



EXPLORING *TEAM MUHAFIZ* COMIC SERIES FOR THE PORTRAYAL OF SOCIAL EVILS: A MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This study aims at investigating the visual modes employed to represent characters and social issues such as child marriage, girls' harassment, and drug abuse in the selected comic series *Team Muhafiz*. This study draws upon Visual Grammar Model (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006) and interpersonal metafunction from Systemic Functional Theory (Halliday, 2004; Mathiessen, 2014) for its analyses. The former helped to analyze characters portrayed through images and the latter aided in investigating roles and relationships embedded through linguistic choices given in dialogue boxes. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) theoretical framework, visual images fulfill three fundamental metafunctions: representational, interactive, and compositional. These metafunctions facilitate the conveyance of experiential knowledge, establishment of participant-viewer relationships, and arrangement of visual resources. This model guided the analysis of the comic series' visual elements to identify how social issues are portrayed and challenged. Furthermore, the findings highlight power relations, solidarity, and resistance, thereby promoting collective awareness. The results suggest that *Team Muhafiz* narrates stories of social injustices that empowers marginalized voices and encourages youth activism.

Keywords: *Comic Series, Interpersonal Metafunction, Social Issues, Visual Grammar, Youth Activism*

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1.Introduction

Multimodality has been a central area of inquiry in Applied Linguistics, Semiotics, and Education since the late twentieth century, rooted in the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework developed by Halliday. It refers to the interaction of multiple semiotic modes, such as language, image, colour, gesture, sound, and spatial design, in meaning-making processes (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). In contemporary communicative landscapes, meaning is rarely produced through language alone; rather, digital media, advertisements, educational materials, and popular culture rely on the co-deployment of diverse semiotic resources. Within this context, comics emerge as a particularly rich site for multimodal analysis.

Comics are multimodal ensembles that integrate written language with visual symbolism, spatial layout, and narrative sequencing. Cohn (2016) conceptualizes comics as a form of visual language with its own grammar, which functions analogously to linguistic syntax. Panels operate not merely as containers of images but as components of a larger narrative system that requires readers to infer meaning across gutters and decode symbolic conventions. McCloud (1993) similarly defines comics as deliberately sequenced images through which meaning arises from the interaction of panels, frames, gutters, speech balloons, sound effects, and visual metaphors. As Postema (2013) argues, the gutter compels readers to actively co-construct narrative continuity, which makes comics an inherently participatory medium.

The multimodality of comics lies in the interdependence of words and images, where meaning is shaped through panel arrangement, colour, typography, perspective, and visual symbolism. This distinguishes comics from other multimodal texts by demanding simultaneous linguistic, visual, and cognitive engagement. Over time, comics have evolved in response to cultural, social, and technological shifts. There are diverse forms such as comic strips (e.g., Peanuts), comic books (Superman, Batman), graphic novels (Persepolis), Manga and Manhwa (Naruto, Attack on Titan), and webcomics that expand reader interaction in digital spaces (Setialis et al., 2018).

The growing popularity of comics among children and adolescents has increased scholarly interest in their educational and ideological potential. Within educational contexts, particularly English as a Foreign Language (EFL), multimodal texts such as comics are valued for enhancing engagement and supporting multiple literacies. Serafini (2011) notes that contemporary literacy extends beyond alphabetic reading and writing to include visual, digital, and critical literacies. Learners today navigate multimodal environments where meaning is constructed through the interaction of images, text, and

digital affordances. Consequently, comics function as effective pedagogical tools that align with learners' lived communicative experiences.

Children's literature plays a crucial role in transmitting social, cultural, and ethical values (Cherland, 2006, as cited in Rehmat, 2022). As a form of children's literature, comics are particularly suited to addressing sensitive social issues through accessible and engaging narratives. In Pakistan and the wider South Asian context, social problems such as child marriage, girls' harassment, and drug abuse persist despite legal frameworks. Child marriage remains prevalent, often institutionalized through practices such as Vani or Swara, which force minor girls into marriage as a means of dispute resolution (Zaman, 2012). Gender discrimination continues to be reinforced through cultural traditions and media representations, with children's literature frequently reproducing stereotypical gender roles by portraying males in public domains and females in domestic or passive roles (Davis, 2003; Ruble et al., 2006). The comics under study, when examined through the lens of visual grammar and systemic functional linguistics, can be powerful instruments for deconstructing harmful norms and promoting legal awareness, such as the recently passed Islamabad Capital Territory Child Marriage Restraint Bill 2025 (UN Women Pakistan, 2025).

Research has also documented the role of the media in shaping gendered power relations. Gooden and Gooden (2001) demonstrate how children's media often normalize male dominance and marginalize female characters. Similarly, studies on harassment highlight how mainstream media trivializes or romanticizes harassment, which reinforces victim-blaming ideologies (Ward, 2022). Multimodal analyses show that visual grammar (through gaze, framing, and composition) can either reproduce or challenge such power structures (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Lin, 2024). In contrast, empowering representations deploy posture, colour, and spatial arrangement to depict agency and resistance (Barrington, 2023).

Drug abuse among youth represents another pressing concern. Studies reveal alarming rates of substance use among Pakistani adolescents and university students due to peer pressure, institutional neglect, and socio-economic vulnerability (Ashraf et al., 2020; Sabri, 2018). National data indicate that approximately two million of Pakistan's drug users are aged 15–25 (Pakistan Narcotics Control Board, 2022), while research on street children reports drug use rates as high as 67% (Sherman et al., 2005). Early exposure significantly increases the risk of long-term addiction (Newcomb & Bentler, 1989). Media narratives, including comics, play an important role in humanizing addiction by depicting it through relatable characters and symbolic imagery, while preventive research supports media-integrated interventions in reducing substance abuse (Botvin et al., 1990).

Historically, comics have functioned as powerful tools of political and social commentary. As a medium rather than a genre, comics occupy a distinctive cultural position (McCue & Bloom, 1993). From wartime propaganda in Japan and the United States (Anderson, 1990; McAllister, 1990) to the emergence of socially critical works such as *The Dark Knight Returns* (Miller, 1985), comics have increasingly engaged with real-world political and social concerns (Witek, 1989). In Pakistan, comics were traditionally limited to political cartoons in newspapers, but recent years have witnessed the emergence of locally grounded narratives that address social injustices and expand the medium's pedagogical relevance.

Contemporary comics favor visually driven storytelling, reducing textual density while increasing reliance on imagery, close-up framing, and symbolic sequencing (Cohn et al., 2021). Meaning construction often occurs cognitively within gutters, requiring readers to infer implied actions and emotions (Lazarinis et al., 2015). This semiotic density aligns with Bateman's (2014) assertion that meaning emerges from the integration of semiotic modes rather than isolated systems. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) further argue that visual grammar structures social relations through representational, interactive, and compositional meanings, making comics ideal texts for multimodal discourse analysis.

Multimodal media have also been increasingly used to contest harmful social practices. Studies on visual protest discourse, such as Aurat March placards (Memon, 2021) and films addressing forced marriage (Ardiani et al., 2023), demonstrate the effectiveness of visual narratives in raising awareness. Similarly, Pakistani comics have begun to challenge child marriage, harassment, and drug abuse by embedding social critique within culturally familiar settings and symbolic imagery. Visual language, often more emotionally resonant than verbal discourse, enables engagement with sensitive topics that may otherwise remain suppressed (Lloyd, 2015).

Although a considerable amount of research has explored social issues such as child marriage, gender inequality, harassment, and drug abuse through traditional literary texts and academic studies, very limited scholarly attention has been given to the representation of these issues in Pakistani comics, particularly from a multimodal analytical perspective. Existing literature mostly focuses on children's picture books (Gooden & Gooden, 2001; Rehmat, 2022) or academic discussions of sociocultural dynamics surrounding these social evils (Newcomb & Bentler, 1989; Zaman, 2012), but the visual narrative power of comics still remains underexplored. Moreover, most studies on social evils in Pakistan concentrate on statistical data, policy analysis, or textual content. By contrast, comics like *Team Muhafiz* serve as culturally rooted, youth-oriented narratives that engage with these issues in an impactful and accessible manner. To date, no significant research has analyzed comic series like *Team Muhafiz* using Kress and Van

Leeuwen's Visual Grammar in combination with Systemic Functional Linguistics to understand how text and image work together to construct meaning, particularly in case of addressing injustice and advocating for social reform.

Team *Muhafiz* explicitly addresses social issues in a format accessible to youth, yet scholarly exploration of its role in social critique remains limited. Existing studies have predominantly focused on picture books or children's literature showcasing gender stereotypes and social norms. By analyzing Team *Muhafiz* with the help of multimodal frameworks, this study not only addresses a gap in research; it also highlights the role of indigenous cultural production in promoting social awareness, resisting patriarchal structures, and motivating young readers for positive change.

The study is designed to investigate the following research questions:

Q1: What multimodal representations do the comic writers employ to represent social evils in the comic series?

Q2: How do the comic writers identify the participants as entities in their portrayals?

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two interrelated theoretical frameworks that work as comprehensive tools for analyzing both the visual and textual facets of *Team Muhafiz* comic series. One is Kress and van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar Model (2006) and the other one is Interpersonal Metafunction from Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (2004; Matthiessen, 2014). These frameworks provide a multimodal lens to investigate how characters and social issues are represented in the selected issues of the comic series.

2.1. Visual Grammar Model (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006)

Kress and van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar is grounded in the framework of social semiotics, which refers to construction of meaning through various semiotic modes.

This model is Built upon Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) that outlines three core metafunctions; ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) adapted these into the representational, interactive, and compositional metafunctions to analyze visual communication. This framework is particularly useful in examining comics like *Team Muhafiz*, where visual elements are not only illustrative but also communicates intricate social meanings, ideologies, and relationships.

2.1.1. Representational Metafunction

The representational metafunction focuses on the ways images represent the world, either through narrative structures (showing actions and processes) or conceptual structures (depicting classifications, symbolism, or analytical relationships). Narrative structures use vectors that refer to imaginary lines formed by limbs, gaze, or objects. It represents movement or action. For instance, a raised arm in protest or a gaze directed toward another character builds a dynamic story element.

The theorists identify several kinds of narrative processes: action, reactional speech, mental, and conversion. Action processes are defined by the presence of a vector that is typically formed by depicted element or an arrow that originates from the participant (Actor). These processes are categorized into two types: non-transactional (only the Actor is present) and transactional (both an Actor and a Goal are involved). The Goal pertains to the participant toward whom the vector is directed. In some cases, transactional processes may be bidirectional which means that each participant alternated between the role of Actor and Goal, thereby acting as Interactors (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, pp. 63–66). Conversely, the conceptual structures are more static and symbolic. They include classificational (showing hierarchies or grouping), analytical (part-whole relationships), and symbolic (identity and meaning) processes.

2.1.2. Interactive Metafunction

The interactive metafunction refers to the relationship between the interactive participant (viewer) and the represented participants (characters or objects in the image) and also between the participants present within the images itself. It defines how visual elements invite the viewer to engage, sympathize, or reflect. The interaction between these participants or among represented participants themselves gives rise to different relational dynamics. The interactive meaning of images is realized through three dimensions: image act, social distance, and point of view. The gaze of the represented participants determine image act. When the gaze is directed toward the viewer, it creates a demand act. It establishes an imaginary social relation directly addressing the viewer. This relation may be further emphasized through gestures and facial expressions. On the other hand, when the gaze is not directed at the viewer, the image creates an offer act, where no direct engagement is established. Rather presented participants are taken as objects of contemplation or items of information. It can be said that the choice between demand and offer act convey different levels of engagement and detachment between real viewers and visual participants.

Social distance refers to the size of the frame; close-up, medium, or long-shot. These framing applies to human figures, objects, landscapes, and architectural structures. It aids in determining the degree of intimacy between viewer and participants. The third

dimension, point of view or perspective, reflects how participants are positioned in relation to the viewer. A frontal angle implies involvement, whereas an oblique angle suggests detachment. In the same way, a high level angle empowers the viewer over the participants, a low angle grants power to the participants, and eye-level angle mirrors equality. Kress and van Leeuwen also expand their model by introducing the concept of modality, which, much like in language, pertains to the degree of credibility or truth value conveyed by an image. In simple words, visuals can represent people, objects, or places as if they exist in reality, or as imaginary constructs (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 156). Modality is characterized by different markers, like color saturation, contextualization, differentiation and modulation, depth, illumination, and brightness.

2.1.3. Compositional Metafunction

The compositional metafunction is concerned with how elements in an image are organized and arranged to guide meaning-making. It combines the representational and interactive meanings to form a coherent visual message. It includes three key systems: information value, salience, and framing. Informational value pertains to the spatial positioning of elements that affect the meaning is interpreted. The left-right axis often presents the “given” or familiar information on the left side, while the “new” or important revelations are presented on the right. Top-bottom axis typical holds the “ideal” (aspirational or abstract concepts) at the top while the “real” (practical or detailed information) at the bottom. Further, in the center-margin axis, the center signifies prominence and marginal elements are subordinated.

Apart from this, certain elements are visually emphasized through color contrast, size, foregrounding, and positioning. The use of lines, spacing, or borders is done to separate or unite elements in an image. Framing controls how viewers perceive relationships between people and concepts. Closely grouped figures suggest harmony, whereas isolated elements can signify difference. Together, these components guide the viewer’s navigation through the panel, frame, or page. They contribute to the overall meaning of each scene and its alignment with the comic’s ideological stance. The application of Kress and van Leeuwen’s model in this research facilitates a deeper understanding of how *Team Muhafiz* constructs visual narratives that resist gender stereotypes, challenge social injustices, and promote positive change.

2.2. Interpersonal Metafunction from Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 2004)

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), proposed by Michael Halliday, is a theory of language that takes language as a social semiotic system. Rather than focusing solely

on grammatical structures in isolation, SFL explains how language functions in real life contexts to make meaning. Halliday (1994) proposed that language simultaneously serves three broad metafunctions: ideational (representing experience), interpersonal (enacting relationships), and textual (organizing messages). These metafunctions operate together to shape the meanings in different contexts.

Within the framework of SFL, the interpersonal metafunction refers to the way language is used to enact social interactions, establish and negotiate relationships, and express personal attitudes, evaluations, and judgments. According to Halliday (2007), this metafunction permits speakers or writers to position themselves in relation to others to construct a specific stance. It is realized primarily with the help of mood (declarative, interrogative, imperative structures), modality (degrees of certainty or obligation) and the use of pronouns (reflecting the levels of intimacy, distance, and power dynamics). (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999; Thompson, 2004).

This metafunction reflects the intentions of the speaker or writer. In addition to this, it also mirrors the social positioning like relative status, authority or solidarity in relation to the audience. Thompson (2004) stated that it encompasses features such as variation, personalization, and it distinguishes between the roles of giving and demanding in linguistic exchange. These roles relate to the main commodities: a) goods and services, and b) information (Halliday, 1994). In spoken discourse, this metafunction can be analyzed in terms of turn-taking, question-answer sequences, and speech acts. On contrary, in written or visual texts like comics, interpersonal meaning can be conveyed through lexical choices, register, and dialogue structure. In the context of the current study, where the researcher aims at exploring the representation of social issues such as child marriage, drug abuse, and gender inequality in the comic series *Team Muhafiz*, the interpersonal metafunction serves as a useful analytical lens for investigating the characters' voices, relationships, and authority linguistically. When coupled with the visual grammar perspective (e.g., gaze, angle, and proximity), this metafunction helps to reveal the way language and image juxtapose to position readers in relation to the social evils portrayed in the comics.

3. Material and Method

This study employs a qualitative approach, and the data has been collected through purposive sampling. The selected primary texts include *Team Muhafiz comic Issues 1, 3, and the Special Edition*, created by Imran Azhar, Kamran Khan, and Noman Ansari (2015). These particular issues were chosen due to their strong thematic relevance to the research objectives, especially their portrayal of pressing social issues such as gender-

based discrimination, child marriage, and drug abuse. The criterion-based sampling, a subtype of purposive sampling is used for selecting specific panels within these comics to enable an in-depth, theory-driven analysis. This technique involves identifying data segments that meet predefined criteria aligned with the study's research questions and theoretical framework. The criteria for panel selection included: the presence of meaningful interpersonal interactions in the dialogues or speech bubbles; visual cues that highlight power relations, gender roles, and social hierarchies; and panels where the interplay between text and visuals clearly contributes to constructing social conventions. This focused selection boosts the depth and relevance of the analysis, which ensures that both linguistic and visual modes are carefully examined in relation to the study's objectives.

This study adopts a qualitative approach to investigate how the comic series *Team Muhafiz* represents three selected social evils in Pakistani society: child marriage, girl harassment, and drug abuse. The analysis was conducted through purposive sampling for the purpose of selecting texts that align with the specific objectives of the study. The data were drawn from three comic book issues of *Team Muhafiz*: **Issue 3** (*The Child Raiders*), **Issue 1** (*Women Rescued After*), and **Special Edition** (*The Toxic Lands*). These issues were deliberately selected because they directly correspond to the concerns of this research. They also provide clear narrative depictions of the identified social evils. From each issue a certain number of pages were analyzed in detail.

The pages were chosen from the core narrative sections where the storyline clearly addresses the identified social issues under investigation instead of the peripheral content like character backstories, advertisements or unrelated subplots. From Issue 3 (double Issue), 3 pages were selected that shed light on the representation of child marriage, its impact on the victim, and the interventions by *Team Muhafiz*. From Issue 1, 3 pages were analyzed that focus on the portrayal of girls' harassment and the response by members of the *Team Muhafiz*. From the Special Edition, 3 pages were selected for analysis that revolves around drug abuse and trafficking among young people along with its causes and consequences. In short, this research presents a detailed analysis of the selected nine (9) pages from the *Team Muhafiz* comic series. Each section is discussed separately with reference to the comic narrative, visual strategies, and socio-cultural context.

4.Result and Discussion

4.1. Analysis of Comic “Team Muhafiz and the Child Raiders”

4.1.1. Analysis



Figure 1.1. The cover image of comic *Team Muhafiz* and the Child Raiders

In this cover image, the central participant is a distressed girl in traditional attire, with teary eyes at representational level. She is holding a doll tightly. Her presence depicts the narrative process. It means she is the “Narrated Participant” in a visual storyline. She communicates innocence, fear, and vulnerability. The doll in her arms serves as a vector of meaning, which symbolizes innocence and emotional trauma. A man with a garland in his neck is holding a young girl from the back reinforces the idea of child marriage and elevates the girl’s representation beyond an individual child to a symbol of all victimized children. Additionally, the presence of this man emphasizes the stark binary between innocence and exploitation, purity and menace. In contrast, the background silhouettes of faceless figures resembling members of *Team Muhafiz* evoke a sense of hope against this injustice.

From an interactive metafunction, the girl’s direct gaze toward the viewer establishes a “demand” image. It compels the audience to engage with her suffering both emotionally and ethically. Here the use of close-up shot signifies intimacy and closeness with viewers that draw them into a more personal interaction with the subject. The eye-level angle further advocates this connect and positions the viewer not in a place of dominance or detachment rather as an equal (preferably a potential ally). These choices invite empathy and solidarity with the child girl by involving the viewers in the moral narrative of the visual.

At compositional level, the girl is placed in the center in the frame, which according to the principle of “information value”, denotes her as the most salient and thematically significant participant. The contrast between the vivid reds, yellows, and pinks of her clothing and the muted and dark tones of the background further enhances her visual prominence. These color choices ensure the viewers’ attention is drawn to her and emotions urgency and distress is evoked. Applying Halliday’s interpersonal metafunction, the image performs a declarative function. It communicates a reality about the presence of child exploitation in society.

The visuals convey the mood of sorrow and urgency as girl’s body language and facial expressions act as powerful semiotic resources. The modality of the image is relatively high but still the depiction remains realistic enough to be emotionally credible. Through appraisal, the image builds an affective relationship with the viewers. The title “*Team Muhafiz and the Child Raiders*” is in coherence with the imagery effectively. In the title, *Muhafiz* is Urdu word meaning the protector. This word is referring to the team who symbolizes hope for a vulnerable minor girl.

4.1.2. Analysis



Figure 4.1.2. A scenario of girls’ football team playing in the ground

This figure from the comic utilizes multimodal approach to introduce a significant event and its central character. The first panel uses a long-shot perspective to set the scene and positions the reader as a distant yet engaged observer of an inter-club football tournament in Minanwali, North Punjab. The accompanying dialogue boxes use declarative sentences to provide a factual overview. The text, “EXCITING

GAME OF FOOTBALL IS UNDERWAY,” and “SPIRITS ARE HIGH AND THE

GIRLS ARE READY,” [emphasis in original] functions as a narrative voice that highlights the specific context of female football team. It is taken as a key detail that subverts traditional gender roles from the outset.

The second panel shifts the focus to a more intimate medium shot, which brings the reader closer to the action and its protagonist, Safiya. Here, the visual and linguistic elements converge to establish her as a dynamic and powerful female figure. Safiya is placed at the center of the frame making her the most salient element. She is depicted with a strong, determined posture in a clear action process.

The vector of her kick guides the reader’s eye and creates a sense of momentum and skill. In addition to this, the visual emphasis on her leadership and talent is directly reinforced by the linguistic commentary. The dialogue box identifies her as “the star of the club, a 13 years old captain.” It also highlights that her “talent and hard work has paid off.” The use of declarative statements and definitive language with high modality affirms her capabilities challenging gender stereotypes.

At interactive stage, the movement from a detached long shot to an engaged medium shot mirrors the narrative’s progression from setting the stage to focusing on the individual hero. The eye-level perspective and the characters’ offer gaze (looking away from the reader) encourage admiration instead of direct emotional plea.

This positions the female characters as subjects of respect and inspiration. The comic is actively promoting a positive message of female empowerment, leadership, and public achievement in a context where such roles are often marginalized.

4.1.3. Analysis



Figure 1.3. The offender trying to throw acid on Safiya

This page from the comic functions as a moment of emotional climax. It depicts the antagonist's rage and his refusal to accept the fact that now he is not going to marry the minor girl. In panel 1, Safiya is hugging coach Elaha who is trying to protect and soothe her. In the second panel, the visual is a medium-close shot of furious man. His hand is reaching for his pocket to take acid bottle and his facial expression is one of frustration. The dark background and lighting on his face create tension and mystery.

The vector of his gaze unfolds his bad intentions to harm the little girl.

In the last panel, the bright green color of acid with a close shot suggests intensity and the occurrence of something grave. The dark background surrounding the acid makes it the focus to draw reader's attention to it.

From linguistic perspectives, the dialogues align with the visual modes. The attacker's dialogue "NO, IT'S NOT OVER. MY FRIENDS WILL LAUGH AT ME...SHE WAS PROMISED TO ME," [emphasis in original] is a declarative statement with high modality that refers to his ego and so-called image in front of his. It also sheds light on the value of a human being (preferably a girl) is nothing as compared to attacker's ego (rather male ego). Similarly, his so-called face saving is far more important than a female child's life and safety. He throws acid towards Safiya's face where the narrator's voice (A HEINOUS CRIME...COMMITTED BY MANY COWARDS AND WEAKLINGS) [emphasis in original] come in to inform reader about this heinous act as a crime that

happens often against women in Pakistan due to male ego. The words “cowards’ and “weaklings” for such men are used by narrator to discourage this grave crime in the society.

4.2. Analysis of comic “Team Muhafiz and Women rescued after”

4.2.1. Analysis

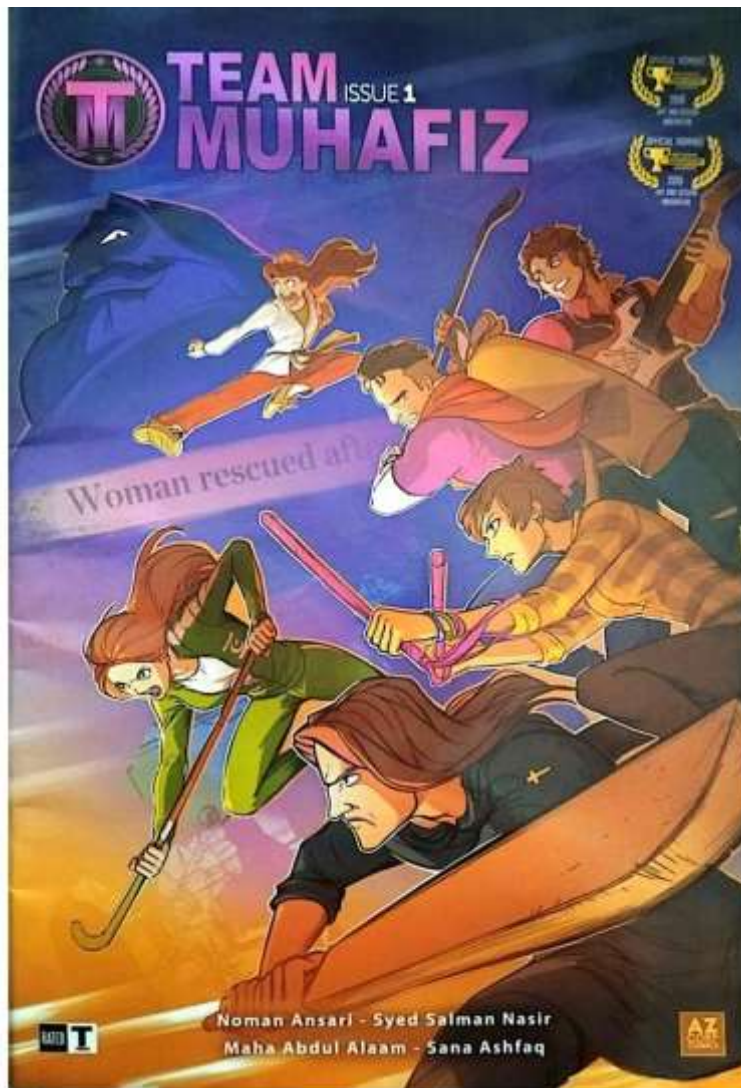


Figure 2.1. The cover image of Issue 1 *Team Muhafiz and the Women Recused After*

The cover image of comic "*Team Muhafiz and the Women Rescued after*" serves a crucial function to introduce some major elements. These include the main characters, a tone of action, heroism, and collaboration.

At representational level, the cover depicts a group of young heroes (including both male and female) who are engaged in a collective action process. The characters are in dynamic poses, with clear vectors of motion. The girl with the hockey stick is swinging, the boy with the guitar is striking a pose, and the girl in pink is leaping. This visually represents the comic as belonging to the action/superhero genre. In the image, the use of everyday items like a hockey stick and a guitar, as weapons or tools suggests a form of relatable and grounded heroism.

From the perspective of interactive metafunction, the medium-long shot shows the full bodies of the characters. It allows the readers to see their actions and their relationship to one another as a team. Further, it employs a slightly low angle to position the viewer to look up to the heroes. This approach elevates the characters as powerful and heroic figures.

The characters are not looking at the viewer directly. Rather their games are focused on the action. It creates an „offer“ which invites the viewer to witness their action instead of addressing them or demanding from them to participate. The contrast between large, purple-blue background and the central group of heroes make them the core focus of the comic.

At compositional level, the title "TEAM MUHAFIZ" is placed at the top establishes the concept and the other part of title "AND THE WOMEN RESCUED AFTER"

[emphasis in original] placed under the first section of the title adds more context to the nature of the story. The most salient elements are the characters themselves. They are highlighted by their vibrant colors and dynamic, overlapping poses. The bold text of the title is also highly salient, which immediately draws the eye. The cover uses an open frame where the characters are overlapping and extending beyond the edges. It creates a sense of continuous action.

Though the linguistic elements on the cover are limited, yet they are crucial for establishing the comic's identity and its ideological stance. The title "TEAM MUHAFIZ" is a powerful linguistic choice. "*Muhafiz*" (مُحَافِظ) is an Urdu word meaning "protector" or "guardian." This immediately codes the group as heroes with a clear purpose of protecting. The word "Team" emphasizes collective action, which suggests that their strength lies in their unity.

In addition to this, the faded text "Woman rescued after..." hints at a specific plot point or theme. It suggests that female empowerment and rescue missions are key to the narrative.

4.2.2. Analysis



Figure 2.2. A scene of girls being teased by street perverts

From representation perspective, this page employs a clear narrative structure focused on a reactionary process. The central image is dominating the page that shows two female characters. The character on the right is looking towards other character with a concerned expression. The character on the left holds a book and an apple. Her gaze is directed away from the viewer towards something off-page. The vectors created by their gazes and body language are central to the narrative.

The right-hand character's raised eyebrows convey a sense of surprise and apprehension. A second narrative element is present in the smaller panels. The bottom panel shows two characters walking away from the viewer. As a result, they are creating a vector of movement and action. This also shows the concerned female character from the main panel, with a smaller panel inset showing a different male character with a thought bubble.

The main panel uses a close-up shot to bring the viewer into an intimate relationship with the characters. This proximity is crucial for allowing the reader to

experience the characters' situation directly. In contrast, the bottom panel is a long shot, which creates a sense of detachment. This distance is appropriate for showing the setting and the characters' movement within the larger context. This ultimately frames them as small figures within the larger urban environment. The smaller panels maintain engagement with the dialogue and internal thoughts.

At compositional stage, the large central panel dominates the page. It puts the two female characters in a prominent position which represents the page's core theme or "ideal." The smaller panels on the right serve as the "new" information as they provide context, dialogue, and a shift in perspective. The thought bubble in the bottom-right panel provides the "real" details. It explains the character's motivations and the situation (undercover operation). The two female characters are the most salient elements. They are foregrounded, brightly colored, and occupy the largest portion of the page.

The small thought bubble of a male character employs declarative mood to express an internal thought: "DID THAT FRUIT EXPLODE ON HER FACE." [emphasis in original] The speech bubble from the female character on the left also uses a declarative mood to make a statement (can be taken as her reaction to the male commented: "NO SIGN OF THAT GANG, ASIDE FROM THE USUAL PERVS

(PERVERTS)."[emphasis in original] The use of the informal and derogatory term "usual pervs" holds a strong negative evaluation. It highlights a clear stance against the perpetrators of harassment. This further establishes the character's persona as someone who is aware of the girl's harassment done by male in Pakistani society. The linguistic choice also reveals her social role.

4.2.3. Analysis



Figure 2.3. A figure showcasing an attempt of kidnapping

This page depicts a moment of direct conflict and physical action. The central element is a speeding van (a clear action process) that dominates the middle of the page. Its forward motion is indicated by the motion lines, which creates a powerful vector moving towards the right. The characters in the middle panel are also caught in this action. One female character is shown being pushed or pulled, while another reacts with surprise.

The bottom panel shows a male character (preferably the kidnapper) with a large hand reaching for one of the female characters, which is visibly recoiling. The vector of man's hand is in direct opposition to her gaze and body language that creates a dynamic visual tension. Her body recoiling and expressions portray a powerful "reactional process" to the threat.

In the bottom panel, the gaze is highly confrontational. The large, dominant hand of the aggressor builds a strong visual demand. On the other hand, the female character's large, wide eyes stare directly at the way she is being approached. The menacing eyes of the aggressor in the panel above also create less direct, demand. The page uses close up shots to establish a sense of connection and to magnify the tension. The top panel is medium shot but the action quickly shifts to a close-up in the middle panel.

The bottom panel is an extreme close-up that focuses on the character's panicked face and the aggressive hand. This close proximity puts the reader directly in the midst of action and makes the threat feel immediate and personal.

In the bottom panel, the shot is a close-up but from a slightly high angle, which positions the viewer as an observer looking down on the moment of capture. It further emphasizes the victim's vulnerability. However, the large, dominating hand is presented at eye-level with the character. It makes its threat feel direct and overpowering.

At compositional level, the speeding van is very salient in the middle panel and dominates the space with its size and the motion lines around it. Its dark color and aggressive forward motion mirrors it as a clear symbol of the threat. On the other hand, in the bottom panel, the large, orange-toned hand and the wide-eyed face of the female character are the most salient elements. They are emphasized by their close-up shots and bright colors. These visual elements draw the reader's attention to the central moment of conflict and panic.

The top panel dialogue of a female character uses a declarative mood to express a threat: "I THINK WE'LL HAVE TO TEACH YOU WHAT 'NO' MEANS."

[emphasis in original]It is a response to the male character's comment on the previous page, and it sheds light on the idea of acceptance of the women's no as Literal no.

The dialogue in the middle panel, "WHAT THE..." [emphasis in original] is a common interjection. It is an utterance in an elliptical mood. It expresses surprise and shock which reflects the character's sudden reaction to the van's appearance. The dialogue in the bottom panel, "CHALO," [emphasis in original] is an imperative mood command in Urdu. It means "Let's go" or "Come on," and it is a command from a male aggressor to their victim. It is a clear assertion of dominance. It can be taken as the use of language to exert power and control over the vulnerable.

4.3. Analysis of "Team Muhafiz and the Toxic Lands"

4.3.1. Analysis

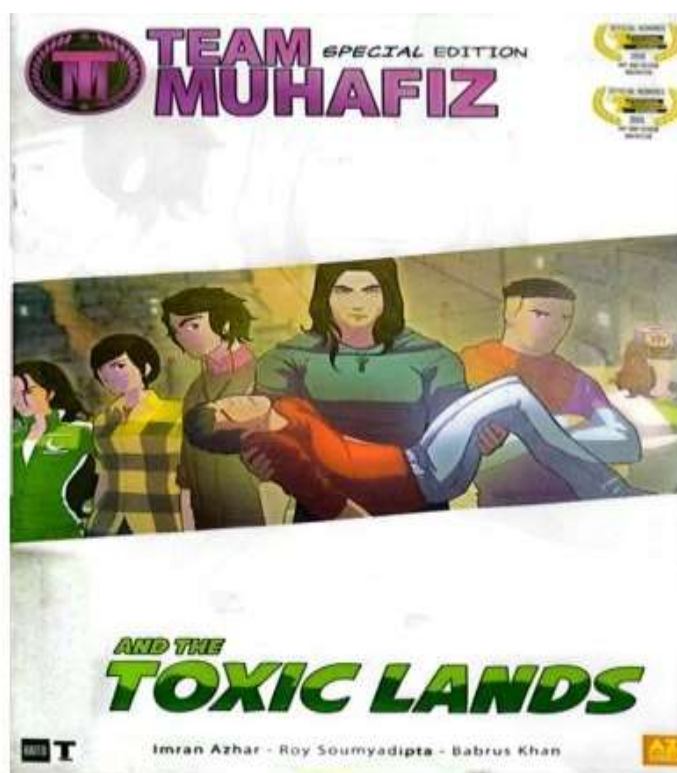


Figure 4.3.1. The cover image of *Team Muhafiz and the Toxic Lands*

At representational level, in this cover image, a male character is being carried by another. The vector of carrying and being carried immediately suggests a theme of rescue, injury, or loss. The central male figure, with his long hair and direct gaze, is the focal point.

He is the central actor in this narrative. The other characters surrounding him are also part of this narrative as supporting figures.

The cover also employs a "conceptual structure" to establish the comic's themes. The title "TEAM MUHAFIZ AND THE TOXIC LANDS" acts as a symbolic process that defines the setting and the nature of the conflict. The background is muted and washed-out tones with buildings visually represent these "toxic lands." This contrasts sharply with the vibrant colors of the characters. It is visually setting up a conflict between the heroes and their desolate environment. The flag of Pakistan on the shirt of one of the female characters is a powerful symbolic element that suggests that the "toxic lands" is a commentary on Pakistan itself.

From interactive perspective, the central male character with long hair is making a direct eye contact with the viewer. This is a strong demand which invites the reader to connect with him. His serious and determined expression implies a call to action. The gazes of other supporting heroes are also directed toward the reader. The cover uses a neutral, eye-level perspective. This is a strategic choice, as it places the reader on equal footing with the characters.

The most salient elements are the central male figure and the injured character he is carrying. Their position in the center of the frame and their bright, distinct colors (the red shirt of the injured character) make them immediately stand out. The muted, brownish-green tones of the background also make the heroes' vibrant colors even more salient, visually emphasizing their role as a force of life and hope in a desolate environment. The logo and titles are also highly salient due to their bold, large font and bright colors.

4.3.2. Analysis



Figure 3.2. An intense scene between Mahnur and drug dealer

This page combines narrative structures with a conceptual structure. The top panels are a clear speech process in which the female protagonist verbally confronts a large, menacing male villain. Her pointing arm and his open, dismissive posture make a dynamic vector of accusation and rejection. This is a foundational narrative moment.

However, the central panel is a conceptual structure. It portrays society through two distinct groups of silhouetted figures. One group, near the top, is shown with the text

“...AND THEN THERE ARE SOME WHO CHOOSE NOT TO IGNORE...,” [emphasis in original] while a larger group at the bottom is of goons. This visual classification of society into offenders and active resisters is a powerful symbolic process. The final panel is a climax of the narrative structure, a dynamic action process, where the female member of Team *Muhafiz* physically confronts the villain. The vector of her hand grabbing his collar is an act of defiance. It is also a direct representation of her words being translated into action.

It uses varying shot distances to control emotional intensity. The top panels are medium shots, which create a sense of confrontation. The central, long shot provides a sense of detachment, which allows the reader to observe the societal context from a distance. The bottom panels, however, use close-ups that increase the emotional intensity. The final close-up of the member of Team *Muhafiz* grabbing the villain is an immediate moment of action.

The dialogue in the top panel is a mix of moods. The girl’s statement: “YOU ARE KILLING CHILDREN, HUNDREDS ARE DYING BECAUSE OF PEOPLE LIKE

YOU. HOW CAN YOU LIVE WITH YOURSELF?” [emphasis in original] employs a declarative mood to make a powerful accusation, followed by an interrogative mood that is a rhetorical challenge to the villain's morality. This depicts the hero's interpersonal role as a moral crusader. The villain's response, “NOW, NOW MY LITTLE GIRL... CAME OFF SO MUCH ANGRY ...,” uses a mocking tone and the condescending term “MY LITTLE GIRL.” [emphasis in original] This builds the villain's interpersonal role as a bully who uses mockery to assert his dominance.

Similarly, the villain's speech, “...HEY, MY FRIENDS BEHIND YOU... OH, BY THE WAY, THEY ARE ALSO VERY COOL,” [emphasis in original] is a series of declarative moods that are meant to taunt and provoke. He is using language to mock the heroes and belittle their attempts to help. In the girl's final statements, “LET ME

THINK... HMMMM... SORRY NOT INTERESTED," and "ENOUGH? NO, IT'S

NOT ENOUGH," [emphasis in original]the first statement is an interrogative and elliptical mood used to criticize the villain's offer. The second statement is a declarative mood that is a direct rejection of the villain's words. The use of the word "ENOUGH" is a clear expression of the girl's frustration and her decision to move to action. Moreover, the use of terms like "Gulabo," and "Rani" can be taken as expressions used to harass a girl as the research has explored the same idea in previous comic *Team Muhafiz and the Women Rescued after*. Similarly the use of phrases such as "play with your dolls" sheds light on the stereotypical expectations attached with female gender and they can also be seen as a way of asserting his authority over her character.

4.3.3. Analysis



Figure 3.3. A resolution of story

This page is structured around a conceptual process of dialogue and a narrative structure showing a resolution. The top panel depicts a speech process in which a police

officer is addressing an unseen audience. The middle panels depict a consultation in what appears to be the "DRUGS ADDICT REHABILITATION CENTRE," [emphasis in original] as mentioned in the text box. The bottom panels show a new conceptual structure: the characters are now involved in a new project, collecting garbage for "FREE ENERGY". [emphasis in original] This represents a symbolic process that is turning a societal problem (garbage) into a solution (energy). Through this representation, it is embodying the themes of hope and social change.

The police officer in the top panel looks directly at the reader and establishes a strong demand act. He is asking the reader to listen to his words and acknowledge the heroism of the Team *Muhafiz*. In the middle panels, the male character with long hair looks directly at the reader and creates demand act to invite the reader to listen to the new project. This is a recurring interactive technique that places the team as spokespeople for a moral cause. The other characters' gazes are averted that allows the reader to observe their reactions and their part in the new project.

The top panel is a medium shot of the police officer, which creates a formal connection to his speech. The middle panels are medium to close-up shots that bring the reader into the discussion about the new project. The bottom panel is a medium shot, which allows the reader to see the group and the new project in action. It ultimately makes it a collective participation. The panels use an eye-level perspective throughout. Here it is a consistent choice that keeps the reader on equal footing with all the characters. It encourages them to listen to the various perspectives and to feel a part of the team's new initiative.

The police officer in the top panel is highly salient due to his size and his position. The text boxes with their white and yellow backgrounds are also highly salient, which draws the reader's attention to the key linguistic information. In the bottom panel, the central figures are made salient by their actions and their vibrant colors.

The police officer's dialogue, "NO WAIT... WELL, WHAT I REALLY WANT TO

SAY IS... HMMM... YOU ARE MY HEROES... AND I AM PROUD OF YOU,"

[emphasis in original] is a declarative mood that functions as a commendation. His use of the modal "HMMM..." and "NO WAIT..." suggests a genuine sentiment rather than a prepared speech, which makes his praise more personal.

In the middle panels, the first speech bubble, "WOW, THANKS... YES OF COURSE WE ARE INTERESTED," [emphasis in original] is a combination of

exclamatory and declarative moods. It expresses both gratitude and a positive response. The other speech bubble, spoken by the character with long hair, is a declarative mood that works as a proposal: “WE HAVE FOUND AN AMAZING FOUNDATION THAT PRODUCES ALTERNATIVE ENERGY FROM THE GARBAGE.” [emphasis in original] This statement, with its use of the word “amazing,” develops a stance of enthusiasm and hope.

In the bottom panel, the dialogue employs a declarative mood to issue a call to action and to make a promise. “SO ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS HELP THEM COLLECT GARBAGE” [emphasis in original] is a declarative that functions as a command and gives the speaker a role of a leader. The final speech bubble, “AND FREE

EDUCATION FOR YOU,” [emphasis in original] is a promise, a hopeful statement that associates the team's actions to a tangible social good.

The findings reveal a coherent and systematic use of multimodal strategies in *Team Muhafiz* to represent social evils and engage readers in moral discourse. Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) visual grammar and Halliday’s interpersonal metafunction, the comics construct powerful visual and linguistic narratives that depict victims and perpetrators while positioning readers as active participants in resisting injustice. In line with Bateman (2014), meaning emerges through the integration of compositional salience, symbolic imagery, gaze, social distance, mood, modality, and evaluative language to achieve ideological and social goals.

Consistent with Cherland’s (2006) work on children’s picture books and gender socialization, this study highlights the capacity of comics to shape children’s perceptions of gender and social responsibility. Significantly, the findings challenge entrenched stereotypes identified by Gooden and Gooden (2001), particularly the depiction of women as passive and marginalized. Practices such as male dominance, gendered violence, and crimes like *Vani* are exposed. The victims (both female and male) are foregrounded as central moral agents.

At the representational level, symbolism plays a key role in foregrounding moral meaning. In *Team Muhafiz and the Child Raiders*, the image of a girl holding a doll functions as a visual metaphor for innocence violated by child marriage. It echoes Forceville’s (2009) view of visual metaphors as cognitively efficient conveyors of complex moral meanings. Across all three comics, light and shadow demarcate justice from corruption. They draw on culturally embedded associations of brightness with hope and darkness with moral decay.

Interpersonally, gaze functions as a powerful engagement strategy. Victims frequently employ a “demand” gaze (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), directly confronting the viewer and eliciting ethical and emotional responses. On the other hand, perpetrators are depicted with averted or obscured gazes, which reinforces moral exclusion. This contrast humanizes victims, marginalizes offenders, and underscores the comics’ call for social resistance.

Social distance and perspective further reinforce solidarity. Close-up and mid-shot framing fosters intimacy and empathy (van Leeuwen, 2008). The eye-level angles position victims, especially female characters, as equals rather than objects of pity. The inclusion of male and female heroes from diverse regions and backgrounds promotes inclusivity and gender equality, diverging from earlier patterns in children’s media (Gooden & Gooden, 2001).

Compositional salience consistently assigns moral priority to victims and heroes through central placement, colour contrast, and foregrounding. It confirms Kress and van Leeuwen’s principle that salience guides interpretation. Linguistically, these visual strategies are reinforced through declarative mood, which conveys authority and moral clarity (Halliday, 2004), and modality markers such as *must*, which introduce obligation and urgency, aligning with Martin and White’s (2005) appraisal framework.

Collectively, these findings affirm Bateman’s (2014) assertion that multimodal meaning arises from semiotic integration rather than isolated modes. While *Team Muhafiz* aligns with socially conscious storytelling traditions, it departs from earlier gender representations noted by Davis (2003). Female characters such as Mahnur, Elaha, Parinaaz, and Aarya are portrayed as professionals and agents of resistance that signals an evolution in South Asian children’s media.

Cultural localization further distinguishes the series. By situating narratives in recognisable Pakistani settings such as Urdu Bazaar, Karachi, Mianwali, and rural communities, the comics ground social critique in lived realities. It advocated Pieterse’s (1992) argument that culturally anchored narratives foster stronger audience identification and responsibility. Interpersonally, the use of collective pronouns and direct moral address positions readers as participants rather than spectators, echoing Fairclough’s (1995) view of discourse as a means of ideological positioning. This framing promotes shared moral accountability and civic engagement.

There are certain limitations of this research work. This analysis is confined to three issues of the comic *Team Muhafiz*, which may not capture the full range of representational strategies used across different types of comics. Although the multimodal analysis of the selected comics unfolds the intended ideological positioning, it does not

address how actual readers interpret and respond to the story. In summary, the multimodal analysis of *Team Muhafiz* underscores the ability of visual narratives (comics) to engage with urgent social issues that are both culturally resonant and ideologically charged. By employing gaze, salience, framing, symbolism, linguistic mood and modality, these comics humanize the victims, condemn perpetrators, and invite the readers into a shared moral project. These strategies align with the findings of prior studies on children's literature, gender representation, and multimodal discourse. Whereas it also extends the findings of previous research works by offering distinctive contributions rooted in the Pakistani socio-cultural context. In the modern era, the youth media often oscillates between escapist fantasy and didactic moralizing. But *Team Muhafiz* demonstrates immersive, action-driven storytelling that is both entertaining and socially transformative.

5. Conclusion

This study examined selected issues of the *Team Muhafiz* comic series to explore how social issues such as child marriage, girls' harassment, and drug abuse are represented through visual and linguistic modes. Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar and Halliday's interpersonal metafunction, the analysis of *The Child Raiders*, *Women Rescued After*, and *The Toxic Lands* revealed a strategic use of multimodal resources including gaze, symbolism, salience, composition, modality, and evaluative language. These semiotic choices not only advance the narrative but also position readers as active participants, enabling the comics to convey culturally grounded moral messages. A key contribution of this research lies in demonstrating how *Team Muhafiz* departs from reductive portrayals commonly identified in children's literature and comics (Gooden & Gooden, 2001). Unlike stereotypical depictions of marginalized figures as passive, the series presents both male and female victims as agentive, with female characters actively resisting injustice. This challenges patriarchal narratives and aligns with contemporary gender discourse, situating the series within an emergent, socially conscious media tradition.

The findings also support Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) claim about the communicative power of visual modes and resonate with Bateman's (2014) argument that meaning emerges through the interaction of multiple semiotic systems. In *Team Muhafiz*, visuals evoke affective responses while text articulates explicit moral judgments, ensuring that complex issues remain accessible to younger audiences without trivialization.

Cultural localization further distinguishes the series. By situating narratives in familiar Pakistani settings such as Urdu Bazar, Karachi, and Mianwali, the comics foster audience identification and frame social problems as immediate and solvable. This

supports Sakti's (2024) view that culturally grounded narratives revitalize local wisdom and contrasts with the abstraction often seen in Western comics. Methodologically, purposive sampling and panel-level analysis enabled close attention to moments of high semiotic density, aligning with multimodal discourse approaches that emphasize micro-level textual detail. However, the study is limited to qualitative textual analysis of selected issues and does not address audience reception. Its findings are therefore context-specific and not generalizable to the entire series or global comic narratives. Future research could incorporate reader-response methods and expand theoretical frameworks to include narrative theory, critical discourse analysis, or gender theory.

Academically, this research contributes to multimodal discourse studies by applying visual grammar and interpersonal metafunction to youth media within a South Asian context, challenging Eurocentric tendencies in existing scholarship. Practically, the findings highlight the potential of *Team Muhafiz* as a pedagogical tool, an advocacy medium for social activists, and a model for media producers seeking to balance social responsibility with narrative engagement.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that *Team Muhafiz* functions as a form of ideological intervention rather than mere entertainment. By humanizing victims, delegitimizing offenders, and emphasizing collective responsibility, the series positions readers as active citizens committed to justice, supporting Fairclough's (1995) view of texts as agents of social meaning-making. This research affirms that rigorous multimodal analysis can uncover how popular media negotiates meaning and contributes to social change.

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