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Eliciting stories: Exploring images as prompts

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Stories articulate our deepest desires and aspirations, connecting us to each other and the world. Through stories, we make sense of the world, and children tend to express complex feelings through narratives before they learn to articulate abstract thought. Children are encouraged to tell stories, as it is believed that it fosters growth in language, cognition and confidence besides actively contributing to their socialisation. Often teachers use props like puppets and drawings to excite imagination and participation, to enable sharing of stories (Strickland & Morrow, 1989). If children can draw images based on a story they are told or that they wish to tell, is it also possible for them to tell a story about an image that is presented to them? Reading an image is a complex activity, as our encounter with images is never the same. A picture is not simply an image to be read; it invokes memory, imagination and will be interpreted differently by each viewer or reader (Mitchell, 1984). The polysemic nature of the image offers a possibility to see the point of view of children from different segments of society. Understanding ways in which children make meaning when they receive pictures and words together is a vast and important area for research, but, in the context of this paper, is limited to understanding the relations between spoken words and images found in the *Kaavad* storytelling tradition of Rajasthan, India.

Introduction

My doctoral research into the *Kaavad* tradition over six years involved understanding the importance and relevance of the *Kaavad* in the lives of its practitioners. As a part of my fieldwork, I travelled with the itinerant storytellers to their patrons and observed the performances in their natural settings. Inspired by some of the findings, I created the illustrated book *Home* (Sabnani, 2009) to test whether the image is a possible way to elicit stories through which we may access a child's worldview. The idea was to accept the plurality of narratives that the images invoke, just as they do in a *Kaavad* recitation, rather than seek a uniform response to the images from children.

Pictures and words are both plural in nature; contextually, they acquire multiple meanings and are subject to numerous interpretations. They stem from and speak to our senses of seeing and hearing and, therefore, it is argued that, "the sensory perception of these categories is not 'equal' in all parts" (Varga, 1989, p. 32). However, they have long been seen together in children's illustrations, illuminated manuscripts and several other media artefacts, such as oral storytelling using painted scrolls and shrines like the *Kaavad* (Jain, 1998; Mair, 1988; Singh, 1995), and readers have negotiated these spaces unconsciously.



The Kaavad storytelling tradition and its context

The *Kaavad* is a painted wooden shrine, used by the itinerant storyteller (*Kaavadiya*) to recite stories and genealogies for his hereditary patrons (Figure 1). The multi-paneled box is covered with images that are identified by the storyteller as he unfolds the box. He uses the same image to recite multiple narratives and to identify patrons from various villages. Contrary to other practices where the image particularises the word, here, the word or voice particularises the image. This makes the *Kaavad* highly inclusive because it allows an image to hold many stories and several persons to be a part of a narrative or shrine.



Figure 1: A closed *Kavaad*

The storyteller brings the *Kaavad* to his patron's home once a year, which is at the end of the harvest season in winter. The story themes range from dealing with hardships, making sacrifices, encountering good and evil and making donations. The storyteller begins the recitation by brushing the *Kaavad* with a peacock feather (considered sacred) to ward off evil, as well as to draw the attention of his listeners by pointing at the images as he gradually turns the panels, embarking on his journey of telling. He alludes to the stories with the bare minimum of detail and does not recite any story fully because it is assumed the patron knows the stories. He mentions the name of the protagonists and the key actions performed by them in the story, thereby invoking the patron's memory and imagination. The community considers such a recitation to be equivalent to performing a pilgrimage. The recitation of the genealogies raises the status of the patron because the storyteller endorses their lineage to a saint or a god. Origin myths reinforce the connection between the community members and their ancestors from the epics. This gives the members the opportunity to raise their status beyond that which is constrained by conventional social stratifications. Individual identity is thus acknowledged against the backdrop of a community identity, and seemingly considered important, as far as it contributes to finding a 'place' in the community. The *Kaavad* thus serves the function of sustaining a community. It may be noted that the *Kaavad* community is a marginalised community that lies outside of the classical Hindu caste system and are referred to as Other Backward Classes (OBCs) by the Government of India.

The *Kaavad* storytelling is a living but waning tradition approximately 400-years old (Lyons, 2007), although its origin myth suggests that it existed from the times of the Hindu epic Ramayana. The *Kaavad* is one of the lesser-known forms of storytelling from Rajasthan and shares some traits with the wooden puppets (*kathputli*) and the painted scrolls (*phad*), both in the manner of its making and performance. However, the *Kaavad* defies restrictive labels like 'artifact', 'painting', 'story', or 'performance'. It is at once all of these and more - a work in which painting, recitation of genealogies, narratives and gesture coalesce to create a complete work of art or an experience.



Ethnographic observations and analysis about the Kaavad phenomenon

My fieldwork observations about the community and performances of *Kaavad* recitations suggest there is a dynamic relationship between image and voice. The image initiates the memory flow and speech of the storyteller. When he begins to recite the stories or events associated with the image, the listener-patron begins to imagine the rest.



Figure 2: Storyteller Narsinh with his patrons reciting the *Kaavad*

Since the image is emblematic and does not really illustrate the event or story, the listener patron has to exercise his imagination to complete the picture and the events in his mind (Figure 2). With this action, the image is now invested with more meaning than when the image is seen for the first time.

The pictorial representation of patrons in the *Kaavad* is conceptual because there is no likeness or resemblance to the specific patron. All men look the same and the women look like each other and can assume any role. It is the storyteller who identifies the patron by pointing at a specific image. So the generic becomes specific and the specific may become generic at another point. In a transient mode, the mind of the patron accepts the truth of the word and makes them believe the meaning that the storyteller assigns to the image. Not only does the storyteller enthrall the patrons into believing it is them who is represented in the *Kaavad*, he therefore can use the same image to identify multiple patrons in different locations. At one level, it serves the storyteller because he need carry only one *Kaavad*, which is then particularised for each patron simply through narration and not images. At another level, we may also interpret the form as being highly inclusive, because it implies that everyone is the same, thus, it allows several persons to become a part of a narrative or shrine, giving him or her a sense of identity. From a Bakhtinian perspective, the images may also be considered as 'polyphonous' texts (Bakhtin, 2004), since they not only represent multiple voices but also allow for various conflicting voices to be heard. In the *Kaavad*, during the course of a recitation, the patrons recognise the storyteller while he identifies them, and in that sense both interact with each other in a 'polyphonous dialogue'.

When the storyteller points at a figure and identifies it as the image of the patron's ancestor, he conjures an experience of being in the presence of those that are absent, of being in the presence of the dead who are now made eternal. Similarly, when the storyteller points at a figure and identifies it as the patron present, that patron, suspending disbelief, 'enters' the *Kaavad's* liminal space, 'betwixt and between' (Turner 1969, 1979), where he embraces the painted figure as his own without looking for a likeness.



The *Kaavad's* distinctive characteristics lie in its ability to be inclusive and collaborative, to negotiate place and space, bringing together imagination and reality, and connecting space, time and memory, pictures and words, and a sense of an imagined real. It is these qualities of the *Kaavad* that have inspired me to create the illustrated book *Home*, which draws upon these characteristics to be conceptually available to wider audiences.

Designing and experiment to elicit tales: Structuring Home

Home is a children's picture book sans story. The book is inspired by the unique structure of the *Kaavad* and its characteristics of inclusivity, community building and the potential for multiple narratives. The word-image relationship explores the possibility of bringing the oral together with the written and the visual, where a reader would need a listener.

My premise is that, if pictures with a few words are provided without narratives, they may motivate a child to create their own stories, individually and as a group. They may share the complex components of their lives and build lucid connections to explore and comprehend what they confront and perhaps even find resolutions. I have also assumed that such a book offers a space for free associations that may provide insights into a child's world and possibly create a platform for an interaction between children, their parents and teachers in formal and informal places. I anticipated the book would lead to learning about the impact of socio-cultural contexts in interpreting images. It is not a book that is to be read alone. It requires a community of listeners and a reader. Narratives bridge images and words; this is more so when there are gaps between images and words. In the *Kaavad*, the storyteller mediates the gaps. In *Home*, gaps encourage children to connect the two through a narrative and, in the process, communicate their worldview. I believe children will see the potential of several images being linked together in a story.

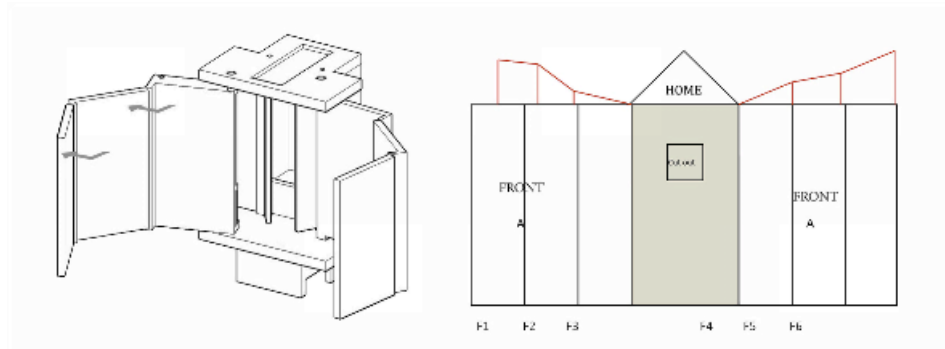


Figure 3: *Kaavad* structure (left), *Home* book structure (right)

Home shares a fair amount of similarities with the *Kaavad* but also differs from it in several ways. Like the *Kaavad*, the book is structurally designed to be a stand-up book that can be opened in several ways, inciting curiosity. Accordion folded flaps flank a central panel where a cut-out window invites the child to look out at the world through a frame, and yet know that what is seen through the frame is only a part of a whole (Figure 3). The window frame makes them aware of choices of what to include and, through that extension, know that



something is left out. It may also be used as a theatrical stage for children to perform with puppets or toys of their choice or converse with each other.

In the *Kaavad*, the storyteller points at an image and narrates a story. Similarly, in the book, children are invited to choose any image and narrate a story of their own. All panels have painted pictures against a red background with keywords that prompt discussions around home and family from the human and animal world. One set of flaps has images from the animal world and the other has humans. There is no formal sequence, but the images are distributed thematically in clusters on individual flaps, and within the flap, each image is separated by grid lines, as found in the *Kaavad*. Themes include family, homes, gendered identities and animals. The approach is inclusive, as the images portray several families and homes that children could identify with. In the *Kaavad*, one image represents multiple patrons; here, too, the image could mean different things to different children, inviting them to draw on their own cultural context. Some may identify with the images, others may recall various tales. Images are not simply representations of reality; they are contextual and suggest worldviews. For example, normative illustrations depict a family unit consisting of father, mother and two children, and many children may not feel included. Such depictions may alienate those that do not belong to such a family (Sabnani, 2012). In the book, like the *Kaavad*, there is a possibility of identifying with different kinds of family units, such as a large joint family, a single parent unit, or a gay couple. When a child looks at an image or text, s/he may recall a story from memory or imagine new ones, co-opting the listener as a collaborator for new memories. Unlike the *Kaavad*, *Home* needs no rituals to be performed, it is secular in nature and invites universal use. It is not performed by a single individual and can be used by multiple children. It has a cutout window that allows for multiple interpretations on how to engage with it. It is nonlinear and allows students and children to access it in multiple ways, and read the images in any order they wish. There is no tacit understanding between the tellers and listeners; it does not assume a shared knowledge between them. However, a teller may seek collaboration from listeners to move the story forward, a challenge that the *Kaavad* offers too, conceptually.

Home in the field



Figure 4: The illustrated book, *Home*, at Asha for Education

I shared the *Kaavad* and *Home* with children and school teachers in creative workshops in schools, and with parents and children at city festivals in Vadodara, Delhi, Srinagar, Chennai and Mumbai. I also benefitted from independent testing conducted by other researchers located in Mumbai and the United Kingdom. Children from various socio-economic segments 'played' with the 'book' (Figure 4). It aroused the curiosity of children and adults alike, because the book could stand up by itself. At first,



children wanted to know what it was. They wanted to open it from all sides and kept turning the flaps without reading anything. The parents thought the book was to teach young children to recognise the figures. Teachers said they could use it to talk about animals and their habitat. I suggested how the book could be used to elicit stories from children and demonstrated by first telling a story using an image from the book. Then I invited a child to tell a story using the same image. Soon, everyone wanted to tell their own story and held the book in their hand while telling their story. Some told a known story and others made up their own stories. Some children invented a story around one image and others combined several images to construct their narratives.

In Vadodara, children wanted to make their own version of the book and drew images in them on themes of their own choice. One student made an autobiographic story on adoption using the flaps to show a childless couple bringing a child home from an orphanage and celebrating her birthday (Sabnani, 2012).

Kannal Achuthan, an MPhil student, from the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, UK, used the book to explore whether “picture books that offer a gap between the text and the reader offer the most scope to promote verbal, visual and narrative literacies” (Achuthan, 2011). Achuthan carried out the test with two boys and two girls of multiple ethnicities, between the ages five to seven years, in their homes. The children responded to the book structure and to the images, and recalled memories of events while looking at some images. They also created their own versions of the book. Some of the findings that were interesting and different for us were their response to the book structure, itself. The boys called it a rocket book, the girls said it reminded them of a hotel and home and one of them said the book reminded them of ‘Noah’s Ark’ (Achuthan, 2011).



Figure 5: Children ‘playing’ and telling stories

A weeklong workshop with Early Learners and Kindergarten Kids, at the American Embassy School in Delhi in 2013, led me to expand the repertoire of the *Kaavad* and *Home* to create homelike installations with the children and their teachers. The children were from various countries, between the ages of five to seven. It was collaboration between several sections in the school and they made the structure with discarded cardboard boxes on which they pasted their paintings of ‘homes’ and ‘friends’ they missed or had left behind. They made large cutouts in the ‘walls’ and used them as theatre windows to perform with their handmade puppets. The response to the book was like most other children I had met so far. They all wanted to ‘play’ with it. One child ran around with the book looking out the cutout window, using it as a frame for himself and as way of looking at everyone.



In an investigation carried out independently by Anisha Dalvi (personal communication, March 5th, 2014), the book was shared with underprivileged children at 'Asha for Education', an organisation that is actively working towards bringing basic education for a 'socio-economic change' ("Asha for Education", n.d.). The responses to the images from this group were similar, in some instances, and quite different to the ones from children going to private schools. They were more inclined to label the images and describe the situation in which the figures were found.

A child seeing the image of a man with balloons said, "The balloon man has stolen balloons from someone else and is going to sell these balloons for Rs 2." When probed further as to why he felt the man was a thief, he said, 'because he is dark.' This response clearly indicates that color bias has been internalised in some way. In another instance, after seeing the image of a person reading a book outside his house, a child said, "The Muslim man is studying in the dark as there is no electricity in his house." This he concluded from the green color of the house and the dark background, a color association with Muslims in India and Pakistan.

Another child combined several images from different flaps of the book to create a narrative about a boy who nearly drowns in the river but is rescued by a dolphin, only to be devoured by a tiger and then saved by a seal and taken home to safety by his mother and sister. In this story, the child turned the book several times to identify the different characters that were spread on different flaps and connected them into a complex narrative of being attacked and rescued.

I wanted to explore how one image could have multiple interpretations, and this led us to ask three children to narrate stories about a single image. They chose an image of two nomadic women walking with a camel, carrying all their belongings, including a child. While one told the story of a camel lost in the desert and ultimately dying to become a mountain, another said the man on the camel falls off while traveling and the camel leaves him behind. The third child said the women were tired of the boy's tricks and were going to leave him in a jungle. While all three stories differ in the events, strangely they all touch upon issues of abandonment.

Finally, I also shared the book with the *Kaavad* storytellers (Figure 5), even though they were not the identified audience for the book; they were the carriers of the tradition that had inspired me and I was curious to know their responses. Two of them discussed three images on a flap and said they could tell one of the *Kaavad* stories using those images. They wanted to link all three images on a flap to construct a story they knew. This encouraged us to think about an image's flexibility to be molded for different contexts.



Figure 6: Storyteller Kojaram with *Home*



Findings from Home

The *Home* experiment answered some of the assumptions and also surprised me, in some ways. That pictures are plural was obvious from the responses, and children narrated different stories using the same image and even linked some images. As anticipated, the book did arouse curiosity; children collaborated by prompting, adding and arguing about known stories. They expressed their worldviews and recalled memories. What I did not anticipate was the use of the book as a toy, or being called a rocket or a hotel. I was surprised by the way children invested meaning into the images, especially dark colour being associated with a thief and the stories of abandonment. I did not expect them to connect the several images together, even though they were so far apart from each other. Responses like these suggest that a book need not be author-controlled and could offer opportunities for reading in different ways. Reading can also become performance based, which brings readers and listeners together as a community, just like in a *Kaavad* recitation. The largest difference between the *Kaavad* and *Home* that stood out was the way the storytellers look at the image in a *Kaavad*; for them, it is iconic of people and gods, which they only need to recognise, and this is something they will see as a collective, whereas in *Home*, the reader or teller has to find their own individual references and invest that meaning into the picture.

Conclusion

Pictures can be a powerful way to access memory, imagination and narratives, and give insights into the way a child thinks and feels. A child is not able to articulate abstract thought until a certain age, therefore narration seems to be the most used form to express their feelings (Ahn & Filipenko, 2007). The image offers the stimulus and association to begin the narration. In the case of *Home*, the theme of family, identity, house and habitat were invoked through a combination of words and images. While teachers have often used images to stimulate discussions around themes of concern in their classes, they may also explore stimulating narratives through images, as the complexity of narratives reveals acquired notions and worldviews that would be hard to access through direct questions or discussions. Images in the book *Home* have few details in the background, which leaves the space for imagining different contexts. What would be the response if there were more details in the background? Probing further in this area may provide more insights into the nature of an image and what is invoked.

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