



Cultural Narratives in Pakistani Children's Book Illustrations: A Study of Identity and Representation

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Abstract

This academic paper will analyze the cultural narratives that are reflected in the illustrations of children's books in Pakistan, focusing on the role that these illustrations play in terms of construction and representation of cultural identity. This study observes the interaction between visual narrative and cultural identity, also shedding light on the importance of authentic representation in shaping a sense of belonging among young readers. By conducting a qualitative analysis of some of the children books and illustrated works of some prominent illustrators including Rumana Husain, Wajiha Rafay and Maria Raza: this paper seeks to find out the dominant themes and cultural aspects presented in the illustrations and how they expand children's knowledge of their own culture.

Introduction

Children's literature is very important as it influences young minds and helps them to develop a critical thinking framework. The literature embedded with themes and reflection of native culture and values help young children to develop a sense of nationality and belonging with their society. The picture books, especially the children oriented picture books can play the pivotal role of the visual learning and ingestion of culture in the vulnerable age where the visual images just complement the printed word and improve its reception. In Pakistan, where diverse cultures and various traditions coexist, stretching across different provinces including Sindh, Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan, the illustrated pictures in children's books are one of the most important medium of promoting cultural narratives. This paper examines the significance of these illustrations in the context of identity representation, the scope in which they share the realities of Pakistani society, and the concerns regarding children's understanding of their cultural heritage. The necessity to make an in-depth investigation is predetermined by the fact that lots of illustrations are either based on or are strongly influenced by Western images, which raises the question of authenticity and spiritual portrayal. The aim of this study is to identify the need of accentuating the themes and stories of ethnic culture, so that it may contribute in the formation of a stronger bond between a child and his culture. As a result, it may facilitate children to develop positive societal and cultural perceptions.

Literature Review

Representation of culture in children's books has always been an interesting area of inquiry for many scholars around the world, particularly subjected to identity formation. Nodelman (1988), suggests that illustrations in storybooks are not just for decoration but they serve as an important

tool of storytelling, through which children understand the narrative in a better way. Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson (2005), highlight the significance of storybook illustrations by stating that these images in collaboration with text convey the meaning, text alone cannot generate the emotional response that can be produced by illustrations. There is also a concern of true cultural representation in children's book illustrations, that has been brought into consideration by a number of studies. Such investigations have raised the question of authentic cultural representation, when taking the situation of Pakistani children literature into consideration. For instance, Rehmat (2024) concluded in a visual analysis of picture books published by Pakistanis, that the role of women lagged far behind than the male ones, as well as that they were predisposed to support traditional gender models. This observation is validated by the study conducted by Hazir Ullah and Skelton (2012) who stated that the patriarchal society tends to be mirrored in literature and thus perplexes the experience of children in regards to gender roles. Also, Ahmed (2021) believed that the usual imagery presented in illustrations have represented a homogenized idea of Pakistani culture, which has mostly concentrated on urban middle-class living despite disregarding rural and various cultural practices spread throughout the nation. Consequently, the stories expressed by illustrations can bring misrepresentation of the Pakistani society to young readers. Moreover, the study conducted by Yaqoob and Zubair (2012) points out the significance of the source culture in educational resources and implies that textbooks must be based on the cultural realities of the Pakistani learners to provide them with the opportunity to relate to their national identity. They stated that failure to integrate local narratives disrupts cultural identity, where students are unable to relate to the literary material. Yet, there is a gap in literature related to the role of children books illustrations and influence on cultural identity. The theory of visual grammar by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2016) offers a model of identifying the impact of visual images in projecting the meaning, whether complementing or contradicting the textual narration. This theory emphasizes the role of semiotics in illustrations, since color, composition, and symbols can effectively express cultural values and stories. The study of the visual grammar of children's book illustrations provides helpful information about the factors that shape the way how young readers perceive their culture.

Methodology

The proposed study takes an approach of a qualitative content analysis, in which several children books by prominent authors and illustrators, with varying themes published in the past two decades in Pakistan have been analyzed. The analysis will include looking at the illustrations as visual elements, such as depiction of clothing, architecture, traditions, social interactions, environmental settings, cultural images and representation of ethnic identity. Academic research ethics were observed in this study. No particular author and publisher were consulted to get any special permission to examine the book illustrations that were analyzed, since all of these books were freely available. The analysis used was done purely on the contents of the illustrations and intellectual property rights.

Discussion

Rumana Husain, Wajiha Rafay and Maria Raza are among the illustrators who have helped Pakistani literature by adding rich cultural imagery. Hussain celebrates the traditional crafts and rural life of Pakistan by adding beautifully colored and culturally charged illustrations in her book *'The Glass-Maker's Daughter'*. It glorifies local culture and art in contrast with western visual imagery. Maria Raza is a distinguished artist whose illustrations are generally lively and full of colors, mostly depict Pakistani folklore, for example *'Haseena's Dream'*, where the esteemed values of friendship and endurance are interlaced with local stories.

Rumana Husain is a famous Pakistani writer, illustrator and artist having a large body of work in children literature. She has written and illustrated more than 60 children books on behalf of different publishers but notably Oxford University Press. Her drawings serve an important purpose of making stories available and discernible to young readers of Pakistan. She takes inspiration from the natural environment, day-to-day life, and the cultural melodies of Pakistan. Using a variety of art mediums including, watercolors, poster paints, color pencils, crayons, markers, photographs, collage and digital art, Rumana Husain's books are completely drenched in Pakistani cultural traditions. Her books are educational as well as entertaining, often revolving around the subject of friendship, inclusion, relationships, environmentalism and social awareness, avoiding excessive dose of moralization.

City Tales by Rumana Husain:

'City Tales' series is a collection of children books written by Rumana Husain and illustrated by Priya Kuriyan (an Indian comic book writer, illustrator and animation filmmaker, based in Bengaluru, Karnataka). This series is published by Oxford University Press Pakistan, for the children of 4 to 6 years. It focuses on urban themes and life of children in Pakistani town settings. These books feature two main characters 'Sonya' and 'Anyu', who are sisters, navigating through city life. These characters provide relatable outlooks for young readers of Pakistan. These books use city life as a background for narration of stories that are similar to the experiences, challenges, exuberance, and circumstances of life of a person growing up in an urban atmosphere especially in cities of Pakistan. Husain's books also discuss social challenges of urban life, such as safety, environmental issues, sharing of public spaces and tolerance of diverse ethnic values in a metropolitan setting. They provide young readers with fairly realistic perspectives to find solutions and coexistence.



Figure. 1, Rumana Hussain, City Tales Series, Title pages, Oxford University Press Pakistan.

Rooted in local culture and history, Husain's stories bring native architecture, neighborhoods and traditions under the spotlight. These elements of the stories are taken much further by the polychromatic illustrations of Kuriyan, instilling an indulgence and affection in the supple minds of young audience for their culture and traditions. 'Hop on the Story truck' is the 4th book of 'City Tales' series and it continues with its mission of reflecting the sights, sounds and experiences of living in Pakistani cities. The titular 'Story truck' and its vivid illustrations pay homage to a vibrant and iconic form of folk art of decorating commercial vehicles into masterpieces on wheels. Inclusion of truck in the story and its rendering in colorful illustrations play a significant role in promoting the art form that is a living heritage in Pakistan, passed down from generation to

generation of skilled artisans. The truck art in Pakistan has been keeping the traditional techniques and themes alive in this modern world. 'Hop on the Story Truck' invites children to get onboard for a vibrant bilingual ride through the heart of the city, where the reader not only falls in love with the brightly decorated ride but also with the several stops it makes. Illustration of the truck in this book evoke the feelings of excitement, belonging and movement. Bright colors play their part in grabbing the attention of the reader and keeping a firm hold on it. Traditional motives on the vehicle stir up a deep emotional resonance and association with lively local culture.

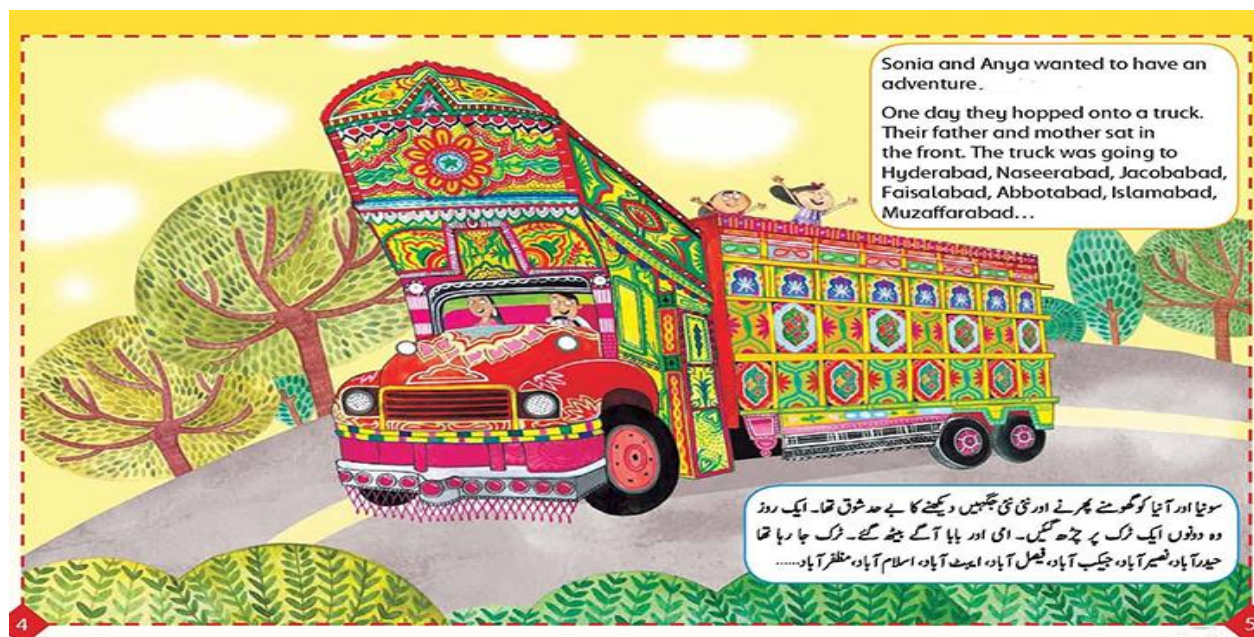


Figure. 2, Rumana Hussain, Hop on the Story Truck, City Tales Series, pg. 4 - 5, Oxford University Press Pakistan.

Gloriously illustrated modern views of the streets, buildings, cars and people make the background of the story really lively and at the same time familiar. With the help of these illustrations, readers feel the rhythm of the city with all its colors, energy and diversity, which is seamlessly brought out on every page. Illustrations by Kuriyan aid children in getting emotionally involved in the story. She has depicted life in the city seem nice and friendly by portraying the characters like those of children, vendors and strangers with positively expressive faces and body language. The Truck in the story itself gains the status of a character through not only the narrative but through visuals as well. It moves around various areas of the city carrying children into the world of their imagination, setting them on a journey of their discovery. The moving, intermingling, and random stimuli are depicted, and every station on the road of the truck becomes a place with something to look up to and increase familiarity. The characters in the illustrations represent people of all origin, occupations, and cultures, which is actually the taste of a city. This contributes to how children value learning to be aware of differences and knowing that the urban communities are the places of inclusion.



Figure 3, Rumana Hussain, Hop on the Story Truck, City Tales Series, pg. 16 - 17, Oxford University Press Pakistan.

Detailed and colorful pictures prompt a child to take time to look at every page looking for recognizable places, means of transport or even characters. This increases the sightseeing ability besides creating an interest in the actual urban life. Illustrations in *'Hop on the Story Truck'* do much more than merely serving as decoration; they are eminent to bring the urban narratives alive and become relevant to the children. They provide vivid descriptions of the sounds and scenes, diversity, and rhythms of city life that make urban places look alive and active with possibilities and people.

Village tales

Just like *'City Tales'*, *'Village tales'* is also a series of bilingual books published by the Oxford University Press Pakistan, written and illustrated by Rumana Husain. The books aim to familiarize readers (4-6 years of age) with the distinct rhythms, plainness and struggles of life in the countryside of Pakistan. The themes are centered on the life of a small girl *'Rani'*, whose adventures in a small village define the nature of a rural community and its environment.

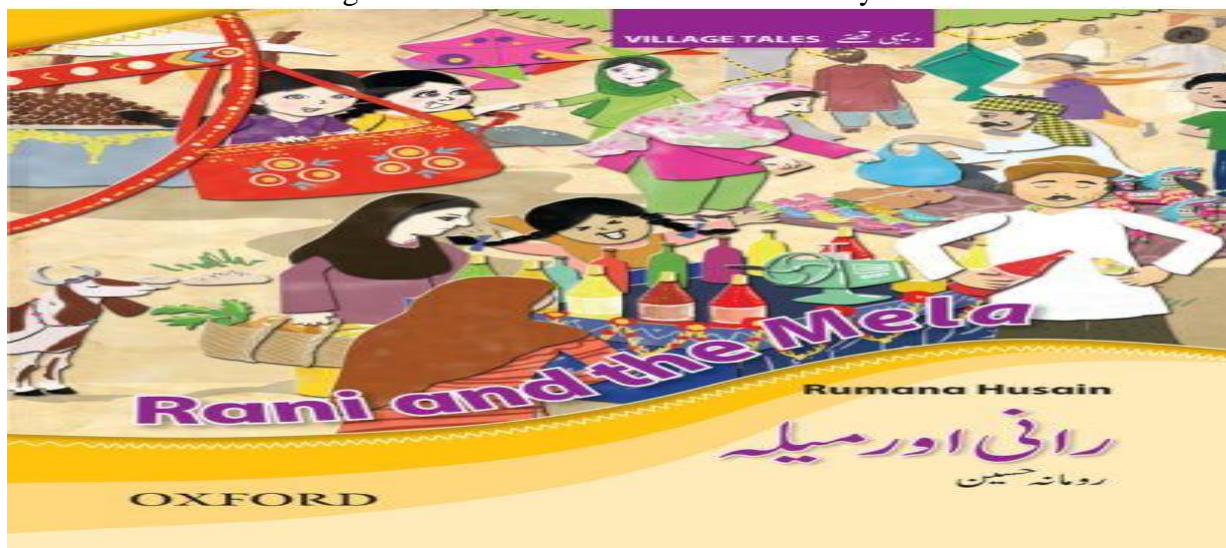


Figure 4, Rumana Hussain, Rani and the Mela, Village Tales Series, Title page, Oxford University Press Pakistan.

Mixed media techniques have been used in this series of illustrations by Husain including watercolor and pencil, also incorporating fabric applique and other traditional techniques. By using the original visual details associated with traditional rural customs and celebrations, the illustrations support the concept of rootedness, so that the readers have awareness about village life, by portraying it as a brightly colored cultural tapestry and not a stereotype.



Figure. 4, Rumana Hussain, Rani in School, Village Tales Series, Pg. 12, Oxford University Press Pakistan.

The book 'Rani in School' from 'Village Tales' series includes illustrations that provide a reflection of rural school life through the prism of a little village girl named Rani who has her first day at school. The illustrations skillfully represent various emotions and feelings a child experiences on the first day of school including excitement, nervousness, encountering new faces and presence of a kind teacher. Adding the true essence in these images are the visual elements like rural school setting, traditional classroom, children coming to school on foot, simplicity of homes and lifestyle. These elements including native rural scenery entrench the story in a cultural narrative. It is a descriptive treat to witness how illustrations complement the bi-lingual text where fun and challenges of village school life become accessible to the readers and they can imagine themselves being there with 'Rani' in her personal journey of development and adaptation. Rumana Husain has rendered these drawings in warm, earthy colors and straightforward expressive figures that reflect the innocence and social atmosphere in rural Pakistan, brimming with authenticity and emotional warmth. Rumana Husain shares a deep love for storytelling through Urdu language books. Her illustrations driven with colorful palette and likeable characters have contributed significantly towards the aesthetic of the modern Urdu children literature. Husain's art is largely inspired by the urban and rural life in Pakistan that mirrors details about local traditions, apparel, scenery and occupation. This would make sure that the children get their worldview and identities reflected in these stories. Another children's book illustrator who shares the love of reflecting cultural heritage through visual vocabulary is Wajiha Rafay, her work includes newly published children books (in Urdu) by Maqbool Books and Room to Read Pakistan. Moreover, she has illustrated the book 'Uff! Chor Kaun?' ('Thief Exposed') written by Mona

Azhar. This book illuminates the readers about a family, who is living in a new house and some small items like ribbons and socks are disappearing without a clue, but eventually found out that a crow is playfully picking up these items and hiding it in a mango tree.



Figure. 5, Wajiha Rafay, a spread from ‘Uff! Chor Kaun?’ (Thief Exposed), ITA Publications.

She has also done illustration of the books, ‘*Bulbul ka Bacha*’ (poem by Professor Qayyum Nazar) and ‘*Babli Ki Baatein*’ by Shehzad Ahmad, where she has utilized local settings filled with local landscape, traditional furniture and architecture as backdrops.



Figure.6, Wajiha Rafay, Bulbul ka Bacha (A Baby Nightingale), Title page, One Book Ahead Publications, 2009.



Figure.7, Wajihah Rafay, Bulbul ka Bacha (A Baby Nightingale), Pg. 2, One Book Ahead Publications, 2009.

Her style is usually characterized by cute, big eyed characters dressed in traditional clothes. These characters and cultural environment greatly appeal to the young audience and naturally take them to the world of imagination.

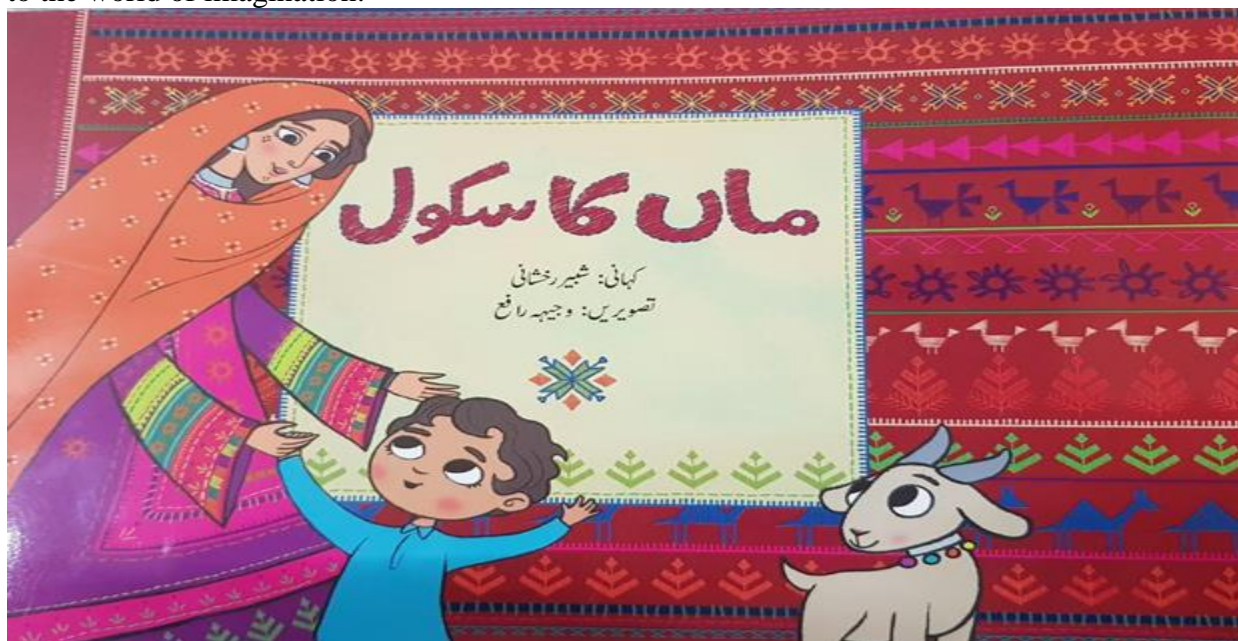


Figure. 8, Wajihah Rafay, Maa ka School (Mother's School), Title Page, ITA Publications.

The patterns and motifs drawn on clothes and draperies in Rafay's illustrations celebrate rich cultural heritage of Pakistan. She draws inspiration from ethnic embroideries of Sindhi, Punjabi, Balochi and Kashmiri culture and adeptly mirror them in her illustrations. Her depictions of everyday moments rooted in local village and family life – instill a love for Pakistani tradition and culture in the minds of young readers. Moreover, such images help children to relate themselves and their families to the characters in the stories, fostering a sense of identity and belonging.

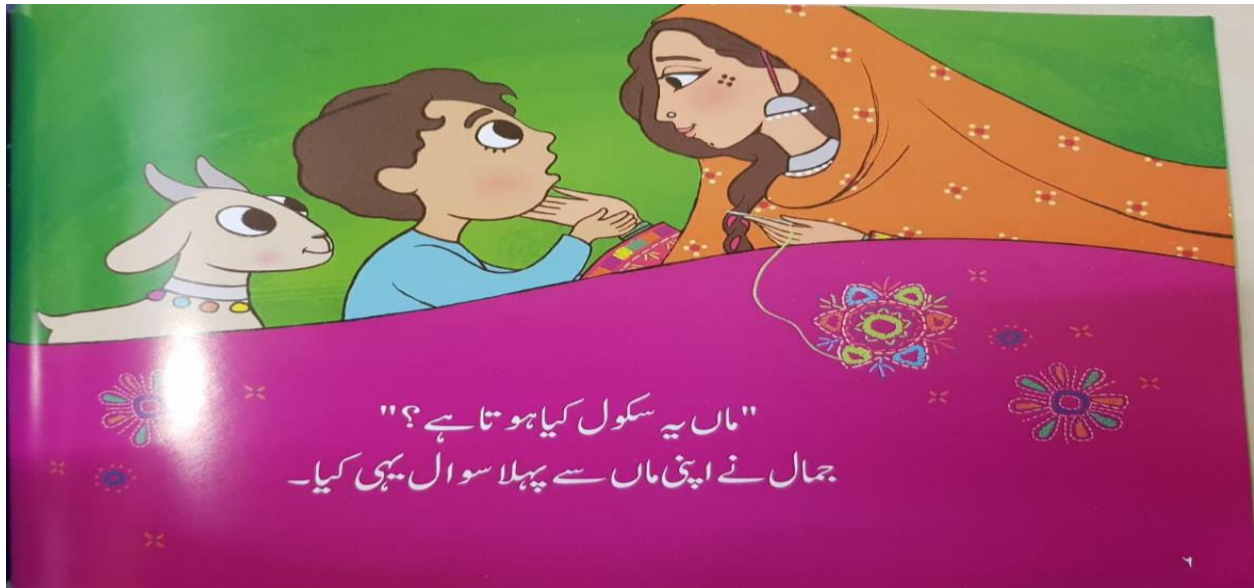


Figure.9, Wajiha Rafay, Maa ka School (Mother's School), pg. 2, ITA Publications.

From the background to apparels, the ornamental elements she utilizes are rich with cultural motifs and vibrant colors, this not only steals attention but also reminds the audience of opulent Pakistani culture. Wajiha Rafay makes wide use of somewhat child-friendly, innocent, colorful and expressive style that is suitable to support the notions of childhood inquisitiveness, and expressing the dynamics of family and village life. This qualifies her as a noted living illustrator of children books in Pakistan.



Figure.10, Wajiha Rafay, Kahan Gayein (Where did they go), Cover Page, Maqbool Books.

In the book '*Kahan Gayein*' written by Mona Azhar and published by Maqbool Books, Wajiha Rafay has shown female characters in beautiful and carefully crafted local dresses with attractive prints and embellishments, also wearing accessories like bangles and jhumkis (earrings). Her choice of colors makes the illustrations even more appealing to the young girls as they see their own reflection in them and thus the story becomes more relatable.

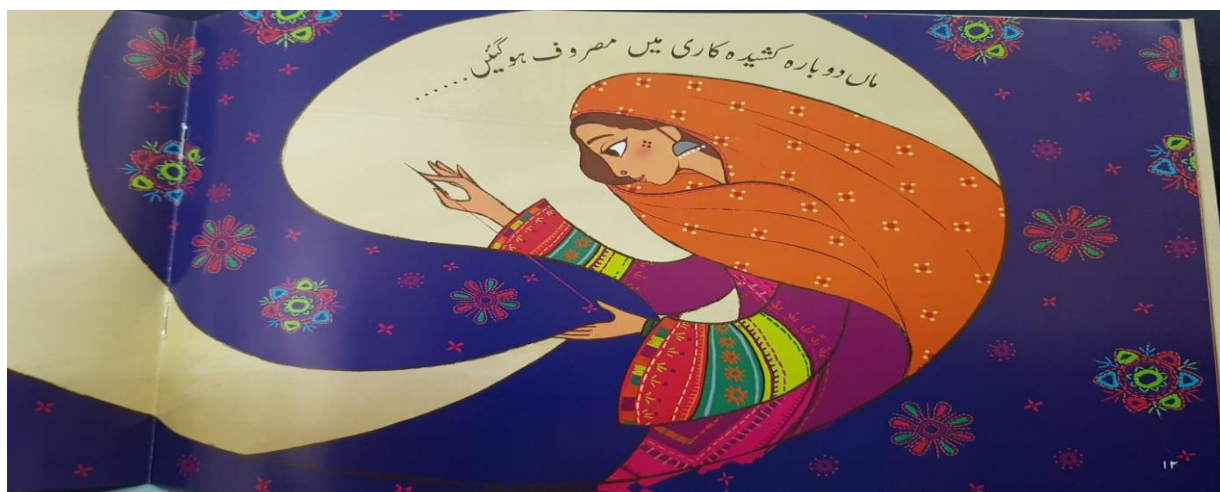


Figure.11, Wajiha Rafay, Maa ka School (Mother's School), pg. 12, ITA Publications.

In her book illustrations, not only the dresses are drawn carefully, an equal amount of consideration has been given to the environment. Whether it's a bedsheet, rug, table cover or a chikk (cane blinds), traditional motifs make the story setting realistic and result in a true representation of local culture.

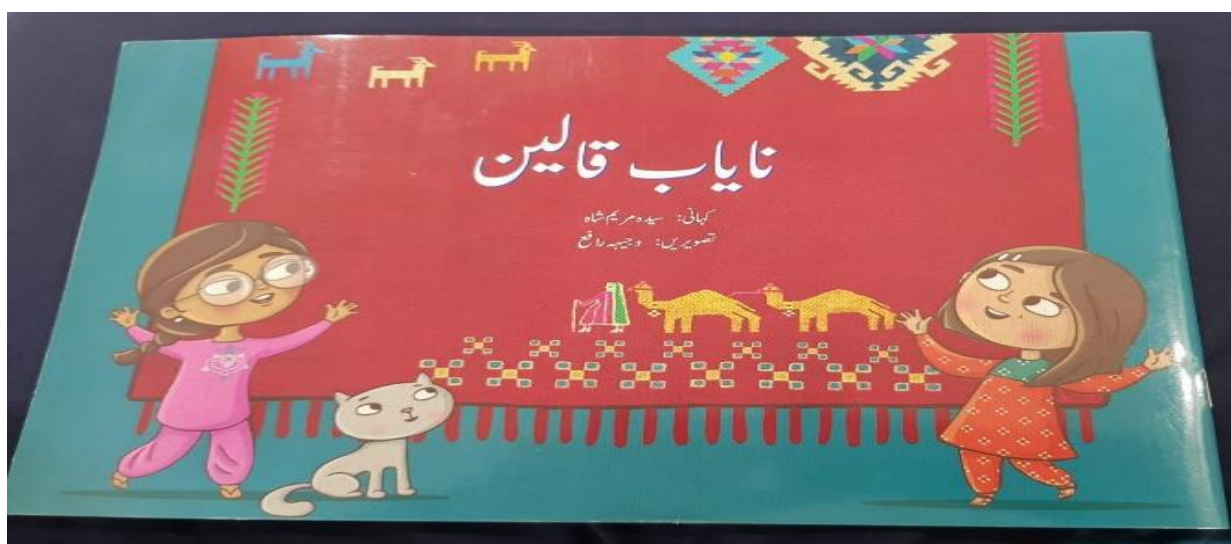


Figure.11, Wajiha Rafay, Nayyab Qaleen (The Rare Carpet), Title Page, ITA Publications.

'Nayyab Qaleen' (The Rare Carpet) written by Syeda Maryam Shah and illustrated by Wajiha Rafay, highlights a traditional hand-crafted industry of Pakistan. It captures the strength and flexibility of Pakistani carpet weavers who managed to sustain and develop their trade amid migrations, invasions, colonial destabilization, global markets transformation, making it one of the backbones of Pakistan both in the cultural and economic environment. The images not only show the carpet with rich traditional patterns and colors but also the process through which these marvels are hand knotted. Such illustrations encourage young minds to explore more about Pakistan's traditional handicrafts and understand the significance of such cultural heritage.

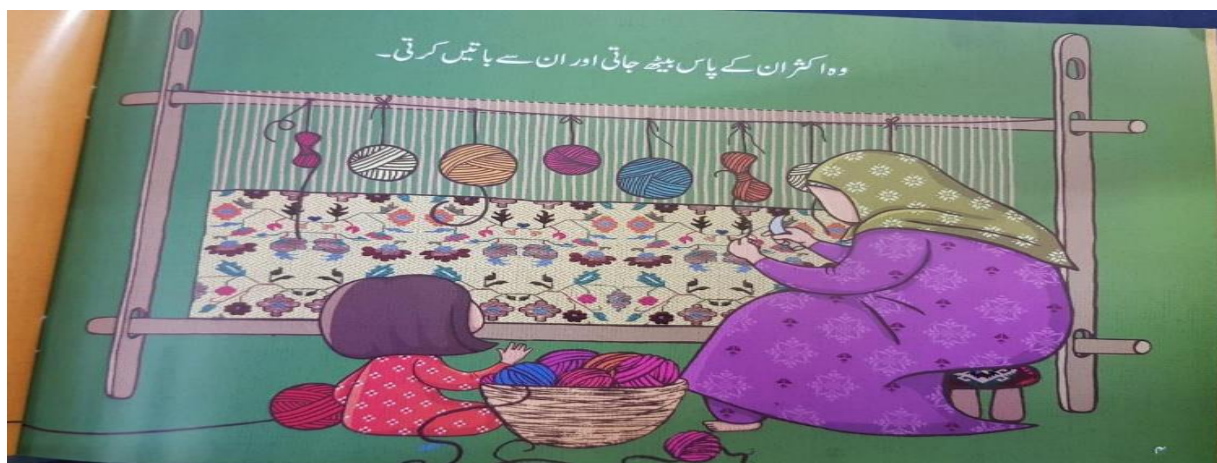


Figure.12, Wajiha Rafay, Nayyab Qaleen (The Rare Carpet), Pg. 4, ITA Publications.

Another illustrator whose practice is deeply rooted in creating desi characters is Maria Riaz. She is a well-known Pakistani author and illustrator of children books. Riaz is the founder of WHY Books Pakistan and has worked on more than 30 projects relating to children literature. She received ‘Sadequain Pride of Performance Award’ for her significant contribution in the area of book illustrations. She started her career as an illustrator and author around 2019, and got acknowledgement from her self-published book ‘*Our Superhero Edhi Baba*’. Her multidisciplinary work involve art, publishing, designing and writing, this shows that her dedication and passion has been pinned on storytelling, reflecting diversity and social responsibility towards young readers. She frequently presents significant social messages and cultural stories that influence Pakistani kids and thus strives to provide the stories that are both inspirational and informative. Maria has been recognized as a contributor to the spread of Pakistani representation of personalities and distinctive content that have been overlooked in regular school curriculum. Through projects such as EdJAM Pakistan Children Series in which artists such as Maria has fulfilled her objectives and produced children books on diversity of identity and rights.

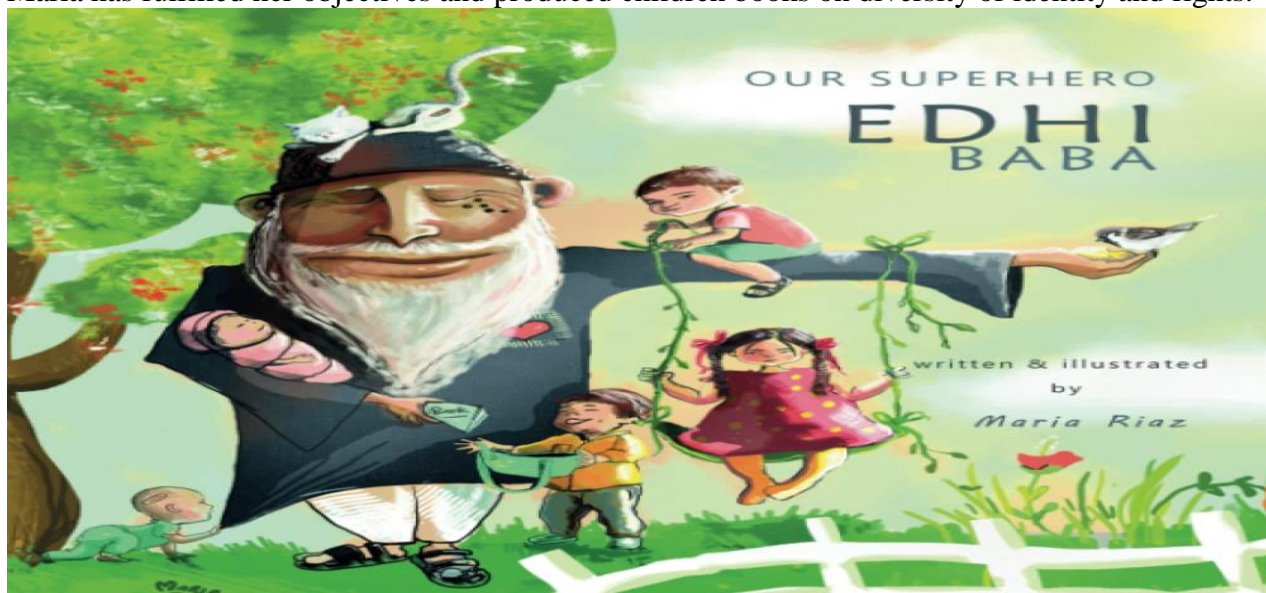


Figure.13, Maria Riaz, Our Superhero Edhi Baba, Title page.

One of the best works by Maria Riaz, can be listed as ‘*Our Superhero Edhi Baba*’, it honors the contributions and social welfare of a pronounced Pakistani philanthropist, Abdul Sattar Edhi. The

pictures in this book by Maria Riaz are simple but suggestive, where efforts have been made to capture the attention of young children, since Abdul Sattar Edhi is depicted visually as a real superhero whose most prominent superpower is his kindness and love for humanity.



Figure.14, Maria Riaz, Our Superhero Edhi Baba, Inside pages.

The imagery sets in well with the story-line of children being in the classroom and having a discussion about super heroes, building a platform to unravel the scenes of Edhi's exemplary life and benevolent efforts. To make her story accessible and attractive, a prerequisite of a picture book created for young readers, Riaz uses bright colors and expressive characters. Her characters wear regular Pakistani clothes that grounds the story in a familiar cultural context. This reflection of being true to the local narratives, grow the relevance of such stories to the readers.

The illustrated images collaborate with the literature to help the young reader to understand Edhi's legacy, to make it easy for children to comprehend the ideas of philanthropy and kindness at a tender age. Although the narrative is straightforward and simple, yet the visual representation plays an important part in stimulating discussion and encouraging respect toward the humanitarianism of Edhi, among the audience. Visuals of common Pakistani people and children, ambulances of Edhi and his shelters, along with reflection of his benevolent attitude create a common ground and emotional mood, that helps youngsters connect to the story and social aspect of Edhi's activities. Showing Edhi as a superhero in a real life scenario, with bright expressive images, the children can determine that being a hero is not something super natural but very much attainable, by developing certain heroic aspects like kindness and generosity. Edhi's character has been drawn keeping in mind his inherent features of compassion and empathy, which young children can learn and practice copying. The innocent, picturesque drawings take the reader to the land of imagination where he becomes a helper, following the path of empathy and fostering a sense of social responsibility. Riaz has also included Pakistani clothing and sceneries, the traditional symbols and social settings in her imagery and this enables children to associate themselves with these visuals of their ancestral heritage. This fits a larger trend of Pakistani children literature to adopt native themes and shun Western-based style, thus developing cultural pride and awareness. Another noticeable contribution by Maria Riaz in children's literature is '*Mahol Sahelian*' series as they reflect her illustrative and story-telling style based on Pakistani culture and values, effectively targeting young audience. Engaging illustrations in this series present the themes concerning climate change and reformative actions to deal with it. Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA) has published this series of three books on various climate threats including the air, land, and water

pollution. The images also present the protagonists, three girls between 10 and 16 years of age, in action against climate change, offering children easy-to-approach role models that arouse curiosity and drive to take on activism. The art depends on Pakistani sceneries and cultural aspects making children understand the environmental problems the world and more specifically their own region is facing, like the environmental issues from the coastline of Mubarak Village to Gwadar. Examples are drawn of certain environmental problems- air pollution in the book '*Sabz Bagh*', land pollution in '*Pahaar Sa Kaam*', and water pollution of the marine ecosystem in '*Naya Paar*'. As an example, the books depict coral bleaching, the endangered sea turtles, and mangroves, so that the young readers could access the complex ecological concepts. The drawings focus on action and resolutions, making children feel competent to create a difference towards climate justice. Curiosity, imagination, and determination of the protagonists become the visible act. Altogether, the illustrations on the pages of '*Mahol Saheliyan*' are characterized by the harmony of scientific truth and culturally rich imagery, not only raising awareness of environmental problems but also evoking a sense of national identity and pride. This graphic style helps in understanding, encouraging and instilling a sense of duty among children to take care of the environment of their homeland, Pakistan.



Figure.15, Maria Riaz, Sabz Bagh (Green Garden), 'Mahol Saheliyan' series, Title page, ITA Publications.

Her illustrations loaded with clarity and meaning, register Maria Riaz as one of the most prominent illustrators and writers in the Pakistani children book market, with a constant endeavor to create pictorially attractive, culturally charismatic, and socially relevant literature for young Pakistanis.

Conclusion

This research paper was aimed at rendering the importance of the illustrations in the Pakistani books for children, in terms of representing the cultural stories as well as building ethnic identity in the young readers. This discussion of the carefully chosen illustrated literature, such as the ones by renowned authors and illustrators, Rumana Husain, Maria Raza and Wajiha Rafay, has emphasized subjects of true cultural expression in children literature. Stressing more on the use of

local narratives, themes, and visual story telling strategies. This group of skillful illustrators has offered their audience, the content that feels relevant to them and allows them to form a deep connection with their own cultural background and roots. This study has revealed that there are certain Pakistani authors and illustrators who are constantly striving towards the representation of authentic Pakistani culture, but there is still a dire necessity of an increased number of voices to take on this legacy. Works by illustrators like Rumana Husain and Maria Raza, are promising in their pursuit of creating vibrant, culturally rich imagery that has the potential to charm the younger audiences. With the continuation of the development in children literature, it is therefore important that the authors and the illustrators are consciously aware of how they represent people, ethnicity and cultural practices. Authentic representation of a culture and society can help children to profoundly express their identities and feel gratified for their culture, which eventually results in a more elucidated and culturally conscious society. Future studies can consider incorporating the views of writers, artists and teachers to gain a better picture of how creative processes and societal influences shape the illustrations in literature for young adults. This study prefigures the path for future discussion and research in association with the identity, culture and representation in the world of children's books.

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