore the relationship between words and images. According to Nodelman (1988), the coexistence of visual and verbal storytelling in a single picturebook requires separate readings before combining them. The words and images in a picturebook both enhance and constrain one another, altering their meanings and creating a more immersive reading experience. Nodelman observes that the relationship between words and images in a picturebook involves not only collaboration and enhancement but also irony, where discrepancies

between the two allow for multiple interpretations and the creation of meaning. Similarly, Molly Bang in her seminal text 'Picture This: How Pictures Work' (1991) delves into the intricacies of how we interpret visual elements like shape, colour, size, and composition, and the emotional impact they carry. According to Bang, our perception of images is deeply rooted in our view of them as extensions of reality. She argues that we make "sense of images by drawing on existing knowledge and experience."

However, the process behind this 'making of meaning' in picturebooks, has remained an understudied area of research in India. This paper is a brief attempt to explore the application of Bang's insights along with Moebius's ideas in picturebooks like "The Why-Why Girl" (2003) by Mahasweta Devi (and illustrated by Kanyaka Kini) and "The Heart and the Bottle" (2010) by Oliver Jeffers.

Analysis

"The Heart and the Bottle" is a poignant tale of loss and healing, centred around a young child who experiences the trauma of losing a close paternal figure. The child's decision to 'put her heart in a bottle' is a powerful metaphor that resonates with readers on multiple levels. It is only as the child grows up that she is able to finally take her heart out of the bottle and heal from her pain.

William Moebius (1986) has discussed the role of images in children's texts, noting that they can either reinforce the story as conveyed in words or suggest additional storylines and subplots. In the case of "The Heart and the Bottle", the absence of any mention of the paternal figure in the text itself is significant. It is through visual cues, such as the empty chair and the use of colder, darker shades of blue, that the reader is able to infer the presence and subsequent absence of the paternal figure.

The illustrations in the book play a crucial role in conveying the story's emotional depth. The close relationship between the young girl and the paternal figure is depicted on the titular page, but as the story progresses, a sense of eeriness and distance creeps in. The contrast between the bright red of the girl and the colder tones of her surroundings serves to highlight her isolation and grief. The first spread (Fig.1) itself sees the young girl in a bright red which makes her a warm, familiar character but also focuses the reader's attention on the contrast between her and her surroundings.



Fig.1

The father figure almost seems to merge into the landscape, with the same colour palette being used for him and the trees (shades of brown). Moebius and Bang have also suggested that the placement and size of objects alter the feel of the narrative. The positioning of the girl in the foreground, yet distanced from both the forest and the paternal figure, conveys a sense of desolation. Her petite stature in contrast to the towering trees of the forest creates a feeling of intimidation and unfamiliarity, heightened by the dark hues

of the surroundings. Bang's principle, "The larger an object is in a picture the stronger it feels" is replicated here. A sense of foreboding is evident in the picture.



Fig.2

The next spread in the story almost seems to move from right to left, with the focus being on the bright red chair and the figure sitting in it (Fig.2). He becomes the source of all the curiosity and wonderment the child experiences, as proved by the accompanying red colour of the books. The red colour symbolises warmth and security within the domestic setting, enhancing the sense of comfort and familiarity. The play of sunlight and shadows around the figure adds a halo effect, emphasising their importance in the child's world.



Fig.3



Fig.4

The next few pages again present the foreboding sense, with cooler shades, depicting stormy weather and nighttime (Fig.4). ‘Distance’ is a very real visual motif: depicted through the sea, and the far-off cliff, all giving a certain depth to the picture. The positioning of the two bodies in the third spread (stargazing at night) seems to resemble the burying of the dead, a morbid image (Fig.3). Thus, the portrayal of isolation in these pages leaves the reader feeling adrift in a vast, unfamiliar landscape. It is only the protagonist who serves as the anchor to a sense of familiarity amidst the overwhelming solitude.



Fig.5

The once familiar landscape is also abruptly taken away, leaving the girl stranded in a white space where she encounters the empty chair (Fig.5). The chair stands out in this blank environment, the bright red colour serving as a stark reminder of what is absent. As Bang has theorised, “vertical shapes rebel against the Earth’s gravity”, reaching for the heavens. The chair too is drawn as a vertical shape, that too a giant one, dwarfing the girl in front (Fig.6).

**Fig.6****Fig.7**

The constant play with the colours 'blue' and 'red' in the following pages also hints at the loss and the trauma that the girl is going through. As she is growing, landscapes exist only in thought bubbles. It is only when she meets another young girl, who is also curious about the world that she regains her wonderment, and the landscapes return to our story. Beginning as a vague desolate motif, the landscape by the end of the story becomes the thread by which the girl hangs on to her childhood sense of wonderment (Fig.7).

The Why-Why Girl

'The Why-Why Girl' by Mahasweta Devi is a captivating Indian picturebook that follows the story of Moyna, a curious tribal girl who loves to ask questions. The book's use of gradient shades and white-coloured patterns (instead of solid colours) within objects brings a unique and lively perspective to seemingly inanimate objects (plants, trees etc.), emphasising their significance in Moyna's forest-dwelling life.

In Moebius's approach to picturebooks through 'Design-as-Communication', the text design too is a part of the illustration. In this *The Why-Why Girl* the enlargement and the curvature of the questions by Moyna are distinctly visible. The cover page of the book features the titular phrase positioned above a simple

girl's head. As Mobieus has demonstrated, this serves as a hermeneutic code, prompting readers to question and seek explanations for story elements. This, in turn, encourages readers to continue turning the pages to uncover the meaning behind the imagery.

“But why?”

Does he ever thank me? Why should I?”

Fig.8

The recurring motif of curving questions in the book adds emotional tension to the text (Fig.8). Unlike the other words placed with a horizontal base, the curving questions create a unique dynamic that enhances the overall impact of the narrative. Thus, herein we see Bang’s principle of the ‘Diagonal’ playing out.



Fig.9 (a,b,c)

This principle can also be observed in the spreads wherever Moyna is thinking or talking about the labour she has to do for the ‘savarna’, upper caste/class people of the village. Being a young child, the labour expected out of her is unfair on numerous levels, creating her angst and tension which has been particularly brought out in between the diagonal, wavy lines of her imagination. This emotional angst within the diagonal lines is juxtaposed to the perpendicular frame in which the character of her mother is placed: depicting a passive acceptance of suffering by the latter (Fig.9 a & b)). The same spread of diagonal lines is then imitated on the last page where the diagonal framework of Moyna’s imagination is visible but instead of the thoughts of labour, the thoughts of her and those of her proteges’ are consumed with questions and knowledge of the world, depicted by the stars dominating the page (Fig.9 c).

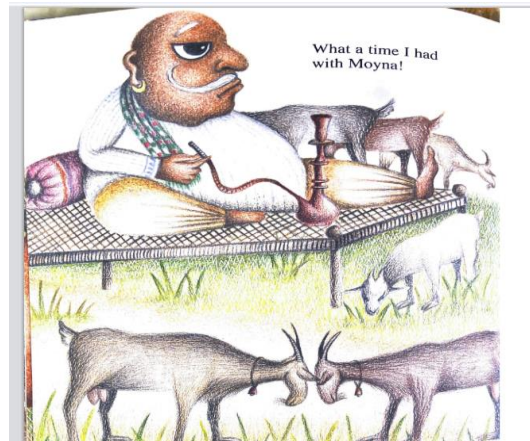


Fig.10

The position of the upper-caste *Savarna* characters versus Moyna and her tribe who have to suffer can be seen visually iterated in the pages. According to another one of Bang's principles, "The upper half of a picture is a place of freedom, happiness, and power." Thus, the placement of the Babu and his son in the upper half is a symbol of his comfortable power (Fig.10). Initially, his power and even freedom are out of Moyna's reach, until she decides to seize it for herself.

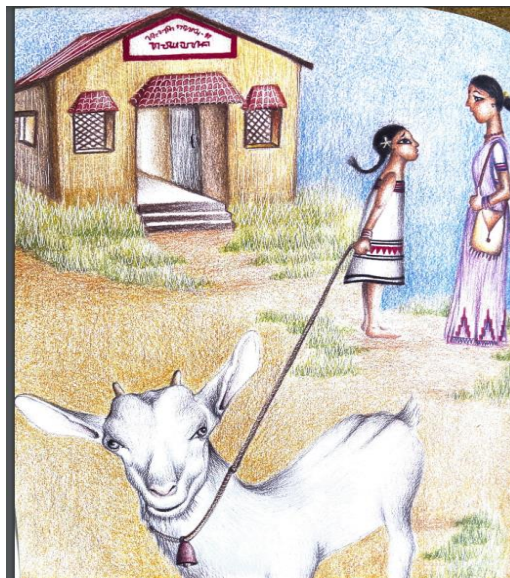


Fig.11

Moyna wrests this power by demanding her right to study. In the spread which depicts her arguing with her teacher about the same, the goat has been tactfully placed at the forefront, larger than either of the figures or the school in the background (Fig.11). A rendition of Bang's principle can be observed here: "The larger an object is in a picture, the stronger it feels". The activity of herding the goats which Moyna has to undertake because of her caste and class location predominates her life and education is pushed to the periphery for communities like hers.

Conclusion

Thus, the illustrations of picture books are not simply beautiful artworks, they rather have a logic behind them causing the reader to feel deep emotions within the two dimensions of the pages.

When interpreting visual texts, it is important to recognise that our understanding is shaped by our linguistic codes, cultural context, lived experiences, and previous knowledge. Art objects and images do

not exist in isolation, and our interpretations are influenced by our perspectives. Therefore, it is essential to consider the multiple layers of meaning that can be attributed to any visual text and to approach the analysis with an awareness of our own biases and influences.

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