



Multimodal Analysis on the Cover Books of the Translated Bestselling Feminist Fiction

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Abstract. Book cover is not only the representation of its content but can also be the representation of the sociocultural aspects of its production site. Especially with a sensitive matter such as feminism, each publisher in each respective society must have designed book covers that both fit and attract the readers. Employing visual grammar theory by Kress and Van Leeuwen, this paper analyses two different book covers, the British and the Indonesian versions, of the translated bestselling feminist fiction Kim Ji Young, *Born in 1982*. It intends to see how the combination of modes constructs meanings in each version and how it reflects the sensitivity of both societies regarding feminist ideology. The findings of this paper suggest that British society is open about the feminism ideology, whereas Indonesian society has not been too open in regards to the doctrine or the issue just yet.

Keywords: Multimodal analysis · Book cover · Feminist fiction

1 Introduction

Books have been a product of mass consumption for a long time. It has been consumed for various purposes, from education and gaining insight to more entertainment. On picking up a book, it is common to judge it by its cover since it is the first thing the readers see. Ultimately, the publishing industry acknowledges that the book cover is the key aspect to promoting the “grabability” of a book and is also the determinant of the book’s success regardless of the quality of the content [1]. Due to its significance, each decision has always been carefully decided by the publishers, including the target readers, content representation, marketing, and sociocultural aspects.

Meanwhile, book covers are naturally multimodal [2]. They “utilize more than one mode or semiotic resource to represent meaning potentials, where mode is defined as a socioculturally shaped resource for meaning-making” [3]. Multimodal analysis, after that, can interpret how these covers are designed to achieve their purpose in consideration of the sociocultural context of its readers.

Several studies have discussed book covers as multimodal text. The first study is by Li et al. [2]. This research aimed to bridge translation and multimodal studies by developing the visual grammar approach by Kress and Van Leeuwen [5]. It investigated how different covers from a translated controversial book, *Wild Swans* by Jung Chang, might illustrate ideologies. The results found that the Orientalist ideology motivated the

increase of ‘likeability’ and the ‘back-staging’ of the anti-Mao agenda in the Western versions. The second study is by Wu & Wu [4]. It revealed that Jane Eyre’s book covers are closely related to the social changes in Chinese culture and society. It analyzed the evolution of Chinese versions of the book covers from 1930 to the present time. They concluded that the ideological shift of Chinese publishers and readers is shown from the gradual acceptance of the book.

However, the studies that focus on book covers of a translated version is still scarce. Therefore, by incorporating Kress and Van Leeuwen’s framework [5], this paper intends to illustrate how translated cover versions differ from country to country and how these sign-making choices reflect the readers’ sociocultural condition. Based on three dimensions of meaning in this framework, this study believes that the two cover versions, the UK and Indonesian, of the bestseller feminist fiction *Kim Ji Young, Born 1982* by *Cho Nam Joo* reflect a different societal sensitivity to feminist ideology. Further, the current paper answer the following research questions (1) How does the combination of modes construct meanings on the book covers of *Kim Ji Young, Born 1982*’s British and Indonesian versions? (2) How and in what ways do the two versions differ in the meaning-making process? (3) How does the contrast between the two versions reflect the different sensitivity of both societies towards feminist ideology?

1.1 Representational Meaning

This dimension often explores the relationship of what is called *Participants*, the objects and elements of the text [5]. Participants are divided into two, namely interactive and represented participants. Interactive participants create or see images (e.g., illustrator, readers). While the represented participants are people, things, or objects described in the text (e.g., a female portrait on the cover). These participants’ processes in the text can be a narrative and/or conceptual process.

When a vector, e.g., gaze or pointing fingers, is involved, it is called *the narrative process*. The process is to describe an unfolding of actions or events. Participants are viewed as doing something to or for each other (p. 59). The narrative process is divided into more specific processes depending on their vectors and participants. Two processes that are found in the data are Action and Reactional processes. In *Action Processes*, there is the Actor (whom/where the vector emanates) and Goal (whom/where the vector is directed). If there is only the Actor, it is called a non-transactional action; if there are both the Actor and the Goal, it is called a transactional action. Moreover, if the vector is in the form of a gaze or eye line, then it is called *Reactional Processes*. In this process, the Actors are called the Reacters, and the Goals are called the Phenomena. (p. 67). This process, too, can be transactional or non-transactional depending on whether there is a Phenomena.

If there is no vector indicated, it is categorized as *Conceptual Processes*. The participants are represented by their class, structure, or meaning (p. 59). One process that is included in this process is *Classificational process*. This process builds relations between participants in a way that there are Subordinate and Superordinate. Subordinate is the ‘kind of’ or ‘part of’ Superordinate. They are to form a taxonomy. It can be either

covert taxonomy or overt taxonomy. For the cover taxonomy, it is identified by symmetrical design implying equivalence between participants. Meanwhile, there is a hierarchical structure for the overt taxonomy showing power relations between participants (p. 79–82).

1.2 Interactive Meaning

This dimension looks into the interactions between the represented participants and the readers (interactive participants) [6]. The designer usually puts social meanings into the text by using the gaze, social distance, perspective/point of view, and modality.

The Gaze. When the participant looks into the readers, they emanate a vector and create direct contact between them. Subsequently, the presented participants “*Demands*” to build a relationship with the readers on an imaginary level. What kinds of relationships depend on the participant’s type of gaze, facial expression, and body language/gesture, if any (p. 118). When there is no gaze, it is called “*Offer*”. It addresses the readers indirectly. “The represented participants to the viewer as items of information, objects of contemplation, impersonally, as though they were specimens in a display case” (p. 119). These gazes can illustrate either personal or impersonal, engagement or detachment, etc. (p. 116–120).

Social Distance. It is determined by the type of shot employed, whether *close-up*, *medium*, or *long-shot* (p. 124). Hall in [6] mentioned that the shorter the social distance, the more intimate and closer the relationship between the participant and the readers.

Perspective or Point of View. The view can be seen by angle to suggest a ‘subjective attitude’ to the participants. Kress and Van Leeuwen [5] described this as the “socially determined attitudes” (p. 129). This angle can be seen from the *Horizontal and Vertical sides*. Horizontally, the frontal angle is subjective and shows involvement. While, the oblique angle is objective and shows detachment. Vertically, an eye-level angle connotes equal power between the presented participants and the readers. A high angle connotes the reader has more power. Low angle connotes representing the participant’s power (p. 148).

Modality. It refers to how readers see the “realness” of the text. “Modality judgments are social, dependent on what is considered real in the social group for which the representation is primarily intended.” (p. 156), yet also depending on the context [5]. The realism of a text is based on several modality markers namely color saturation (full color to the lack of color), differentiation (diverse colors to monochrome), modulation (fully modulated/color shades to plain or unmodulated), contextualization (lack of background detail to fully articulated background), representation (full abstract to detailed picture), depth (lack of depth into a maximum of deep perspective), illumination (full play of light and shade to the absence of it), and brightness (p. 160). The more realistic it looks the higher the modality is, and vice versa.

1.3 Compositional Meaning

Compositional meaning is related to the whole composition of the text, how symbolic and interactive features relate to each other and are integrated to make a meaningful

whole (p. 176). This metafunction can be explored through informative value, salience, and framing.

Information Value refers to the placement or positioning of the elements. The positions are left or right, top or bottom, and center or margin (p. 177). When a text utilizes the horizontal axis, the elements on the left are *Given* as for general information and the elements on the right are *New* as something not yet known. Thus, “New is, therefore, ‘problematic’, ‘contestable’, ‘the information “at issue”, while the Given is presented as commonsensical, self-evident.” (p. 181). As for the use of vertical axis, there are *Ideal* and *Real*. The elements placed on the top are the *Ideal* consisting of the “idealized or the general essence of the information”, and the elements placed on the bottom part are the *Real*, more detailed information (p. 187). Moreover, there is also the *Center*, the “nucleus information”, and *Margin*, dependent and subservient information (p.196).

Salience refers to elements of the book that are made more visible and vital than the others. It can be seen by size, placement, contrast color, etc. Any aspects can be salience depending on the designer’s view as significant for their purpose (p. 201).

Framing is about the connection and disconnection between the elements. It can be drawn by solid lines of the frame, white spaces between one piece and another, shaped by colors, etc. The stronger the structure is, the more it is seen as separate information. At the same time, the more connected the elements are, the more they are seen as “belonging together” (p. 203–204).

2 Methods

The data used are British and Indonesian book covers of the translated feminist fiction *Kim Ji Young, Born in 1982* by *Cho Nam-Joo*, which originated in South Korea. The original book was published in October 2016 by Minumsa Publishing. Meanwhile, the Indonesian version was published in November 2019 by Gramedia Pustaka Utama (Fig. 1). As of December 2021, the book is still on the bestseller list in Indonesia [7].

This novel talks about the experiences of a young mother, Kim Ji Young, who puts up with sexism and misogyny. The social expectations to be specific ways are so consistent that it drives her into psychosis [8]. This story is believed to resonate with Korean women and others worldwide. Despite being a controversial book in the home country, its impact has been so widespread that it has been translated into 18 languages.

The research was carried out using the qualitative method since the data are in the form of textual and visual data instead of numerical. Flick in [9] stated that linguistics (and visual) data are examined within the qualitative analysis to make claims regarding the implicit and explicit elements and the meaning-making process and what they represent. Theoretical framework by Kress and Van Leeuwen [5] was applied to show how textual and visual elements construe meanings in both British and Indonesian versions of the novel, how they contrast in the meaning-making process, and how these distinctions represent a different level of sensitivity of both societies regarding the feminism ideology on the content.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Visual Grammar in the British Version of *Kim Ji Young, Born in 1982*

3.1.1 Representational Meaning

Figure 1 suggests that the represented participants in the text are women drawn multiple times yet identical. There is no vector emanating from the faces. Thus, Kress and Van Leeuwen [5] described this as a conceptual process. It presents more generalized participants in class, structure, or meaning (p.79). Moreover, it is a Classificational process since it shows a ‘kind of’ relation between the participants and by their category as subordinates. The symmetrical structure of Covert Taxonomy illustrates equivalence between them. Ultimately, the cover represents the relations between participants as belonging to the same ‘kind’ or group, that they are all Kim Ji young yet she also represents Korean women in general. This is also supported of the last lines from the blurb: “*Kim Jiyoung is depressed. Kim Jiyoung is mad. Kim Jiyoung is her own woman. Kim Jiyoung is every woman.*” [10].

3.1.2 Interactive Meaning

The relationships between the participants and the readers can be seen based on the following indicators:

- (a) **The gaze**, firstly, is viewed from the eye-line. There is no gaze indicated, therefore, no vector or contact is being made between the participants and the readers. In this case, readers are addressed indirectly, and the presented participants are to be Offered as “objects of contemplation” [5]. It is as if telling, “Look. This is women, this is their conditions”. It suggests that the issues are already there to contemplate. It can also be interpreted bluntly that it refers to women as objects with no feelings or identity. Moreover, it suggests impersonality.
- (b) **Social distance** is shown through the close-up shots. This kind of shot indicates a closer relationship. The cover may expect the reader to see Kim Ji young, women,



Fig. 1. UK Cover

and their social condition objectively but also intimately in the sense that it is relatable to us. That we can imagine it happens to the women around us or us.

- (c) **Point of view**, this angle represents the social attitude towards the participants (p. 129). Horizontally and vertically, the frontal angle and the eye-level position imply involvement and equal power between the two parties. The cover illustrates the readers and the participants to share the same society or realm that the book projects.
- (d) **Modality**. Figure 1 presents saturated color and differentiation, medium brightness and illumination, yet low to none representation, depth, and contextualization. Hence, in terms of the image's realness, it has a standard modality because they have no faces, although it still gives the shape of human beings. The producers may mean it to be relatable enough but still conform to the fiction genre.

3.1.3 Compositional Meaning

As "a meaningful whole" (p. 179), the cover can be valued from the following aspects:

- (a) **Information Value**. In Fig. 1, the British version is arranged in a vertical structure. The title and bestseller information are put on the upper part, the Ideal, and the presented participants, along with the textual details, are the Real. The verbal text as the Ideal offers "a more neutral and less emotive (but not less ideological) kind of idealization" (p. 186). Meanwhile, the lower part offers specific evidence that supports the upper part (the Ideal). In this case, the Ideal of the book title and the bestselling marker is proved by the remarkable testimonial details regarding feminist fiction (the Real). Essentially, it suggests that the readers' idealization of the bestselling novel is based on the testimonials on how "groundbreaking" feminist fiction it is (the Real).
- (b) **Salience**. Many elements are made conspicuous. The most likely reading path begins with the title, followed by the bestselling information considering its large font size, which takes $\frac{1}{2}$ of the page, and its contrast color. Another salient element is the presented participants considering its size, framing, and contrast colorful background. Additionally, there is the attestant and their testimonials due to its capitalized and big font size, framing, and contrast background. Generally, it highlights many selling points starting from the book, which already has a name for itself, the topic of feminism, and the testimonials being reviewed by well-known brands and its power representing the issue.
- (c) **Framing**. The use of identical women, yet separated by the framing, can be interpreted that they are within the same social group yet still individuals. It emphasizes the notion of "every woman". Moreover, the text has solid and consistent framings for separating the book's title and related information, the presented participants, and the strong testimonials. The producers might make them separated for salience purposes. Additionally, there is an attractive cut in the lower part of the text, where only some features of the participants' heads are shown. It can indicate a continuation of the structures further down, implying that more women are outside of the frame (being told in the story) who experience the same. Additionally, consistent

visual repetition of the women and primary background colors, such as blue, white, yellow, and red, creates a visual cohesion of the text.

3.2 Visual Grammar of the Indonesian Version of Kim Ji Young, Born in 1982

3.2.1 Representational Meaning

There is only one represented participant in the Indonesian version. Figure 2 shows a vector, indicating that this is a narrative process. Thus, the participant is “doing something” (p. 59). Since the vector is formed through the eye line, it is called the reactional process, and the participant is called the Reactor. Since the phenomenon is not in the picture, the process is a non-transactional reactional process. In this process, “it is left to the viewer to imagine what he or she is thinking about or looking at, and this can create a powerful sense of empathy” (p. 68). In this case, the eye line (vector) is directed to the outside of the frame towards the readers. Here, the Reactor is identified as a woman, most likely Kim Ji young. With her flat stare and lack of expression, she may seem drained or deteriorated. According to the blurb, this is the “mad” and “depressed” Kim Ji young. As she gets deeper into psychosis, she starts losing the sense of herself due to society.

3.2.2 Interactive Meaning

The relationship or interaction that is built between the Reactor and the readers is explored through the following aspects:

- (a) **The Gaze.** In Fig. 2, the Reactor gazes right into the readers. She establishes contact and “demands” interaction and empathy, even on an imaginary level (p. 117). However, what kind of relationship is ambiguous since the gaze and expression are neither cold nor disdainful. They are flat and, more likely, have no expression. It may mean Kim Ji young deteriorated as if society sucked the life out of her.



Fig. 2. Indonesian Cover

- (b) **Social distance.** The close-up frame connects the woman Reacter into a very intimate relationship with the readers. She wants to connect emotionally. She wants to be seen as their friend, mother, sister, etc.
- (c) **Perspective.** As in the British version, the frontal angle and eye-level positions depict involvement and equal power between the presented participant and the readers. It is as if Kim Ji young demands the readers to get into the realm of the book.
- (d) **Modality.** Figure 2 illustrates full-color differentiation, high brightness, medium to low saturation (pastels), and soft-to-none contextualization, representation, and depth. At last, the abstract participant is categorized as a standard modality, although the image can illustrate a woman's face. Similar to the British version, the low modality here might refer to the fictional genre of the book.

3.2.3 Compositional Meaning

As a whole, the cover can be judged by three following aspects:

- (a) **Information value.** The Indonesian version combines vertical and horizontal structures to arrange the text. The woman participant is placed on the top-right, indicating roles as the Ideal-New. Meanwhile, the book title and the writer are placed on the bottom-left, indicating roles as the Real-Given. The Ideal-New can suggest a 'redefinition' (p. 183), a new perspective on women that are expected to be a specific way. At the same time, it also introduces the 'issue' (p. 180) of feminism that has not been highlighted before. The position usually employs more 'emotive appeal' to the element (p. 186). Whereas the Real-Given refers to the known information of the title and author.
- (b) **Salience.** The woman Reactor is the most conspicuous element due to its large size, taking up $\frac{2}{2}$ of the page, and its colors which contrast with the white background. Another salient element is the title due to its font size. It is to show that the book already has a name for itself and is talking about women's issues. These aspects are the selling points of the book.
- (c) **Framing.** In the text, no framing is identified. In comparison, visual cohesion is achieved by the shared white background, pastel shades, and the lines that form the expression.

3.3 The Contrast Between the British and Indonesian Version of Kim Ji Young, Born in 1982

A visual text is forever bound to its cultural site of production, distribution, and reception by the consumers [11]. In addition, publishing is a "reactionary industry" at its core in which it responds to the trends, attitudes, and, of course, demographics [1]. Consequently, it implies that visual texts, including book covers, reflect its consumers and, therefore, refer to its society. In this section, the writer explains the distinctions between the two versions, British and Indonesian, of the book to highlight the different levels of sensitivity of both societies regarding the feminist ideology.

Representationally, the Indonesian cover is more straightforward. It focuses on Kim Ji young as the reactor and how the book represents her story as she is losing her senses and is led into psychosis by society. It captures the issues more specifically as an individual experience. Meanwhile, the British cover tells Kim Ji young as the representation of every woman in Korea and therefore, a generalization of their experiences. By that, it refers to women's social issues as a group.

Interactively, the British cover offers no vector; meanwhile Indonesian cover creates it through the gaze. The absence of gaze in the British version shows the impersonality that the women are seen as "specimens" (p. 119). It supports the notion of women as objects with no feelings or identity. Moreover, the issues are expected to be seen less emotionally yet not completely detached. Conversely, the Indonesian version connects to the readers directly, 'demanding' their involvement intimately and emotionally towards the issues. It may be interpreted that the British version sees the problems are it is critically there. Meanwhile, the Indonesian version wants to draw more attention to it as it is still taboo.

Compositionally, the British cover sets the title and the bestselling phrase as the Ideal and the visual representation of women and testimonials as the Real. It promotes a more neutral and non-emotive perception. It is saying that the book is a bestseller because of how powerful feminist fiction it is. The selling points of the textual and visual elements include the bestseller title, the women, and influential testimonials. Meanwhile, the Indonesian version, as the opposite, gives the Ideal-New role to the visual representation of women and the Real-Given role to the book's title and writer. It implies a 'redefinition' or new perspective on women's experiences in the book. It introduces a new message of feminist issues to highlight. Additionally, the selling points focus on the woman and the title without too many narrative/verbal elements. Altogether, the British cover uses ideological elements to appeal to the readers [11]. The Indonesian version focuses on the indirect visual appeal [12], without emphasizing its ideological aspects.

4 Conclusion

The current research asserts that although the translated content and the goal to promote the book are the same, each publisher represents them differently depending on the sociocultural condition of the respective society. The current data is the cover versions of the novel Kim Ji Young, Born 1982 by Cho Nam-Joo which addresses the patriarchal ideology systematically imposed on Korean women. Moreover, the study found that the British cover presents the women's experiences as a group with the issue already being there. It wants to be approached more unemotionally with the feminist ideology attached to it. It indicates that British society is open to the problem or ideology. On the other hand, the Indonesian version, which presents an experience of women with the issue, treated the focus as something new to highlight. It draws the readers empathetically and emotionally yet with a more indirect appeal without clearly illustrating its ideological aspect. After that, it suggests that Indonesian society may still be taboo or has not been too open towards the feminist ideology.

Lastly, there are some limitations to this study. First, it excluded the first edition of the first data (UK version), which might influence the current data. It, therefore, might

weaken the argument of this paper. Second, this study is only limited to two data. Hence, there needs to be more pervasive and in-depth research to support the current finding.

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