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An Exegesis on Cover Pages with Special Reference to *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*

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Abstract:

It is rare that books got analyzed from outside. This paper concentrates on the newly acquired status of books as commercial products and the importance of cover pages as their marketing tool. In this present time when even the world is considered as a market, book has transformed itself and became one of the greatest commodities of all time. Publishers have usurped the credit of a book from its author. They started to determine every aspect of a book's packaging. Publishers are now concentrating on the cover pages of books as their visual statement. Cover designing has become a professional field. The cover page of *Harry Potter and the philosopher's Stone*, which is considered as a publishing phenomenon reflects the tactics of publishers regarding the cover pages. These cover pages are not just protecting means but a well-crafted visual statement and marketing tool.

Keywords: Books, Publishing, Marketing, cover pages, *Harry Potter and the philosopher's Stone*, Editions.

Books have been the greatest companions of human beings. It's been part of their civilized social life. As time passed, books have acquired various dimensions in the society. In this twenty first century, books have acquired the status of a commercial product which worth millions in the market possibilities. As per the present situation, each book is a competitor, fighting for its survival in this arena of book publishing.

While commenting on book publishing industry, Coser et al. in *The Culture and Commerce of Publishing* noted that "ideas are the brain children of individuals; but books, in which ideas are given concrete shape so as to be conveyed to their intended audience, are the products of the collective work of members of publishing firms that specialize in the production and distribution of books" (3). Thus, as a writer finishes his job of giving a concrete form to the idea, he gives the batten to the publisher who packages the work at its best to attract the customers. According to Nicholas Spark "publishing is business writing may be art, but publishing, when all is said and done, comes down to dollars." There is in publishing a need to balance creativity with commercial reality.

“Books like any commodity need a clear perception of the product and buyer and vigorous marketing to bring them together...” (Clark and Phillips 2). It gets harder and harder to sell books every year because no other industry has so many new product introductions. Consequently marketing strategies began to play a key role in book publishing industry.

The holistic marketing and the consumer marketing together form the atmosphere of the present book publishing industry. Both of them give importance to the consumers and their tastes. With the emergence of holistic marketing every part of a book got prominence. The unprecedented importance given to the cover pages of a book is the greatest example of this new attitude.

The association between marketing and book covers is a long standing one. Marketing always upholds cover pages as its prime focus since it's been the cover pages which played the role of a spokesperson to a book. Robert Damton expresses this importance of a cover page through his words “one could learn a great deal about attitudes towards books by studying the way they are presented” (197). Cover page is the very first thing that a reader sees as far as a book is concerned. Therefore we cannot ignore the importance of a cover page.

Matthew Gallaway in his article “Six Writers Tell All about Covers and Blurbs” quotes famous writer Bennett Madison who goes to the extent of saying that “I think covers literally are the only thing that matters” (1). Nowadays each parts of a cover page is formed with acute care and effort. In reality, this emphasis given to the cover pages plays a prominent role in the success of a book as it is the book covers which help to position a book in the mind of a buyer.

Earlier the cover pages were considered as an insignificant part of a book. Till the early Nineteenth century books were hand-bound. But the 1820s witnessed the first step towards a change in the then existing situation. With the gradual introduction of techniques for mechanical book-binding, a transformation came in the attitude of how a book should be covered. With the arrival of cloth, then paper brought a new dimension to book binding. These covers were cheaper and printable. Thus book cover gradually became more than just a protection for the pages, performing the function of advertisement, and imparting information about the content of the book.

The journey of books which started from ‘I want a book’ has now reached the point of ‘I want the book’. Customers began to search, analyze, compare and think rather than blindly purchasing books. Therefore, one book has to be unique if it wants to stand out among other books. Cover page is, indeed, one among those factors which attribute uniqueness to a particular book. As far as a new writer, who is not so well established, is concerned he wants to make the customers readers. In this process it is the cover pages which help the book to catch the attention of the customers. Christiana Miller in her article “Self-Publishing on a Shoestring: Cover Me, Baby!” tells that “a book cover is an invitation-a way of seducing the

reader. It beckons, inviting them to enter the world of your book and dance with your characters for a while” (1).

At times even the popularity of a book depends upon its cover page. Angus Phillips cites an example of how a book cover influence or rather determines the popularity of a book. When the sales of the bestselling author Agatha Christy’s book “started to weaken, attention turned to the reasons of this decline. The mystery of these missing sales was solved by examining the covers of her books and what they said to potential readers” (19).

It is the publishers who realize the importance of cover pages at its totality since then publishing houses, at regular intervals, came up with a new cover for a book. *International Book Publishing; An Encyclopedia* mentions about this marketing strategy, that “when a previously published paperback title is reissued, its cover wrapper is often changed to give it a fresh appearance and appeal to the audiences” (Altbach and Hoshino 137).

Colleen Gleason shares his experience through his blog titled “The Importance of Your Book Cover: Achieving the Right Fit” how the sales of his books have increased when he changed the cover pages. His gothic romances *The Shop of Shades and Secrets* and *The Cards of Life and Death* were not going well as his expectations. Originally the covers showed the gothic elements of the book and this prevented the book from reaching the romance audiences. So he implemented a radical change in the cover pages. The effects were unbelievable. “Sales have increased several hundred percent over the last month since I unveiled the new look” (Gleason 1). Terri Giuliano Long in his article “Yes, We Really Do Judge Books by Their Covers” shares a similar experience

Over the last five years, at Smashwords, they’ve seen numerous examples of a simple cover change causing the author’s ‘sales to break out. As Coker documents in his free e-book, *The Secrets to E-book Publishing Success*, R.L. Mathewson, a romance writer, went from selling five or six copies a day of her novel, *Playing for Keeps*, to over 1,000 a day simply by updating her cover image.(1)

A book cover has three parts: front cover, back cover and spine. Front cover usually has a greater visual impact than the back cover. Andrew Haslam in his *Book Design* suggests that a book front cover should have an “image, authors name in full, books title, plus subtitle where required...” (161).It also may include a quick blurb.

The cover image is a visual statement through which the essence of a book is meant to communicate clearly, quickly and efficiently to the reader. Therefore the cover image should communicate the nature, emotion tone, genre and style of a book. Thus “the cover of a title accepted for publication inspired and requires more attention than all of the other publishing concerns” (Altbach and Hoshino 23).

A cover page is a merging of visual imagery with well-crafted typography. The typography also matters: the type face, styling, sizing and positioning of the typography are important. Usually there are only a few words in the cover page but these few words play a

key role in influencing the readers. The title should be big and easy to read. The front cover should also highlight the name of the author. Sometimes the name of the author act as a brand and the name itself act as the greatest marketing tool. The present reception given to the works of J.K. Rowling, Stephenie Meyer and Sidney Sheldon show how the writer becomes the brand name. The size of the name depends upon the popularity or the acceptance of the writer. The title and subtitle should also be presented suitably.

Spine of a book is also significant. *Book Design* gives the list of elements which should be included in a spine “authors name in full, book title, plus subtitle where required” and “publisher’s logo” (Haslam161).In libraries books are usually arranged in a manner where the spine of a book is the only part visible and it is expected to give basic information to the readers.

Andrew Haslam also lists the elements that the back cover should possess “ISBN/barcode, registered retail price, blurb or book description, reviewers’ quotes, author biography” and “list of previous publication”(161). It is the second element of a book that readers take into consideration. The most vital part of a back cover is the synopsis included in it. It gives an idea about the story of the book. The blurb is also a key element since these are the words came from reliable sources.

Anything about book publishing industry and marketing in the present should begin with a book which has changed the industry: *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. It was the beginning of a new era in publishing; an era of Harry Potter Books. “As a publishing phenomenon, nothing as big as *Harry Potter* has ever happened in children’s books, hardly even in adult books” (Eccleshare 1).

Harry Potter is a series of seven fantasy novels written by British author Joanne Kathleen Rowling. Since the release of the first novel, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, on 30 June 1997, the books have attained immense popularity, critical acclaim and commercial success worldwide.“Within a year of its publication *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* had become an unprecedented publishing success” (Eccleshare 112).

The success of *Harry Potter* is mainly attributed to the marketing tactics with which each book is released. In reality, it was to Bloomsbury Publishers that the credit of the novel’s initial success goes. They have put all their brilliance into the book and made it a phenomenon. Since J.K. Rowling was a new writer, they have paid their all attention on the marketing and packaging of the book.

First they have selected a reading market and packaged the book for them. J.K.Rowling had no particular age groups in her mind but Bloomsbury packaged it for children. “Though Rowling had not thought of the book as specifically for children when she wrote it, she came to see it as and it was originally published entirely for children, without any attempt to attract the kind of ‘cross-over’ market...” (Eccleshare 10). The cover is the best testimony of this marketing orientation.

The original cover of Bloomsbury children edition, drawn by Thomas Taylor, was a feast for children. The front cover consisted of an image of Harry Potter staring at the Hogwarts Express at Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$, the title, author's name and a blurb. The cover image is more comical and childish as the targeted market was children. The illustration of Harry Potter in front of the Hogwarts Express on Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$, creates a cartoon style. It is marked by thick lines, bright colors, and bizarre time, place and environment. The Hogwarts Express is juxtaposed with an adjacent train which looks so ordinary while the Hogwarts Express is louder and bigger than that of the ordinary train. The inclusion of the '9 $\frac{3}{4}$ ' sign board in the cover clearly expresses the magical nature of the book.

The typography used for the words appeared in the front cover differ according to the matter. The one fourth of the front cover is occupied by the name of the book and of which the character name is given with great importance since J.K.Rowling had a sequel in her mind the publishers wanted the name to get the importance. Another reason might be the children to whom this book was dedicated never bother about the writer. In their world Rudyard Kipling was never famous but Mowgly was. "HARRY POTTER," was written in a gold Times New Roman, and "and the Philosopher's Stone," was written in a small, white italic script. The colours used in the cover are all bright and makes the books compelling for the children to look into. All the colours used in front cover exquisitely blend with each other and add beauty and importance to each element in the cover.

Spine of the book has no such commendable elements expect the fact that it is unusually colourful which is a deliberate attempt made by Bloomsbury to attract the children. Spine consists of the title, author and publisher of the book. Charles-Adam Foster-Simard in his article "Harry Potter Cover Design" comments that "what I've always really liked about the Bloomsbury covers is that they have little surprises on the spine" (1).The colours used there are red, blue and yellow which all make the spine very colourful and attractive for children.

The back cover bears the illustration of a man, a short synopsis, blurbs from reliable sources, and publication details. The back cover portrayed an unidentified pipe-smoking wizard. But the identity of the person remained confusing. But Taylor was asked to provide "a wizard to decorate the back cover" Taylor says that:

The publishers found themselves repeatedly called on to explain why the wizard on the back didn't correspond to the description of Dumbledore in the book. It was clear what readers wanted and expected, so Bloomsbury contacted me for a portrait of the famous head of Hogwarts, and the original wizard disappeared in a puff of smoke. (Taylor 1)

Many of the readers wanted the position to be occupied by Dumbledore on the other hand some even doubted that it is the image of a young Dumbledore. Bloomsbury later changed the back cover and replaces the image with Professor Dumbledore. This incident itself shows how even an image in the back cover of a book haunts the readers. They want each element in the cover to be perfect.

Bloomsbury gave importance to the blurbs than the synopsis of the book. The synopsis only gives a short introduction to the story and theme. J.K. Rowling was a new author when this book was published and it took a great effort to convince a reader to buy a book by a new author. Cunningham foreshadowing this danger sent the copy to eminent personalities. He is of the view that:

It is notoriously difficult to get attention for a new author, so Bloomsbury followed the common practice of sending bound proofs within accompanying fulsome letter to selected authors, critics and booksellers in the field of children's books to elicit suitable quotes with which to attract the attention of others when the book appeared. (Eccleshare 9)

The success of the book in U.K instigated Scholastic to publish it in U.S. Books are culture specific, so they altered the package of the way to make it appealing for the U.S readers. The original covers by American publisher Scholastic usually depict an amalgam of objects and people from the book against a common backdrop. Mary GrandPré made the art on all original American editions.

The American front cover was rich in detail. They have included many curious elements in the cover; Harry Potter chasing “the Golden Snitch”, stone pillars, the pointed towers of the castle, a unicorn, ‘three beastly headed dog Fluffy, wizards etc. While a golden “Harry Potter” stands out from the illustration, a similar tendency borrowed from the U.K editions, the rest of the title disguises itself in the middle archway.

The original back cover shows a letter-carried owl, Dumbledore, a Bludger, and a key, which is dropped by an owl. However it did not contain any synopsis of the book but a blurb from Publishers Weekly. But soon after the back cover was changed may be because its inadequacy in providing information about the book. The new back cover differing from its earlier counterpart gives way to the light-hearted summary.

But for Mary GrandPré who was working on book which bagged an unprecedented success in U.K was well aware of its challenges. “When I do the books it’s so highly scrutinized and its put under the magnifying glass by every kid and adult who is a fan-and understandably so” (GrandPré 1). Every minute detail in the cover began to get scrutinized. She shares one of her experiences in an interview where she really came to know to what extent a cover matters to a reader. “I was speaking at a school once, and I had a magazine cover I’d done of Harry, with Harry flying a broomstick, one of the kids asked me “why did you give Harry blue eyes? Harry’s eyes are green.” It was one of those details that just slipped” (GrandPré 1).

The *Harry Potter* books like a hurricane expanded everywhere in the world. As *Harry Potter* was growing more and more popular, Bloomsbury and Scholastics concentrated on the packaging of the book. Though there are other six books came out but the significance of the first book still remains. The story which was there since 1990s came out in different outlook at different time periods. Bloomsbury left Scholastic far behind in their attempts of

repackaging the book. Bloomsbury experimented with different covers by different cover artists. Meanwhile Scholastic continued with the original cover of Mary GrandPre for more than ten years. It is these attempts of Bloomsbury which shed light on the trends of the publishing industry.

Most notable among these various cover pages is the adult edition covers by Bloomsbury. The *Harry Potter* Publishers who initially believed that the readers of the book were children, gradually realized their mistakes. Many adults found the book attractive. John Barber quotes a character in Lorrie Moore's 2010 novel, *A Gate at the Stairs*, “adults are living increasingly as children reading Harry Potter while every newspaper in the country goes out of business”(1). Barber continues to validate this argument “the adventures of Harry and his magical schoolmates have not only attracted an enormous number of adult readers - one in five of the 12 million copies of the books sold in their first decade in Canada went to adults, according to their publisher” (1).

In response Bloomsbury released separate cover art for Harry Potter books in an attempt to appeal to even more adults who may not be comfortable carrying a children's book with them. Charles-Adam Foster-Simard says that the motive behind this decision is “presumably to make versions of the books more easily marketable with an older audience, or an initial audience that was growing older” (1). So, they decided to release an edition for adults and the only difference that this edition had was its cover. A cover shows the age group to which the book is addressed.

Nimisha Kaushik in his article “Difference between Harry Potter Series for Kids and Adults” tells that:

Adult readers felt uncomfortable reading *Harry Potter* while in public, for example, in a café or library or trains while traveling. So it was a marketing decision to take out two different book covers, one for kids and one for adults. There is no difference in the text or story of these two versions. They are identical. (1)

The adult edition covers were entirely different from that of the children edition: no more comical portraits, magical elements and not even bright colours. The typography used is same but the font differs. It's comparatively small. But the commendable fact is that the authors name got importance which hardly occurred in the children editions. It's because of the fact that the adult readers do give importance to the author. The name of J.K. Rowling is given with due importance.

Later Bloomsbury introduced the Signature Edition of the book with an entirely new look. The ‘Signature’ edition has Harry Potter's ‘signature’ as the title. Bloomsbury redesigned the way Harry Potter was written on the covers. The front page of this version illustrated a wizard chess board with two Wizard's Chess pieces. The designs were unveiled by Bloomsbury in March 2010. Sean O'Connor in his article “A Brief History of Harry Potter Illustrations” explains that:

The new 'Signature' livery was created by Webb and Webb Design Limited, with illustrations by linocut artist Clare Melinsky on the front cover, back cover and spine, to 'appeal to the next generation of readers who did not 'grow up' with Harry Potter and who have not yet experienced the thrill of life at Hogwarts', according to the publisher.(1)

Later, aiming at a new generation of adult readers, Bloomsbury re-released the adult editions of the Harry Potter books with new covers in paperback. Andrew Davidson was commissioned by Bloomsbury and Webb & Webb, who were designing the covers to create a stunning set of hand engraved illustrations for the new adult edition of the *Harry Potter* series. Webb & Webb director James Webb, who designed the covers before commissioning Davidson's illustrations, explains that "the brief was to create a set of covers that would stand out on the shelves of any shop and to make the author's name a key focus, which is why we've used large type and bold colours"(O'Connor 1). It was also part of the marketing strategy because, by then, Rowling has emerged as brand.

Scholastic had been content with their original illustrations and illustrator for a long time. Though they have changed the cover image in 2001 and 2008 the illustrator was the same. The mass market edition of 2001 was really dull. But, gradually they realized their need to refresh the cover images.

Scholastic, American publisher of the Harry Potter books, redesigned all seven books with new covers in celebration of the 15th anniversary of the iconic series in September 2013. The original artwork by Mary GrandPré remained on hardcover editions. Krystle Drew quotes Scholastic president Ellie Berger words that "it was time for a fresh approach. The new covers will feature a scene from the respective movies in an attempt to draw in a younger audience who may only be familiar with Potter from the big screen" (1).Kazu Kibuishi was the cover designer. The new Scholastic Harry Potter children edition pictures the travel of Harry and Hagrid down the Diagon Alley.

Recently Bloomsbury and Scholastic in a combined enterprise released a fully illustrated covers for the Harry Potter books. They have commissioned the award winning artist Jim Kay for this project. The illustrated hardcover edition of Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone published globally on October 6, 2015, and Scholastic plans to publish fully illustrated editions of each of the seven titles with rich details and colours that will complement these books.

When all the books of this series were published they introduced box sets which contain all the book of this series. It is then for the first time the spines got importance. The complete box set of the Children edition designed by Kazu Kibuishi gives the greatest testimony to this attitude. The spines of all the books together constitute the Hogwarts School.

There is a politics behind the cover pages. The publishers want to sell their book and their ultimate goal is to gain profit. So they try their best to make the covers attractive. The present readers often consider book covers as a decisive element. For them the covers represents the genre, theme and the worth of a book. A cover should do so because a large number readers rely on the book covers to choose their book.

Conclusion

Book industry has undoubtedly become one of the most competing industries with its numerous products. Book publishing, which was once considered as a means to disseminate knowledge has turned into a commercial business. As a result, every aspect of publishing got prominence and established itself as an integral professional field. Cover page was not an exception. The protecting tool has undergone great changes and become a marketing tool.

Nicole Matthews in his Introduction to *Judging a Book by Its Covers* says that “research with the publishing industry’s trade magazines and publishers’ correspondence indicates, that, since at least the 1950s, covers have played a privileged role in the wide strategies for marketing books” (4). The importance given to the cover pages of the book *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* reflects this very attitude of the book industry. The care with which it is formed and the various experiments done on the different edition covers show the role of cover pages as a marketing tool.

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