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Research Paper

Transmodal Meaning-Making: Unraveling Transcultural Reception and Interpretation

Nosheen Irshad¹ & Muhammad Yousaf²

¹Corresponding author, Department of Translation and Interpretation, Faculty of Languages, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan; nosheen.irshad@numl.edu.pk

²Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan; myousaf@numl.edu.pk

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Abstract

This research aimed to investigate how children (aged 8 to 12 years) interpret and understand narratives depicting a foreign culture. The sample comprises narratives written in English by popular contemporary Pakistani writers, ensuring a representation of Pakistani culture. Using a deductive coding technique and a thematic analytical approach, data from 10 individual semistructured interviews were analyzed. Participants' profiles were crafted, taking into account demographic factors that could influence their interpretation, such as cultural, ethnic, religious, or linguistic backgrounds. The interviews were video/audiotaped, transcribed, and subsequently coded to identify relevant themes. Findings reveal that transmodal communication, intertwining visual and verbal modes, facilitates the conveyance of cultural concepts across diverse spaces. Material objects and the decentering of human characters played central roles in enriching children's understanding of the narratives. Moreover, the study highlights how differing cultural contexts influence the participants' interpretations, fostering cross-cultural awareness and empathy. The study underscores the importance of encouraging open dialogue and embracing diversity to cultivate empathetic and culturally sensitive individuals in our increasingly interconnected world.

Keywords: Transmodalities; Transcultural Communication; Children Literature; Global Empathy.

1. Introduction

Children's literature, characterized by easily comprehensible narratives and vivid illustrations, has long served as a fundamental instrument for imparting diverse pedagogical insights. The cognitive framework through which a child apprehends the world is fundamentally influenced and fashioned by the literary material encountered during their formative years (Hunt, 2006). Such literary works acquaint them with abstract notions and inherent principles that may otherwise diminish with the passage of time (Jarvin, 2015). The contemporary epoch of globalization is emblematic of substantial sociopolitical transformations, instigating the disintegration of conventional societal constructs, encompassing intensified destitution, disparity, and familial transience. This transnational mobility has predominantly engendered assimilation within the overarching transcultural milieu, replacing the once-entrenched and localized cultural or geographical identities. Within this milieu, children's literature imbued with universal motifs and folklore, encapsulating indigenous cultural sagacity, assumes an invaluable reservoir, availing parents and educators with a formidable tool to foster individual maturation, communal cohesion, and sustainable advancement (Pulimeno, Piscitelli, & Colazzo, 2020).

In tandem with the advent of digital technologies, multimodality has emerged as a driving force behind the globalization of children's literature. Multimodal children's literature has garnered increasing recognition as a potent instrument for fostering cultural comprehension and national identity. By encompassing a diverse array of representational modes, including text, visuals, and auditory elements, this form of literature affords young readers an engaging and accessible portal into distinct cultures and nations (Abdulrahman et al., 2020).



The majority of empirical research in the field of multimodality predominantly focuses on multimodal production and assemblage, which explores how individuals employ different modes to create representations of meaning, whether through performances or artifacts (Al-Naimat & Saidat, 2019; Flewitt, 2011; Jewitt, 2017; Lemke, 2002). However, focusing solely on design and orchestration falls short of capturing the intricacies of meaning-making in communicative interactions (Hawkins, 2018). The notion of meaning-making as encompassing reflexive productive, receptive, and negotiated interactive components, referred to as the arc of communication (Hawkins, 2021), has received limited attention in multimodality research, despite being fundamental to all forms of communication and particularly complex in transnational and transcultural communications (Early & Marchall, 2008; Lemke, 2002; Mills, 2016; Toohey et al., 2015).

Keeping this in view, the current research is focused mainly on the reception and interpretation of the selected texts across cultures and spaces. The central research questions for this study are:

1. In what ways are the semiotic resources (social, cultural, material, etc.) presented in the selected Pakistani storybooks received and their meanings negotiated across cultures and spaces?
2. What are the prominent and recurrent themes that can be derived from the interviews based on the transcultural reception of the selected texts?

To comprehensively grasp the dynamics of meaning flow and negotiation across varied cultures and modalities, we adopt the transmodal approach. This inclusive stance considers all modes of meaning-making and communication as possessing equal significance and impact. Additionally, it serves to address disparities in social positioning resulting from language hierarchies and regards diversity as an asset (Archer, 2014; Bezemer & Kress, 2016; Shipka, 2016).

2. Literature Review

Across diverse cultural contexts and geographical landscapes, children's stories have been and persistently serve as conduits for the transmission of experiential narratives, cultural practices, societal conventions, and ethical principles, concurrently fulfilling the role of providing amusement and novel perspectives to their audience (Lesnik-Oberstein, 1998). Within the framework of culturalistic perspectives, children's narratives constitute an integral facet of a distinct cultural sphere, thereby assuming the function of facilitating the cognitive navigation of children as they grapple with existential self-identification and discern their latent capacities for constructive participation in the progress of the collective (Boyd, Richerson, & Henrich, 2011).

Empirical investigations have underscored the pivotal role that children's literature assumes in shaping the discernment of cultural distinctions and the formation of national identity among its youthful audience (Galda, Liang, & Cullinan, 2016). Exposure to diverse cultural milieus and alternative perspectives via literature engenders the cultivation of empathy and reverence towards others, concurrently instilling a deeper comprehension of one's cultural heritage (Galda, Liang, & Cullinan, 2016; Gainutdinova, Mukhametzyanova, & Mukhamestshina, 2020; Reynolds, 2019). This becomes especially consequential within the context of an increasingly interconnected global society that values cultural diversity, where children are navigating a world that is more intricately interwoven than ever before (Carter et al., 2019).

Multimodal children's literature assumes a vital role as a cultural and national conduit, forging connections between young readers and disparate cultures and nations, thereby engendering a collective comprehension of humanity (Cullinan & Galda, 2002). By presenting varied cultural milieus and nations in a favorable and approachable light, children's literature wields the capacity to foster cultural understanding while simultaneously dismantling cultural barriers and dispelling stereotypes (Cullinan & Galda, 2002).

Existing scholarship on multimodality traditionally views modes as coexisting and interdependent components (Murphy, 2012). Kress puts forth a comprehensive definition of modes as socially constructed and culturally dependent semiotic resources (Kress, 2017). This inclusive definition acknowledges the role of technology-mediated communication and encompasses a wider range of multimodal expressions that were previously overlooked. Nonetheless, numerous complexities and challenges still remain unresolved.

In light of these considerations, scholars in the field have introduced the concept of transmodalities to further extend the understanding of multimodality, accounting for the nuances and intricacies of communication across diverse

cultures, borders, and spaces (Hawkins, 2021; Newfield, 2017). It is important to emphasize that the concept of transmodalities does not negate the significance of the multimodal perspective in communicative analysis. Rather, it builds upon multimodality as a foundational framework to explore and elucidate the fluid and dynamic processes of communication witnessed in the contemporary world (Hawkins, 2018).

2.1. Transmodalities: The Theory in Focus

The notion of transmodalities acknowledges the intricate interplay and interconnections between diverse modes of communication that contribute to the formation of multimodal artifacts. It further underscores the need to move beyond conventional mode categories and consider how these resources are enmeshed and influenced by specific contexts, temporal and spatial trajectories, and mobility. Stornaiuolo, Smith, and Phillips (2016) stress the significance of attending to the intermingling and assembly of different phenomena in emergent configurations, rather than perceiving them as isolated entities. However, transmodalities encompass more than localized interactions within a specific context. It encompasses the movements and trajectories of semiotic resources across various borders and contexts, encompassing local, translocal, and transnational spaces (Brandt & Clinton, 2002; Hawkins, 2014). The mobility of semiotic resources and material objects across diverse contexts and communities plays a crucial role in the meaning-making processes they facilitate. These resources traverse and transcend boundaries, contributing to the dynamic and fluid nature of communication and signification.

According to Hawkins (2021), transmodal communication encompasses not only the interplay of multiple modes but also the interrelationship between these modes and the contextual backdrop within which communication takes place. This relationship is often intricate, involving a multitude of factors such as cultural, historical, and situational elements that shape the way meaning is constructed through the interplay of diverse modes (Govender, 2020). Li and Hawkins (2020) argue that transmodal communication is not simply an additive process of combining modes, but rather entails a dynamic and intricate weaving of multiple modes. For instance, in the realm of children's literature, the utilization of images and other modes of representation can augment the cultural or national dimensions of the text, while also establishing intricate connections between the different modes, the context, and the intended audience (Horner, Selfe, & Lockridge, 2015; Tomlinson, 2015).

In this study, the analysis focuses on the communicative practices found in multimodal children's stories, specifically examining their narrative structures. Taking a transmodal perspective, the study seeks to situate these multimodal texts within the context of contemporary communication and material fluidity that transcends borders. The existing literature on multimodal children's narratives supports and aligns with the transmodal approach, highlighting the presence of multiple narrative textualities within these texts and emphasizing the analytical opportunities that arise from examining them through a transmodal lens.

3. Methodology

3.1. Theoretical Framework

In this study, the theoretical and analytical model of transmodalities, as proposed by Hawkins (2018), serves as the foundational framework. Considering the increasing diversity, globalization, and digitalization that profoundly impact human relations and communication, Baker and Sangiamchit (2019) emphasize the necessity of an approach that can capture the holistic dynamism of meaning-making processes in this era, rather than isolating individual factors. The adopted framework aligns with this requirement by encompassing the broader contextual panorama, acknowledging the heightened global mobility, and signifying the new communication mobilities across spaces, contexts, and cultures through the 'trans' in transmodalities (Hawkins & Mori, 2018).

The model of transmodalities encompasses five complexities that contribute to its theory and analytical approach. The first complexity recognizes the entanglement of modes within multimodal ensembles, where specific configurations of modes by sign makers generate meanings that surpass the sum of their individual parts. The second complexity incorporates theories of new materialities, giving equal importance to semiotic resources beyond language, including time, space, and material objects. Nonhuman actors, such as material objects, hold their own semiotic weight in communication. The third complexity emphasizes the arc of communication, highlighting the significance of understanding not only the creation of multimodal ensembles but also their journey through space, time, and reception.

The fourth complexity focuses on the influence of context and culture, acknowledging that modes and modal ensembles may not be universally recognizable or effective communicative tools across different cultures. Lastly, the fifth complexity addresses transnationalism/transculturalism and power dynamics, acknowledging the impact of power, status, and positioning in shaping perceptions and sense-making processes, particularly in encounters across diverse contexts.

In view of these concepts, this study is an attempt to analyze the transcultural reception and interpretation of the selected transmodal narratives produced by Pakistani authors and representing Pakistani culture.

3.2. Sample Selection

Undoubtedly, a vast amount of multimodal children's literature is available both in digital and print formats, constituting the overall population of this study. However, to align with the research objectives, a specific set of criteria was employed for the selection of the sample. The sample was selected based on the following five criteria:

1. The narratives are specifically set in Pakistan to ensure representation of Pakistani culture.
2. The selected texts exhibit a multimodal nature, incorporating both visual and verbal elements.
3. The verbal mode used in the texts is English.
4. The texts are authored by popular contemporary Pakistani writers.
5. The selected narratives fall within the category of realistic fiction within the genre of children's literature.

Fulfilling this criteria, five multimodal children's books by four of the most popular contemporary Pakistani children's book writers have been selected as a sample for this study. The selection of these books was mainly aided by consultation with experts from the Cooperative Children's Book Center- University of Wisconsin, USA. The popularity of the selected texts was cross-verified by multiple Google searches and ratings and reviews on amazon.com. The details of the selected books are given in Table 1:

Table 1. Selection of the Books & Their Features

Book Title	Name of the Author	Name of the Illustrator	Year of Publication
King for a Day	Ruksana Khan	Christiane Kromer	2013
Night of the Moon	Hena Khan	Julie Paschkis	2008
Rani in Search of a Rainbow: A Natural Disaster Survival Tale	Shaila Abdullah	Bijan Samaddar	2014
Silly Chicken	Rukhsana Khan	Yunmee Kyong	2005
Free as a Bird	Malala Yousafzai	Lina Maslo	2018

3.2.1. Participant Readers

To examine how children from a different culture and context receive and interpret stories set in and about Pakistan, a group of ten US-based children aged between 8 to 12 years were chosen as participant readers. These selected participants, residing in Madison, Wisconsin, had no immigration history in, at least, three of their last generations. The chosen narratives were presented to each participant for reading, followed by individual semistructured interviews consisting of open-ended questions about their comprehension of the texts. To ensure comprehensive analysis, each book was read by at least two participants, resulting in a total of ten interviews. The objective was to gain insight into how children with no direct familiarity with the depicted culture and context make sense of the stories and their underlying themes.

3.2.2. Data Collection and Analysis Method

During their visit to Madison, Wisconsin, the researchers utilized convenient sampling to collect interview data. Prior to the interviews, the participants and their parents were approached and provided with an informed consent document, outlining the study's purpose, duration, and procedure. Each participant's profile was then created with a focus on demographic factors that could potentially influence their interpretation of the text, including cultural, ethnic, religious, or linguistic background. The names and identities of the participants were kept confidential throughout the process. To protect their privacy, the participants are referred to as Part1, Part2, Part3, and so on, during the analysis.

Each participant was assigned one of the stories from the selected sample and, subsequently, a single interview session was conducted. To ensure consistency and relevance to the study's objectives, an interview guide (see Appendix A) was developed to facilitate discussions on each narrative. The guide aided the researchers in eliciting information pertinent to the research purpose. All the interview sessions were recorded through video or audio means and later transcribed for analysis. For the coding process, a deductive coding technique was employed. The deductive coding technique categorizes the interview data based on predetermined themes (Saldaña, 2015). Subsequently, a descriptive thematic analysis using the phenomenological approach was conducted to gain deeper insights into the participants' experiences and perceptions.

4. Results and Discussion

Utilizing the deductive coding technique, this study has identified five main themes aligned with the complexities of transmodalities: intertwined modes, material objects and nonhuman characters, reception and negotiation, context and culture, and relations of power. The data collected from the interview sessions vividly exemplified these themes, providing intriguing insights into the meaning-making processes inherent in transmodal communication when encountering texts from unfamiliar cultures. A detailed analysis of each theme, as it emerged in the collected data, is given below:

4.1. Modes Intertwined

The analysis of the children's interviews in the selected multimodal children's stories revealed a prominent theme: the interwoven nature of visual and verbal modes in conveying the intended message. This finding was particularly significant as the reception of the stories was across different cultures and spaces, indicating that relying solely on the verbal mode seemed insufficient in effectively conveying the message.

One notable observation from the children's responses was their recognition that particular cultural concepts and ideas would not be effectively conveyed using only the verbal mode. The integration of visual elements allowed them to better understand the appearance of characters and the different ways of life portrayed in the stories. The children expressed that without the visual mode, comprehending such cultural aspects would be challenging. For example, Part5 talking about the story *Free as a Bird* (Yousafzai, 2018) noted that without pictures and illustrations:

“... I think it would be harder to understand things about culture and stuff. I would then just rely on this information that it is in Pakistan and it would be hard to understand the details.”

Interestingly, when the children were asked whether their experience would be the same if the story contained only text and no pictures, the majority responded in negation. Part6, surprised with the details of the classroom environment shown in the story *Free as a Bird* (Yousafzai, 2018) mentioned that the text lacks all the details that are important to perceive such a different classroom environment because they had never seen such schools before. They added:

“It would be hard for me to imagine the scenes without the pictures. I don't think I would be able to imagine the classroom exactly like this if there was no picture. This specific text doesn't really talk about the details of the classroom.”

Similarly, Part7, talking about the story *Rani in Search of a Rainbow* (Abdullah, 2014) said, “without these pictures in the background, it would be really difficult to understand what she looks like and the different way they live.” This, further supports the transmodal perspective, emphasizing the importance of decentralizing language and giving equal weightage to other modes in conveying meaning.

However, it is crucial to note that this emphasis on multimodality does not diminish the significance of the verbal mode. Several children pointed out that some information present in the verbal mode would be difficult to conceive if it were not included in the story. For example, in Part5, when asked to imagine their experience of reading the same story without any text and understanding it with only visual mode, they responded:

“I think it would be hard to see the problem because the problem is that girls are not allowed to go to school. I am assuming it's that red building, but I would never really know that it was a school. And like her dad is talking here I wouldn't really know what he is talking about.”

The children also recognized that certain specific details about locations or cultural references were explicitly mentioned in the text, and without them, their understanding might have been different or even inaccurate. For instance, Part8 talking about *Rani in Search of a Rainbow* (Abdullah, 2014) highlighted how the mention of "Pakistan" in the text allowed them to specify the setting, while without it, they might have guessed it to be "some area outside the US, possibly Europe or Israel." This indicates that the verbal mode also plays a crucial role in providing context and precise information that complements the visual elements. Similarly, Part3 reflecting on their interpretation of a South-Asian cultural concept of *Henna*, which was new to them, explained how the combination of both the visual and verbal modes aided their understanding of the concept.

It has been evidently observed that children relied on each mode for a specific purpose, that is, verbal mode for understanding the plot and storyline, and visual mode for comprehending cultural concepts and ideas that were alien to them. It supports the assertion that the combination of different modes enriches the overall meaning and understanding, with each mode contributing uniquely to the communication process. As such, neither mode is inherently superior; instead, they complement and enhance each other, leading to a more holistic and comprehensive reception of the stories by children across cultures and spaces.

4.2. Material Objects and Nonhuman Characters

The presence of material objects in the selected multimodal children's stories played a central role in facilitating the communication process through various modes. As discussed earlier, the emphasis on transmodal communication involves giving equal weightage to various modes and decentralizing language as the sole carrier of meaning (Canagarajah, 2018). In this context, the significance of material objects is highlighted as they take on a prominent role in conveying information and shaping the understanding of the stories (Latour, 2005).

The children's responses provided valuable insights into how material objects and environmental contexts held more significance for them than the storyline itself. When asked about what specifically stood out to them in the given stories, a notable majority of the participants mentioned background objects, cultural practices, clothing styles, appearances, and architectural elements rather than focusing on the narrative itself. This observation indicates that the material objects acted as essential visual cues that helped the children make sense of the whole situation and the cultural context portrayed in the stories. These nonhuman elements provided additional layers of information and context, enriching the transmodal communication experience.

For instance, Part1 talking about the story *King for a Day* (Khan, 2013) noted that the clothing worn by characters and the overall color palette in the illustrations stood out to them and gave them insights into the environmental conditions of the depicted location. "The bright colors worn by girls and the softer colors worn by boys" appeared very interesting to them as they compared their choice of clothing colors with that of characters in the story. They were also fascinated by the orange and yellow dominant color palette used for illustrations in the story which led them to assume that the climate might be moderate or warm, contributing to their overall understanding of the setting and the cultural practices associated with it.

Similarly, Part9 talking about the story *Silly Chicken* (Khan, 2005) inferred the weather conditions of the depicted location, specifically that it was "really, really hot," solely by examining the visual elements in the illustrations. This information was not explicitly written in the text but was effectively communicated through visual cues, showcasing the importance of material objects in conveying context and enriching the meaning-making process.

4.3. Reception and Negotiation

The analysis of the data revealed a compelling theme emphasizing that the meaning-making process continues beyond the formation, production, and assemblage of the text. Instead, the text undergoes a chain of semiosis until its reception (Brandt & Clinton, 2002). This process becomes especially intricate when the stories are received across cultural, social, and geographical borders, leading to varying transmodal chains of semiosis. As a result, the reception end of the communication arc presents multiple ways of interpretation and negotiation of meanings, particularly concerning cultural activities, objects, and environments.

The children's responses made it evident that as the stories travelled through different spaces, times, and actors, such as the researchers and participants, and were received transculturally, the interpretations and meanings associated

with the texts underwent transformations. The lens of different cultures that the readers brought to their interpretation led to intriguing ways of negotiating meanings, as they sought to understand foreign ideas through the familiar concepts within their cultural context.

The responses provided by the participant readers, further, support the idea of varying transmodal chains of semiosis. For example, Part5 noted the stark difference in gender roles portrayed in the story *Free as a Bird* (Yousafzai, 2018) compared to their cultural context, where girls have more opportunities and can attend school: "It was strange that the boys get to do anything, and the girls have to hide themselves. Here, most of the time girls get to do things and they can go to school." This observation highlights how the meaning of gender roles was negotiated and understood differently by the child due to their own cultural background and their personal experiences.

Similarly, the visual cues in the illustrations sparked recognition and connections with the children's own experiences and environments. For instance, Part4 identified similarities and differences in the clothing worn by characters, drawing comparisons to what their father wears to work but also noting the uniqueness of the hats and tunics in the story:

"This is kind of like what my dad wears to work but it is different I think, like the hats I guess. But I think this is a tunic thing, maybe not. You wouldn't really see that here."

This indicates how the child's own cultural familiarity influenced their interpretation of the visual elements.

The children also noticed resemblances between the depicted buildings and clotheslines in the story and those present in their own living environment. This connection allowed them to contextualize the setting and understand the story's cultural elements in relation to their own experiences. Part2 noticing these objects in the visual mode of the stories tried to make sense of the environment linking them to their own experience and observations:

"... the clotheslines like that are hanging, there are some around where we live too. And the buildings are kind of like apartment buildings but they look a little bit different. They are tall and some apartment buildings have like roofs that you can go on that's kind of what reminds me of them."

Part1, who had spent a few years in Thailand and therefore had an added experience of places outside of the USA, mentioned finding the characters' ethnicity and village setup in the story *King for a Day* (Khan, 2013) intriguing, and they drew comparisons to other Asian places they had seen, particularly Thailand. This response showcases how the child's cultural knowledge of other Asian cultures along with their own culture forms an overall repertoire of resources that they draw on to make sense of the new things, places, and cultures they come across. This child's repertoire of semiotic resources, being relatively broader compared to the other participants, influenced their understanding of the story's cultural context.

Another response from a participant reader, that is, Part8 further exemplifies the impact of cultural elements in shaping interpretations of multimodal texts, "I think it is really sad that the girls have to cover themselves up. I think it is not fair that girls have to cover themselves."

This response reflects a participant reader's emotional and ethical reaction to a cultural practice depicted in the story. The reader's cultural background and values lead them to empathize with the situation of the girls in the story, expressing sadness and a sense of injustice about the requirement for girls to cover themselves. Such emotions and the idea of something not being "fair" come from the worldview they have adopted living in a specific cultural context. This statement also emphasizes how the depiction of cultural practices in the story can evoke strong emotions and ethical considerations for the participant readers. The reader's interpretation is influenced by their own cultural norms and values, leading to a critical reflection on the portrayed cultural practice and its implications from their perspective.

This response, further, reinforces the idea that the reception of multimodal texts is not a passive process but an active engagement where readers bring their cultural sensitivities, emotions, and ethical frameworks to the interpretation. It illustrates how the transmodal communication process invites readers to contemplate and negotiate meanings based on their cultural backgrounds, leading to a diverse range of reactions and responses to the text's content and context.

4.4. Context and Culture

The analysis of the data revealed a significant theme concerning the difference between context and culture and its impact on children's interpretation of multimodal children's stories. In today's globalized world, communication across cultures and nations is becoming increasingly common (Baker, 2020). As mentioned in this study's introductory part, children's literature can serve as a powerful means to globalize ideas, concepts, sensitivities, and perspectives from different cultures and contexts, ultimately fostering greater acceptance and global empathy. When children from diverse cultural backgrounds and particularly from politico-economically dominant cultures encounter stories set in third-world countries or unfamiliar contexts, the differences they observe call for a (re)negotiation of meanings. The responses from the children demonstrated that the cultural contexts they were familiar with played a crucial role in helping them understand the unfamiliar ideas, concepts, and cultures portrayed in the stories. This negotiation process forms a part of the transmodal assemblage and transmodal meaning-making process (Hawkins, 2021).

The children's responses included examples of how they tried to link the cultural concepts in the stories with their own experiences and contexts. For instance, Part3 noticed similarities in the food mentioned in the story and the food they have in their own culture, making connections to what was familiar to them, "I think the food was somewhat similar. They said that they were making cupcakes, and we have them here, too."

Similarly, the depiction of family structures and holiday traditions in the story *Night of the Moon* (Khan, 2008) led Part4 to draw parallels with their own experiences. Whereas they found some similarities, they also noted aspects that were different, such as the grandparents' living arrangements, "Our relatives also visit for the holidays, or we visit them so pretty similar. But I haven't seen any family where grandparents live in the same house."

This process of (re)negotiation of meanings and attempts to understand the new culture became even more prominent as the encounter with unfamiliar cultural elements raised questions in the minds of the participant readers. They shared these questions with the interviewer, realizing that she was from the country depicted in the stories. For instance, some children were broadly familiar with the concept of being a Muslim, but they were not specifically acquainted with the Islamic state of Pakistan or its culture and language. This led them to inquire about the language used in the text and how it related to being Muslim.

Pakistani culture and identity are strongly tied to Islamic lifestyle and practices. There are several languages that are spoken in Pakistan, and Urdu is the national language of the country. However, due to its strong association with Islam, many of the Islamic supplications and phrases in Arabic are very frequently used in day-to-day conversations. Rightly capturing this dominance of Islamic lifestyle and Arabic language, all the selected stories have such phrases added to the text. Part3 asking about the Arabic phrases used in the story *Night of the Moon* (Khan, 2008) said, "Is it (foreign language used in the text) called Muslim? Or does it have a special name? It is probably some Muslim language, but I do not know the name of the language. Would this be Hebrew?"

Part7 observed traditional clothing in the illustrations and associated it with events they had seen in the news, particularly related to Ukraine. They made assumptions about the cultural background based on the clothing. These clues in both the verbal and visual modes helped the children recognize the Islamic identity of the characters and the depiction of Muslim culture broadly, which they later built on to further extend their knowledge about the particular place where the stories are set. The children's questions during the interview process reflected their curiosity and desire to understand the cultural aspects depicted in the stories. They sought clarification on language, cultural practices, and behaviors they encountered in the texts, indicating their active engagement with the transmodal encounter.

4.5. Relations of Power

During the data analysis, a significant theme was recognized regarding the interpretation and understanding of power differences and the recognition of privilege and status disparities in transcultural communication. The stories set in Pakistan, a small, developing, and somewhat underresourced country, were presented to children living in the USA. This exposure led the participant readers to identify differences in statuses, lifestyles, availability of resources, access to technology, and overall living conditions. As a result, the children assumed that the stories were either set in impoverished contexts or represented a time in the past, rather than being contemporary.

Part 2, about the story *King for a Day* (Khan, 2013) remarked, "I think it might be somewhere in the past because they don't mention much technology or any of that kind of thing. It just looks a little bit older." Similarly, Part10 expressed a similar sentiment, saying, "If I have to take a guess, I think it might be somewhere in the past because they don't have mobile phones and things like that."

The children also commented on the availability of general resources, noting that the characters in the stories didn't have cars or electric devices, leading them to conclude, "they are not very rich to get these things." Part1 even mistook the city of Lahore, presented in the story, for a village due to the limited resources depicted. When asked about the image of Pakistan they built in their minds after reading the story, the participant readers highlighted the stark differences in resources and quality of life between their context and the depicted setting. Part4 observed:

"Here we have more general resources, but these people have only enough to survive and they don't know much different. For one thing, school. I have a steady school, they obviously don't have that. They don't really have much to tell about food or water or bathrooms or beds. Maybe church. They definitely have no rights, like male and female equality."

Another child (Part5) pointed out the gender disparity in education, saying, "I have learned that most girls cannot go to any schools and get the right education."

The children also noticed the difference in the way girls were dressed in the story. Based on their own context and what they have seen and learned, they assumed and remarked that it kind of shows power deprivation and restrictions on girls. Part6 observed, "the girls are not on the rooftops and are not flying kites because they have to hide themselves from the enemy. They mentioned at the start that the father said 'it's a girl. What bad luck!' Because the girls have to hide themselves and they were worried."

This theme underscores how transcultural communication through children's stories can bring attention to power dynamics and privilege, leading to thoughtful reflections on the disparities between different contexts and cultures. The children's responses reveal their awareness of social issues and the impact of cultural contexts on people's lives, emphasizing the importance of promoting cross-cultural understanding and empathy through such literary encounters.

5. Conclusion

This study delves into the intricacies of transcultural and transmodal communication through the analysis of children's responses to multimodal stories set in a relatively small, developing, and underresourced country, Pakistan, as presented to children living in the USA. The data has been analyzed for five prominent themes deduced from the theory of transmodalities, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of transmodal communication and its impact on the interpretation and understanding of the stories.

The first theme highlighted the intertwining of visual and verbal modes in the selected multimodal children's stories, underscoring how these modes collectively convey the intended message across cultures and spaces. It has been noted that children mainly relied on the visual mode to understand and comprehend the cultural concepts while they depended on the verbal mode to understand the events in the story. The transmodal perspective, emphasizing the significance of combining all modes in communication, proved instrumental in bridging potential deficiencies that a solely verbal mode might have in conveying cultural concepts and ideas (Hawkins, 2021). The second theme emphasized the importance of material objects and the decentralization of human characters in the meaning-making process. The participants' responses indicated that material objects played a central role in facilitating transmodal communication across cultures. By focusing on nonhuman elements, children constructed a more comprehensive understanding of the stories and their cultural context. The third theme revolved around the impact of different cultural contexts on children's interpretation. As the stories transcended borders, children identified power differences, noticed disparities in lifestyles and access to resources, and reimagined the setting either in the past or as representative of impoverished contexts. Such encounters triggered (re)negotiation of meanings, fostering cross-cultural awareness and empathy (Baker & Sangiamchit, 2019). The fourth theme highlighted the children's questions and curiosity about the depicted culture and context. Transmodal encounters prompted inquiries into unfamiliar cultural practices, language, and traditions, signifying active engagement with the stories and an eagerness to learn and comprehend. Finally, the fifth theme explored how transcultural communication led children to recognize privilege and status differences. The children's perceptive observations on

gender disparities in education and power deprivation further exemplified the potential of children's literature to promote critical thinking and cultural understanding.

Overall, the study demonstrated that children's literature serves as a powerful tool for globalizing ideas, concepts, and sensitivities, fostering cross-cultural communication, empathy, and understanding (Salakhova, Sergeeva, & Bogorodskiy, 2020; Seligmen, Ernst, Gillham, Reivice, & Linkins, 2009), especially when it comes to the transfer of information from and about the minority cultures and groups towards the more dominant and advanced cultural groups, transmodal communication plays a vital role in this process by offering diverse interpretations, (re)negotiations of meanings, and reflections on power dynamics and cultural disparities. As we continue to navigate a globalized world, acknowledging the significance of transmodal communication in children's literature becomes imperative (Tang, Ho, & Putra, 2016). By promoting cultural awareness, embracing diversity, and encouraging open dialogue, we can nurture a generation of empathetic and culturally sensitive individuals who value the power of stories in fostering a more interconnected and harmonious world.

The findings from this study on transcultural communication and children's literature hold valuable implications for educationists seeking to foster cross-cultural understanding and empathy among young readers. By embracing diverse representation, fostering global empathy, and leveraging multimodal learning experiences, educators can play a pivotal role in shaping a generation of culturally sensitive and empathetic young individuals, better prepared to thrive in an increasingly interconnected world.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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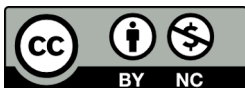
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