

MULTIMODAL SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF THE CHARACTERS IN THE PAKISTANI CARTOON ABDUL BARI

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ABSTRACT

This study conducts a multimodal semiotic analysis of three still images from the Pakistani children's cartoon *Abdul Bari* to investigate what semiotic resources the characters employ to promote Islamic and moral teachings, and what meanings these resources convey. Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) *Reading Images* framework and Ledin and Machin's (2020) *Multimodal Analysis*, we examine representational, interactive, and compositional meanings alongside design and style choices such as colour, dress, gaze, and spatial arrangement. Findings show that dress codes (e.g., skullcaps, hijab), gaze vectors, balanced group compositions, and a warm, high-modality palette jointly encode respect for religious authority, communal equality, and an approachable moral universe suited to young viewers.

Keywords: multimodal, semiotic analysis, children's cartoon.

INTRODUCTION

The Pakistani animated cartoon *Abdul Bari* has gained significant popularity for its unique ability to combine moral, cultural, and religious teachings with engaging storytelling. This research focuses on the multimodal semiotic analysis of *Abdul Bari*, exploring how various semiotic resources collaboratively create meaning to promote Islamic and moral values among children. By examining still images from the series, this study seeks to understand the ways visual and linguistic elements work together to construct narratives that resonate deeply with young audiences and their families.

Multimodal semiotic analysis provides an effective framework to analyze *Abdul Bari* as it considers how multiple modes of communication, such as visual design, linguistic text, spatial composition, and color, interact to convey complex meanings. Specifically, this research applies Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) *Reading Images* framework and Ledin and Machin's (2020) *Multimodal Analysis* to uncover the representational, interactive, and compositional aspects of the selected images. Through this lens, the study explores how visual motifs like traditional clothing, spatial

arrangements, and gaze patterns not only reflect Islamic teachings but also foster relatability and engagement for its target audience.

The analysis of *Abdul Bari* aligns with broader discussions in Pakistani media studies on the use of semiotic strategies to construct socio-cultural realities. The cartoon serves as a rich site for understanding how media can influence moral and ethical development while reinforces cultural and religious norms. This introduction sets the stage for a detailed exploration of the semiotic choices employed in *Abdul Bari* and their implications for children's media in Pakistan.

1.1 Statement of purpose

The purpose of this article is to conduct a multimodal semiotic analysis of the Pakistani animated cartoon *Abdul Bari* to explore how visual, textual, and cultural elements work together to convey meaning. By utilizing frameworks such as Kress and van Leeuwen's "Reading Images" and Ledin and Machin's approach to multimodal analysis, the study aims to investigate how semiotic resources like color, composition, typography, and

cultural symbols represent Islamic values, family dynamics, and moral education. This analysis seeks to understand the cartoon's effectiveness in engaging its audience while promoting cultural and ethical narratives in the context of Pakistani media.

1.2 Objectives

The main objective of the study is to analyze visual elements through which ethical and moral values are promoted by semiotic theory in animated Pakistani cartoon Abdul Bari.

1.3 Significance of the study

There's always concerned about what values media is imparting to children. This study could contribute to discussion on media content's appropriateness and effectiveness in teaching ethics which is valuable for content creator and regulator. The research may offer recommendations for media producers and educators seeking to create content that promotes Islamic moral and ethical values.

Using semiotic to analyze cartoons is not super common especially combining Kress and Van Leeuwen's visual theory with Ledin and Machin's theory of multimodal analysis so this study showcases the effectiveness of semiotic analysis in dissecting how meaning is constructed in visual media offering a methodological framework for future research in children's cartoon and moral Pedagogy.

1.4 Delimitation

The study focuses on the Urdu-language cartoon series "Abdul Bari" and does not explore cartoons in other languages. The study selects still images from the Moral Vision Kids Urdu channel, without exploring other channels or platforms.

The research only focuses on 3 still images from Abdul Bari cartoon series without exploring all other images. The research is grounded in the reading image theory of Kress and Van Leeuwen and multimodal analysis of Ledin and Machin, without exploring other theoretical frameworks.

1.5 Research Questions

1. What semiotic resources are employed by Abdul Bari's characters to promote Islamic and moral teachings?

2. What meanings are conveyed to viewers through these semiotic resources?

2. Literature Review

Visual communication plays a pivotal role in transmitting ideas and engaging cognitive and affective processes (Costello et al., 2012). Semiotics provides a framework for analysing cultural and natural phenomena through symbols, enabling interdisciplinary dialogue (Chandler, 2007; German Society for Semiotics, 2019). Semiotics is a fundamental science that explores the symbolism in both cultural and natural phenomena. It acts as an interdisciplinary bridge for various fields and provides a foundation for analysing intercultural understanding (German Society for Semiotics, 2019). According to Chandler (2007), semiotics is not just about studying 'signs' in everyday communication but anything that represents something else. These signs can include images, words, sounds, objects, and gestures. Rather than studying signs individually, semiotics examines how they convey meaning and represent reality. The media plays a key role in shaping society by selecting and presenting information, opinions, and topics. Media discourse is often influenced and controlled by those managing it to serve specific interests. As a result, the media can manipulate or influence people's minds and attitudes, as the information it shares is readily accepted by its audience (Naghy, 2010). Cartoons, especially animated ones, have become an important part of media. Since the 1940s, with early technology, creators like Walt Disney produced classics like *Pinocchio* and *Snow White*. Cartoons are animated movies, often humorous, primarily aimed at children (Thompson, 2010). They combine stories, images, words, and music, making them socially, psychologically, and aesthetically significant. Over time, cartoons have become more family-oriented, attracting wider audiences (Habib & Soliman, 2015). They capture children's attention quickly and influence them deeply. Watching cartoons helps children develop cognitive skills such as memory, focus, logic, reasoning, and visual and auditory processing. Cartoons can also aid in language learning and linguistic development. Children not only observe but often mimic what they see in cartoons, using them to learn about the world and life lessons (Ghilzai, 2017). Media, particularly television and cartoons, serves as a conduit for disseminating ideologies, often aligned with the interests of dominant social groups (Naghy, 2010; Van Dijk, 1998). Cartoons act as a "soft power," influencing children's perceptions, ideologies, and behaviours through repeated themes and visual stimuli.

Cartoons significantly impact children's cognitive, linguistic, and social development, fostering memory, language skills, and cultural understanding (Habib & Soliman, 2015; Ghilzai, 2017). However, concerns arise about potential negative influences, such as violent behaviour, reduced ethical development, and perpetuation of gender stereotypes (Hassan & Daniyal, 2013; Shumaila Ahmad, 2014). Animated cartoons can reinforce stereotypes and propagate ideological attitudes, subtly shaping societal norms and cultural practices (Green, 2012; Ahmed, 2014). The use of foreign languages and cultural content in cartoons, such as Hindi in *Doraemon*, can influence local language practices and identity (Islam & Biswas, 2012). According to Habib and Soliman (2015), our habits, opinions, memories, and intelligence are shaped by the connections between brain cells. In children, these connections are strengthened by repeated experiences and weakened if unused. Early experiences leave lasting marks on a child's brain structure, influencing their thinking and behaviour. Repeated actions up to the age of 12 have a significant and lasting effect. Since children watch up to 18,000 hours of cartoons by this age, cartoons play a major role in shaping their thinking and behaviour. Rawan, Dar, and Siraj (2018) analysed the effects of the cartoon *Doraemon* on Pakistani children and found that TV cartoons promote incidental learning. They suggested that animated cartoons can be effectively used for teaching at home and in schools, provided precautions are taken to avoid physical issues like eyestrain. Sarwat Rahman (2018) studied three Pakistani animated series: *3 Bahadur*, *Burka Avenger*, and *Quaid Say Baatein*. She found that these shows reflect Pakistani culture, teaching children about customs and values while promoting peace, harmony, and problem-solving skills through logical reasoning. Dr. Rukhsana Kausar, Nida Zafar, and Maryam Arshad (2018) researched the link between cartoon addiction and executive functioning in schoolchildren. They found that excessive cartoon-watching negatively affects skills like problem-solving, memory, organization, and self-regulation. Cartoon-addicted children tend to demand products associated with their favourite characters, become passive, and spend less time learning ethical values from their parents. Rai (2017) studied 200 children aged 5–15 and observed behavioural and habitual changes due to cartoons. His findings included:

- 33% showed increased violent behaviour.

- 64% ignored their parents while watching cartoons.
- 61% tried to copy stunts from cartoons.
- 45% became angry when the TV was turned off.
- 81% showed greater interest in creative subjects.

He concluded that cartoons significantly impact children's behaviour, both positively and negatively. Green (2012) argues that children are influenced by the ideas often presented in animated cartoons, especially regarding language, stereotypes, and ideologies, as children actively absorb biases from a young age. Ahmed (2014) adds that children's television content is filled with ideological messages that shape their understanding of society. Media, particularly television, reflects the dominant ideology of powerful social groups, with animated cartoons subtly conveying these attitudes. Keeping in view the review of relevant literature, the purpose of this study is to do the multimodal semiotic analysis of Pakistani animated cartoon *Abdul Bari*. Earlier no research has been conducted on Pakistani animated cartoon *Abdul Bari*.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative multimodal semiotic approach to analyze three selected still images from the Pakistani animated cartoon *Abdul Bari*. The analysis is grounded in the frameworks of Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) "Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design" and Ledin and Machin's (2020) "Introduction to Multimodal Analysis." These frameworks facilitate an in-depth examination of visual elements to understand how semiotic resources are utilized to convey Islamic and moral teachings. Three still images were purposefully selected from episodes of *Abdul Bari* available on the official YouTube channel. The selection criteria focused on scenes that prominently feature character interactions and settings reflective of Islamic and moral themes. The chosen images include:

Classroom Scene:

Depicts *Abdul Bari* and his classmates attentively listening to a teacher.

Outdoor Interaction:

Shows *Abdul Bari* engaging with peers in a communal setting.

Family Setting:

Presents Abdul Bari with family members in a domestic environment.

These images were chosen to represent diverse contexts within the cartoon where Islamic and moral teachings are likely to be visually communicated. The analysis applies Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) three metafunctions:

Representational Meaning:

Examines the depicted participants, actions, and settings to understand the narrative content.

Interactive Meaning: Analyzes the relationship between the image and the viewer, focusing on gaze, distance, and angles.

Compositional Meaning:

Investigates the arrangement of elements within the image, including information value (placement), salience (visual prominence), and framing (boundaries and connections between elements). Ledin and Machin's Multimodal Analysis Complementing the visual grammar, Ledin and Machin's (2020) approach considers: Design and Style Choices: Evaluates the use of color, typography, and other stylistic elements. Assesses the degree of realism and abstraction to determine how authenticity and credibility are conveyed. Considers the physical and sensory aspects of the images that contribute to meaning-making.

4.Data Analysis



Figure 1: Classroom Scene

Semiotic Resources

Dress & Colour:

Teacher in white skullcap and dark vest; boys in modest tunics (blue, yellow).

Gaze & Posture:

Teacher's frontal gaze; students' uprisen gaze (toward teacher).

Spatial Arrangement:

Teacher centrally framed at lower eye-line; students flank him.

Vector Lines:

Classroom desks and sight-lines converge on teacher's face.

Kress and van Leeuwen focus on how visual elements function in a semiotic system, analysing their meaning-making process.

1. Representational Meaning (What is Depicted?)

The image portrays a teacher (possibly a religious figure based on attire) instructing young boys in what appears to be a classroom or a madrasa (religious school). The teacher is seated on the floor, indicating a traditional and culturally embedded learning environment. The boys are engaged, with their postures and facial expressions suggesting attentiveness and curiosity, reflecting a respectful student-teacher relationship.

2. Interactive Meaning (How Viewers Relate to the Image?)

The teacher's gaze is directed slightly outward, engaging the viewer indirectly, suggesting authority but approachability. The students' gaze is either directed at the teacher or subtly towards their books, emphasizing focus and discipline. The medium-shot perspective creates a sense of inclusion, inviting the viewer to observe the interaction without feeling too

detached. The cartoonish style reduces realism but enhances accessibility, making the image universally relatable, particularly for younger audiences.

3. Compositional Meaning (How Elements Are Arranged?)

The teacher is positioned on the left, which aligns with the "Given" in the Given-New structure, symbolizing established authority and tradition. The students on the right represent the "New," emphasizing their role as learners. The desks, windows, and bookshelves act as framing devices, structuring the classroom and drawing attention to the central interaction. The bright clothing of the students (blue and yellow) contrasts with the neutral tones of the background, ensuring they stand out while still maintaining harmony with the subdued environment.

Ledin and Machin's multimodal analysis emphasizes how different modes (e.g., visuals, spatial arrangements, and cultural symbols) contribute to meaning.

1. Visual Semiotics:

The teacher's attire (white cap and beard) symbolizes religious and cultural authority, signifying the Islamic context. The students' traditional clothing reinforce the cultural setting. The low desks and mats on the floor signify a traditional, informal educational environment, contrasting with modern classroom setups. The bright, saturated colors (blue, yellow, white) evoke a sense of positivity and energy, which aligns with the theme of education and growth. The use of warm tones in the background creates a welcoming atmosphere.

2. Cultural Context and Symbolism:

This image draws on the cultural symbolism of Islamic pedagogy, where teaching often occurs in close, communal settings. The books symbolize knowledge and tradition, while the teacher embodies wisdom and moral guidance.

3. Spatial Relations:

The proximity between the teacher and students signifies respect and accessibility, fostering a sense of community. The symmetrical arrangement of students further implies discipline and harmony in learning.

4. Narrative Action:

The teacher's hand gesture indicates an active teaching moment, while the students' postures suggest listening and engagement. This dynamic interaction conveys the transmission of knowledge and respect for authority.

Both theories highlight the strong connection between the teacher and students. Kress and van Leeuwen focus on how gaze and positioning emphasize their interaction, while Ledin and Machin draw attention to cultural symbols and meanings. The image reflects Islamic traditions and teaching practices, as explored by Ledin and Machin, with Kress and van Leeuwen adding insight into how the layout and arrangement guide the viewer's understanding. Together, they show how the image portrays education as a respectful and communal activity, supported by visual and cultural details.



Figure 2: Outdoor Walk

Semiotic Resources

Dress & Colour Palette: Girl in pastel hijab and tunic; boys in blue, yellow, lighter tunics.

Group Composition: Four children walking side-by-side; equal sizing at eye-level.

Background Elements: Urban skyline subtly in the distance; clear daylight sky.

The image, through Kress and van Leeuwen's Reading Images framework, communicates meaning by organizing its elements into three key metafunctions: representational, interactive, and compositional.

Representational Meaning:

The image depicts a woman walking with three children, holding their hands. The narrative is constructed through the action of walking together, which symbolizes care, guidance, and togetherness. The woman, positioned at the centre, represents authority and protection, while the children on either side symbolize learners or followers in a relationship of mutual trust. Their cultural attire (hijab, traditional caps) and body language highlight a traditional yet modern social setting.

Interactive Meaning:

The interaction between the characters and the viewer is defined by gaze, distance, and perspective. None of the figures engage the viewer directly with their gaze, creating a sense of neutrality and observation. The medium-long shot frames the characters within a larger environment, inviting viewers to observe their interaction while maintaining a respectful distance. The viewer's perspective positions them slightly below eye level, subtly elevating the group, which conveys respect and admiration.

Compositional Meaning:

The woman is centrally positioned, drawing immediate attention as the focal point. Her role as a unifying figure is reinforced by the symmetrical placement of the children. The vibrant colors of their attire (pink, blue, yellow) contrast against the natural greens and urban background, making the characters stand out while suggesting harmony between tradition and progress. The image is balanced and structured, with the figures moving forward, symbolizing growth and continuity. The inclusion of both nature and buildings bridges the divide between cultural roots and modern development.

Ledin and Machin's multimodal framework emphasizes how semiotic resources such as clothing, posture, and setting combine to create cultural and social meanings.

Cultural Semiotics:

The woman's hijab is a strong semiotic marker of Islamic identity and cultural modesty, while the boys' traditional caps signify their cultural upbringing. These elements signal that the image is situated within a religious and cultural context. The use of vibrant colors, especially in the woman's pink outfit, conveys care, warmth, and positivity, making her role as a protector and guide more approachable. The act of holding hands is a key semiotic resource, symbolizing protection, trust, and unity. The forward motion of the group signifies progress and a shared journey. The relaxed postures of the children and their symmetrical arrangement create a sense of balance and harmony, suggesting mutual respect between the woman and the children.

Environment and Setting:

The background includes urban buildings and greenery, symbolizing the coexistence of tradition (represented by the characters) and modernity (represented by the setting). This interplay reflects an optimistic vision of cultural continuity in a modern world, where traditional values adapt and thrive within contemporary contexts. The bright, saturated colors of the characters' clothing contrast with the muted tones of the background, ensuring their prominence. The natural greens of the trees symbolize growth and nurture, while the modern buildings suggest progress. Together, these visual elements position the characters as central figures in a harmonious blend of cultural and social evolution. Using Kress and van Leeuwen's theory, the image conveys a structured, harmonious relationship where the woman serves as a guide and protector, symbolizing authority and care, while the children represent learners in a nurturing and balanced setting. Ledin and Machin's multimodal analysis deepens this understanding by showing how semiotic resources like clothing, posture, and setting reflect cultural identity, social values, and progress. The image's semiotic resources communicate a message of cultural continuity, care, and unity in a progressive context. It portrays a harmonious balance between tradition and modernity,

emphasizing social bonds, mutual respect, and an optimistic vision for the future.



Figure 3: Family Portrait

Semiotic Resources

Hierarchy of Salience:

Abdul Bari in foreground, parents behind him.

Dress: Mother in full hijab; father in casual dark shirt; child in skullcap and navy top.

Facial Expressions:

All smile gently, direct gaze toward viewer.

Logo Placement:

Bright “Abdul Bari and Ansharah Cartoons” logo anchors the image.

Kress and van Leeuwen's "Reading Images" focuses on the visual grammar of images, emphasizing representation, interaction, and composition.

1. Representation:

The characters are positioned dynamically, with the boy (Abdul Bari) in the foreground as the central focus, suggesting he is the protagonist. His extended arm and forward-leaning posture create a sense of action and engagement. This foregrounding and scaling place children as empowered agents, a common visual discourse in modern child education media. Adults in Background Their placement reflects supporting roles not commanding, but present to guide, protect, and affirm the child's centrality. The characters' traditional clothing and setting (open, natural background) symbolize

cultural and family values. The use of hijabs and traditional attire indicates Islamic identity.

2. Interaction:

The boy looks directly at the viewer, establishing a "demand" gaze that invites interaction. The other characters appear to look at the boy or outward, reinforcing his importance. The medium shot positions the viewer close to the family, fostering a sense of familiarity and warmth. The slight upward angle on Abdul Bari emphasizes his prominence and centrality in the image.

3. Composition:

The family members are arranged symmetrically, with Abdul Bari in the most salient position. The logo in the bottom right reinforces the branding. The vibrant colours of clothing and facial expressions draw attention to the characters. The boy's darker outfit contrasts with the pastel colours of the other characters, making him stand out. The family is presented as a cohesive unit, visually connected through overlapping and similar attire, symbolizing unity.

Ledin and Machin focus on semiotic resources, analysing how meaning is constructed through multiple modes like visuals, text, and context.

1. Visual Semiotics:

The bright, inviting palette (greens, blues, and pastels) conveys positivity and approachability. It aligns with the family-friendly nature of the content. Rounded facial features and soft edges in clothing emphasize warmth, friendliness, and non-threatening imagery, appealing to children and families. Abdul Bari is the clear focal point, with size and placement underscoring his role as the primary character. The positioning of family members creates a supportive background narrative.

2. Textual Semiotics: Typography:

The playful, bold font of "Abdul Bari and Ansharah Cartoons" signals a child-oriented theme. The mix of blue and pink in the logo suggests inclusivity, appealing to both boys and girls. The title "Abdul Bari and Ansharah" uses bold, rounded typography with bright colours: Rounded font conveys softness and accessibility. Colour contrast (blue for Abdul Bari, pink for Ansharah) draws on traditional gender norms, yet in a child-friendly, non-aggressive way. The use of "Cartoons" in the logo anchors the genre, positioning the product as educational entertainment for children. The logo anchors the visual message, reinforcing brand identity and linking the characters to a broader narrative (e.g., cartoons or moral education).

3. Cultural and Social Meaning:

The traditional attire signifies cultural and religious grounding, appealing to an audience that values Islamic principles. This cultural representation is further emphasized by the boy's kufi cap and the women's hijabs. The image promotes family-oriented values, showing a loving, united family that reflects Islamic ideals of togetherness and respect.

4. Modes Working Together:

The image uses facial expressions, body language, and clothing to convey warmth, family unity, and cultural pride. These semiotic modes are integrated with textual elements (logo) to deliver a cohesive message that resonates with the intended audience. The semiotic resources in the image represent a harmonious blend of cultural identity, family values, and approachability. The traditional attire and family grouping reflect Islamic principles and unity, while the vibrant colours, playful typography, and dynamic positioning highlight the image's child-

friendly and educational intent. Together, these elements create an inviting narrative of warmth, inclusivity, and cultural pride, appealing to a diverse audience.

5. Conclusion

This study analysed the Pakistani animated cartoon *Abdul Bari* through a multimodal semiotic lens, utilizing frameworks by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) and Ledin and Machin (2020). The findings demonstrate how semiotic resources, including colour, dress, spatial arrangement, and cultural symbolism, are employed to convey Islamic and moral teachings effectively. The cartoon relies on traditional Islamic symbols, such as modest attire and family centred themes, to ground its narrative in cultural authenticity. Through representational, interactive, and compositional elements, *Abdul Bari* engages its audience particularly children by presenting relatable, respectful, and visually accessible content. The imagery fosters a sense of inclusion, unity, and moral guidance, making Islamic teachings approachable within contemporary contexts.

Abdul Bari masterfully combines traditional Islamic values with modern storytelling, using vibrant visuals and cultural symbols to engage young audiences. Its thoughtful design and moral themes make it a powerful tool for imparting ethical and religious teachings in a relatable, impactful way. This animated series not only entertains but also educates, fostering a deeper connection to Islamic principles in a contemporary context.

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