

VISUALIZING LOST CHILDHOOD: A MULTIMODAL SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF CHILD LABOUR THROUGH THE SYMBOL OF TAKHTI

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Abstract

Child labour is not simply an economic and legal issue but also a visual and cultural narrative, that is a means of representing childhood, poverty, education and marginalisation. This research is based on selected visual works of art dealing with the issues of child labour and the takhti, a symbol of traditional South Asian writing board, which is related to early literacy, schooling, discipline and childhood learning. The study is carried out through qualitative multimodal critical discourse, which is based on the visual grammar of Kress and van Leeuwen, van Leeuwen's representation of social actors, Fairclough's critical discourse and Barthes' semiotic theory of denotation, connotation and myth. The analysis dwells upon colour, gaze, posture, framing, salience, spatial arrangement, symbolic objects and the visual contrast of education and labour. Findings indicate that the takhti turns into a metaphor of denied schooling, interrupted childhood and social exclusion. Children are depicted as anonymous, vulnerable and marginalised, and social actors within the scope of exploitation are barely present. The study posits that visual art can be used as a social critique to reveal the educational deprivation, and to question the normalization of child labour within the South Asian society.

1. Introduction

Child labour is one of the oldest social and human development problems in many developing societies. It is closely related to poverty, unequal access to education, household economic insecurity and low level protection of children's rights. Too young children entering into labour find themselves lacking a childhood, lacking schooling, leisure, emotional development and symbolic experiences. Therefore, child labour cannot be simply perceived as work done by children. It is also an experience of interruption of childhood and of children being forced into adult survival modes.

The linkages between child labour and education are especially relevant in South Asian contexts. Children's income might be a critical factor for the survival of poor households, while school-related expenses, parents' illiteracy and the lack of good education can make children even more vulnerable to dropping out of school. Economists have tried to account for child labour in various poverty, household decision-making, and human capital development (HC) models, which involve a trade-off between short-term income and long-term human capital accumulation (Baland & Robinson, 2000; Becker, 1965; Rosenzweig & Evenson, 1977). While important, such work is insufficient in explaining the cultural representation and the visual communication of child labour.

Takhti is a traditional symbol of education in the South Asian culture. It is often linked to early writing practice, literacy, memorisation, discipline and starting school. It is an object of strong cultural connotations of schooling, innocence and aspiration. When the takhti is used in artworks on child labour, however, its meaning is different. But it symbolizes not the learning and hope, but the lack of learning, the disruption and the missed opportunity.

Symbolic objects, body posture, colour, spatial composition and framing are frequently used in visual representations of child labour to convey the idea of exploitation and vulnerability. The look, the exhausted form, the gloomy background, the exposed soles, the work implements, and the empty classroom can all have ideological significance. These visual elements do not just decorate the image, they structure the viewer's understanding of poverty, marginalisation and social neglect. In such a manner,

the visual arts could turn into a strong site of social critique.

This research examines the symbol of "takhti" in selected art works of visual arts, as a semiotic representation of child labour. Drawing from Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) which is informed by Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar, van Leeuwen's social actor framework, Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis and Barthes' visual semiotics. The goal is to analyze how images create discourses of loss of childhood, educational deprivation and socio-economic exploitation visually. The study assumes that the takhti, as a visible/experiential space, a transformed space, a displaced space or a symbolically emptied space is a cultural marker of interrupted schooling. The study involves the analysis of composition, salience, gaze, posture, colour, symbolic objects, and spatial organisation to make a contribution to the fields of visual semiotics, multimodal discourse studies, childhood studies and south Asian cultural analysis.

2. Significance of the Study

In terms of academic output, this study is a contribution to the study on child labour which goes beyond the economic, legal and sociological explanations. It explores the visual representation of child labour and the cultural symbolism in art. This is vital, given that photographs can be as powerful as written or spoken words in influencing perceptions of poverty, childhood, exploitation and education.

Theoretically, the study is an attempt to expand the conditions of applying Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis to the analysis of South Asian visual culture. The research uses a structured model to analyse how visual devices (gaze, framing, salience, colour, posture, spatial arrangements and symbolic objects) elicit ideological effects by drawing on concepts from visual grammar, social semiotics, semiotic interpretation and Critical Discourse Analysis.

Socially and culturally the study identifies the takhti as an indigenous educational symbol which can shed light on the tension between schooling and labour. The analysis reflects on the role that visual art may play in bringing these concerns to the fore and stimulating reflection on the structural inequalities that send children away from school. Thus, the study places visual representation within the realm of awareness, resistance, and critique.

3. Statement of the Problem

Child labour is a longstanding socio-economic issue in many developing societies which drives children into exploitative labour conditions due to poverty, inequality and lack of access to education. While there are plenty of economic, legal and sociological studies about child labour, there are not many studies that have explored the representation of child labour in the visual and symbolic aspects of artistic discourse. In South Asian culture, the takhti traditionally symbolizes the literacy, learning, innocence and starting of formal education. However, in artistic representations of working children, this symbol can be distorted, moved, emptied or placed in another context. This mode of change indicates disruption of education and its substitution by labour. Although it is of cultural significance, the takhti in visual depictions of child labour has so far not been explored on a semiotic level.

It is thus important to explore how discourses of lost childhood and educational deprivation are created using visual language. This study is a filling of that gap with the use of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of selected works of art in which takhti is one of the most significant cultural and semiotic symbols.

4. Research Questions

1. In what way is the takhti symbolically depicted in visual imagery of child labour?
2. How gaze, posture, framing, colour, salience and spatial arrangement contribute to the discourse of lost childhood?
3. What are the differences between the chosen works of art and education and labour?
4. What are the ideological messages of the artworks that highlight social economic inequalities and educational deprivation in South Asian society?

5. Research Objectives

1. To analyse the takhti as a semiotic symbol in the visual representation of child labour.
5. To examine the multimodal visual elements in creating meanings of exploitation, deprivation and lost childhood.
6. To investigate a contrast between education and labour in selected artworks.
7. To read the ideology of socio-economic inequality and educational marginalisation in the visual discourse of South Asia.

6. Literature Review

6.1 Child Labour, Poverty, and Education

Child labour has been extensively examined from the socio-economic perspective as being related to poverty, family income, education expenses, household decision-making and the labour market situation. According to Subhadarsani (2014) child labour is prevalent in the following sectors: manufacturing, transportation and trade, agriculture, construction, services. Children are often drawn to these sectors due to the fact that perhaps need money quickly and the family may be unable to afford the costs of schooling. Chaudhry and Khan (2002) also connect child labour to economic and social situations which limit access to education.

The link between child labour and education also has been explored using the human capital theory. Baland and Robinson (2000) suggest that in the short-term, child labour can contribute to the improvement of household incomes but can have negative impacts on long-term welfare by restricting the education and earning potential of children. The Becker's (1965) household allocation theory and Rosenzweig and Evson's (1977) study on schooling and children's economic contribution also provides some explanations as to why poor households might allocate children's time between school and labour. Angrist and Krueger (1991) also demonstrate the overall significance of schooling on labour market outcomes.

These studies form a good economic and sociological background. But they fail to explore fully the representation of child labour in visual culture. The meaning of 'child labour' is not singularly made by statistics, policies or by household decisions. It is also created using images, symbols and cultural narratives that shape societal perceptions and attitudes to working children.

6.2 Visual Semiotics and Multimodal Discourse

Visual semiotics is the study of how images generate meaning using signs, symbols and codes shared within the culture. Barthes (1977) writes that images work on a denotative and connotative level. The denotative level involves the identification by the viewer of what is physically visible. The connotative level of meaning is the cultural and ideological meaning created by visual signs. This distinction can be helpful when analysing child labour artworks; for example, a takhti, a tool for labour, bare feet, a space

in the school, or an empty background can all have meanings in addition to their physical presence.

Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar is a systematic approach to analysing images as forms of structured communication. They approach these meanings by considering representational, interactive and compositional meanings using visual devices like gaze, salience, framing, vectors, modality, colour and spatial arrangement. The visual aids can be useful in child labour imagery in order to explain the vulnerability, marginalisation, silencing or social exclusion of children.

The takhti is of particular significance since it is not a neutral object. In South Asian memory culture it is linked to childhood learning and early education. When this object is set next to the labouring children, or made to represent the suffering of the frame, it turns into a symbolic reflection of educational deprivation. The photograph thus conveys that there is labour but no schooling.

6.3 Critical Discourse Analysis and Research Gap

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) focuses on the relationship between representation and ideology, power and social practice. According to Fairclough (2001), discourse is not only a reflection of society, but it is also a part of the process of reproduction or contestation of society's inequalities. Images in visual representations of child labour not only can normalize the social conditions that make child labour acceptable, but also challenge the notion that all children have equal access to education.

The framework of representation of social actors in van Leeuwen (1996) also proves useful in this study. It assists in elucidating how children's, employers', parents', institutions', and state's voice may be included, excluded, foregrounded, backgrounded, activated or passivated in a discourse. Many child labour photos show the children working, albeit very prominently, but the institutions behind the child labour are not shown. This lacuna is ideologically relevant as it can reveal a hiding of responsibility and a display of suffering.

While child labour has been studied in economic, sociological, legal, literary and media-based ways, indigenous educational symbols like the takhti have been seldom explored in the context of the visual depiction of labouring children. This research is an attempt to fill this void by analysing selected artworks

from a multimodal semiotic perspective and critical discourse approach.

7. Methodology

7.1 Research Design

The research design used is qualitative and uses Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis method to analyze the semiotic representation of child labour using the symbol takhti. Qualitative approach is appropriate as the study is not about measurement but one of interpretation, symbolism, ideology and visual meaning. The study is interpretive and analytical, investigating the way in which the images in the arts produce discourses of lost childhood, educational deprivation and socio-economic marginalisation.

7.2 Research Approach

Four interrelated theoretical perspectives are utilized to inform the study. The visual grammar of Kress and van Leeuwen is used to analyze gaze, framing, salience, vectors, modality, colour, composition and spatial arrangements. The social actor framework of van Leeuwen is employed to determine the visual representation, exclusion or suppression of children and responsible social actors. Visual representation is related to broader social practices and structures of difference and inequality using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis. The interpretation of meanings in the selected works of art is supported by Barthes; Semiotic concepts of denotation, connotation and myth.

7.3 Data Collection

The main data comprise of a selection of visual artworks concerning child labour and educational deprivation. The works of art are drawings, sketches, paintings and visual illustrations, which symbolically relate to the theme of denied education by depicting working children. The images selected create a visual corpus that is appropriate and adequate for detailed multimodal and semiotic analysis.

7.4 Sampling Technique

The kind of sampling used was purposive sampling as the study was a visual study which demanded visual materials that directly represented child labour, educational exclusion, and cultural symbolism. The images were chosen based on the following:

- Illustrates children who are working or doing something that represents poverty.
- The image has the takhti or is indicative of educational deprivation.

- The themes of Poverty, Exploitation, Marginalisation or Lost Childhood are depicted visually.
- It has rich multimodal features, which can be used for semiotic and discourse analysis.

7.5 Analytical Framework

The analysis was organised at three interrelated levels: denotative, connotative, and ideological. Table 1 summarises the framework used in the study.

Analytical level	Main focus	Key visual elements
Denotative analysis	Identification of what is visibly present in the image	Characters, objects, setting, posture, clothing, colour, and composition
Connotative analysis	Interpretation of symbolic and cultural meanings	Takhti, labour tools, gaze, facial expression, bare feet, empty space, and visual contrast
Ideological analysis	Connection between image, power, and social inequality	Poverty, educational exclusion, social neglect, class inequality, exploitation, and marginalised childhood

7.6 Procedure of Analysis

The analysis was carried out systematically. Firstly, the chosen artworks were arranged as a visual corpus. Second, repetition of visual symbols and multimodal features were observed. Thirdly, educational and labour related indicators were classified. Fourth, a denotative description of the visible elements was

made. Finally, the symbolic meanings were read at the connotative level. Lastly, through MCDA these images were critically analyzed for ideological significance pertaining to the loss of childhood, educational disadvantage, silencing and voicelessness, the commodity explosion of childhood, and socio-economic marginalisation.

8. Analysis and Discussion

8.1 Artwork 1: Takhti as a Symbol of Denied Education



Figure 1. Children involved in labour in takhti frame. Source: Original artwork by the author, Manzoor Solangi.

The takhti is the most prominent pictorial frame shown in Figure 1 and therefore the artwork immediately draws reference to childhood education and early literacy. But the scene of learning is not the expected. The lower section does not have children that are studying or practising writing, participating in a school activity but rather children that are working. This contrast builds the main ideological tension of the image which is that the cultural object

linked to education becomes a place that houses deprivation.

The composition is arranged vertically, with a considerable amount of white space above, towards the top, and the children grouped towards the bottom. The top void acts as a symbolic representation of lost opportunities, silence and unfulfilled learning potential. The down orientation of the children indicates that children's aspirations are suppressed. In

terms of salience, the viewer's attention is first directed to the takhti outline and then to the small figures of the children, which visually suggests that the promise of education is greater than them, but not for them.

Colour is a significant component in the creation of meaning. The black background creates a sense of isolation, invisibility and social darkness. It detaches the takhti from an overall social context and puts the kids into a symbolic space of neglect. The contrast in the white interior, which would normally connote purity, innocence and learning, is ironic because the children are the ones who are in labour, not in school. The earthy hues surrounding the children also indicate poverty, dust, hardship and physical labour.

8.2 Artwork 2: The Individual Child and the Burden of Labour



Figure 2. A child working within the takhti frame. Source: Original artwork by the author, Manzoor Solangi.

Figure 2 is a continuation of the symbolic use of takhti, but instead of a group of children, it is a child. This individualisation magnifies the emotional effect of the artwork as it encourages viewers to face the physical and psychological challenges of child labour on a more personal level. The child is seated within the takhti frame, playing with a tyre-like object, which appears to be associated with manual labour, as opposed to a school environment. Education is thus permeated by survival tools and gestures.

The children are not represented individually but generically as seen in the light of van Leeuwen's social actor's approach. They are not named, identified or provided with social histories. This puts them in the position of representing a greater number of exploited children, not just one child. Meanwhile, adults, employers, parents, schools and state institutions are missing from the picture. Ideologically, this suppression is important because it puts the suffering child on the screen whilst the social structures responsible are not displayed. The image is, in Fairclough's terms, a visual critique of the social practice of poverty in lieu of education and labour in lieu of childhood.

Child's posture is key element of meaning of image. The figure is depicted with a bent body, downward gaze, folded limbs, and a crouched stance, suggesting a sense of exhaustion, withdrawal, and vulnerability. The eye gaze is not directed at the viewer. Rather, it continues to point downward, indicating lack of voice, resignation, and silence. The bare feet also symbolize poverty and exposure. These represent lack of protection and the physical vulnerability of the working child.

The contrast of colours reinforces the semiotic message. Again, the black background serves to isolate and render invisible, while the reddish-brown colours refer to dust and to difficult or industrialized or street-level hardship. The blue shirt gives a contrast maintaining the child's innocence and humanity, but that innocence is visually set in a hard environment. This comparison results in an emotional paradox between the childhood that is supposed to be and the childhood that is portrayed in the image.

Social actor terms: the child is visually activated as he is presented physically involved in labour. But ideologically he is passivated, because he seems to be out of control of what are the conditions that form his life. Employers, institutions and educational authorities are absent, and the focus is on the child's suffering and the backgrounding of the systems that create suffering. Takhti transforms into a place of education and a cage-like structure. It no longer means empowerment through education, it means the denial of empowerment through education.

8.3 Artwork 3: Rural Labour and Educational Exclusion

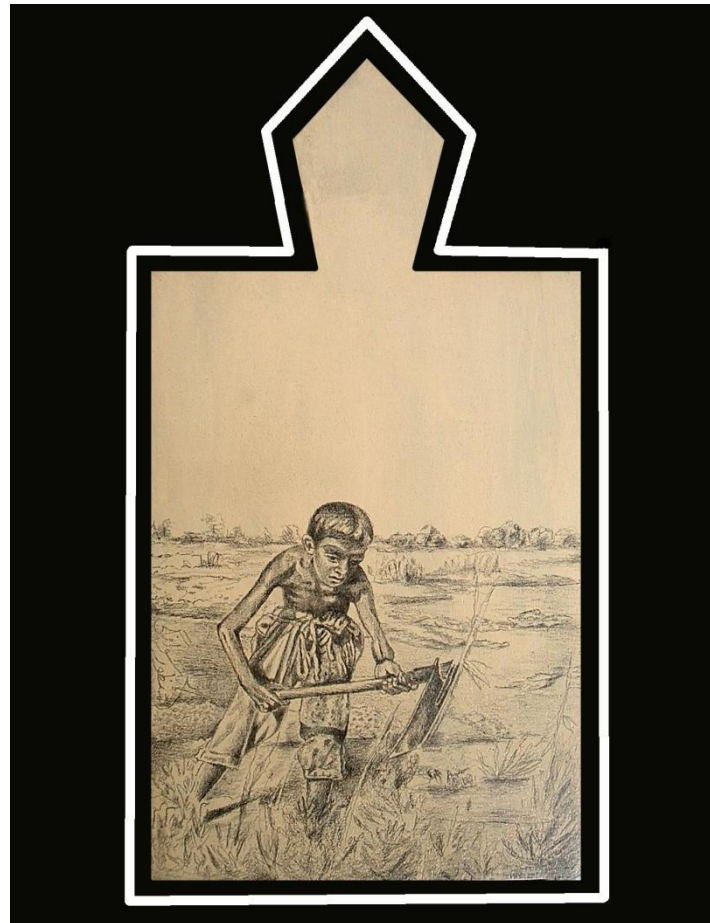


Figure 3. Rural child labour represented within the takhti frame. Source: Original artwork by the author, Manzoor Solangi.

The analysis is expanded from urban or informal labour to rural agricultural labour in Figure 3. The child's activity is depicted, with a farming implement in a field, and the takhti frame still organizing the picture. It is a potent contrast between the ideal of schooling and the reality of labour that is rural. Takhti turns into a vessel of miseries, not into a medium of literacy.

Child's body is shown as frail, stretched and physically burdened. The body's lean forward posture and a strong hold on the farming implement convey labour, survival, and the exhaustion of the body. The look down is one of resignation and voicelessness. Thus the body becomes a text of deprivation to look at. It does not only convey physical work, but also malnutrition, vulnerability and early maturity of adult responsibility for a child.

The rural landscape is used as a semiotic resource. The field symbolises agrarian poverty, manual labour and economic constraints that can lead to the exploitation of children. The background is minimal and subdued, contributing to the feeling of isolation and underdevelopment. This sepia range of browns and muted colors takes the shine away from childhood and give it a documentary quality of difficulty.

Thick white outline frames the child, separating him from the black background, in a symbolic containment. In van Leeuwen's view the child is once again portrayed as a representative of a group of children in general, namely rural child labourers. Responsible social actors are not included, including landowners, employers, schools, policymakers and welfare institutions. This lack can be read as a criticism of social structures which naturalise rural poverty and educational exclusion, through Fairclough's model.

Table 2 is a summary of the themes that are represented in the three artworks.

Theme	Artwork 1	Artwork 2	Artwork 3	Interpretation
Lost childhood	Present	Present	Present	Childhood is visually substituted with labour and harshness.
Educational deprivation	Strong	Strong	Strong	The takhti is a symbol of lack of education and not learning.
Social marginalisation	Strong	Strong	Strong	Children are visibly outside of social protection and institutional support.
Suppressed responsible actors	Present	Present	Present	Employers, institutions, state structures do not appear on the visual plane.
Labour as identity	Moderate	Strong	Strong	The child is portrayed as engaged in labour and through using tools, or through their bodies being exhausted.

The takhti is used repeatedly, thus creating a visual "myth" according to Barthes. So the takhti is no longer merely a wooden writing board, but also a cultural symbol of a childhood that was stolen, an education interrupted. Its symbolic power is the contradiction between its conventional meaning and the images. The viewer understands the promise of education but the image reveals that this promise has been denied to the child.

Combined analysis indicates that the chosen art works are more than a representation of child labour. They examine and denounce the social normalisation of child labour and reveal the emotional, educational and ideological implications of exploitation. The images challenge the belief that all children have

8.4 Cross-Image Thematic Discussion

In all three artworks, the takhti is the key symbolic element which juxtaposes education and labour. In every image, the takhti still has its cultural connotation of learning, but it is altered by the presence of children who are labouring. The thing that should be used to promote literacy is a visual deprivation frame. This transformation creates a powerful semiotic message: Education is there as an ideal and not there as a lived reality.

The works also share a common grammar of the image of marginalisation. Children are positioned in the lower part of the frame, positioned to look down, depicted as weary or burdened, and in dark or dull backgrounds. All these visual decisions represent children as voiceless and socially excluded. Meanwhile, adults and institutions are lacking. This is no coincidence, but an integral component of the images' ideology. It is the children who are visible, but not the systems that exploit or fail them.

access to education equally and give insight into the construction of childhood in class inequality.

9. Conclusion

In this study, the symbol of takhti, a recognized symbol in the culture of the community, was investigated as the semiotic representation of child labour in selected visual artworks. It analysed the multimodal meanings of lost childhood, educational deprivation and social marginalisation using a critical discourse approach that focused on the visual aspects of the images, including colour, framing, gaze, posture, salience, spatial arrangement and symbolic objects.

Based on the analysis, there is a shift from the traditional takhti as a symbol of learning to a metaphor of denied education. In all three works of

art, the place where literacy is supposed to be is filled with labour, tiredness, poverty and silence. The children are portrayed as vulnerable and marginalised social actors, and institutions and adult actors are virtually invisible. This proves to be a blind spot in child labour discourse, revealing the hidden part of structural responsibility.

This study is concluded that the visual art is a potent medium for social critique. The artworks show the conflict between the ideal of education and the socio-economic deprivation of labouring children, by positioning them as an internal contrast within the symbolic frame of the takhti. The study offers a contribution to the fields of visual semiotics, Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis and childhood studies for its demonstration of the use of indigenous educational symbols to challenge the exploitation and promote educational justice.

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